

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Thursday, Jan. 27

Basketball Doubleheader at Northwestern: Rolling schedule: Boys C starts at 3:30 followed by Girls JV, Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

Saturday, Jan. 29

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.

5 p.m.: Boys Basketball vs. Lennox at Madison

Sunday, Jan. 30

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at Groton Community Center, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Monday, Jan. 31

Junior High Boys Basketball with Redfield at Groton. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game

Tuesday, Feb. 1

Boys Basketball hosts Langford Area with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 3

Basketball Doubleheader at Faulkton

Friday, Feb. 4

Wrestling triangular at Preshop

Saturday, Feb. 5

Girls basketball at Madison

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Stanley County

Boys Basketball with Clark/Willow Lake at Groton (7th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade, JV and Varsity).

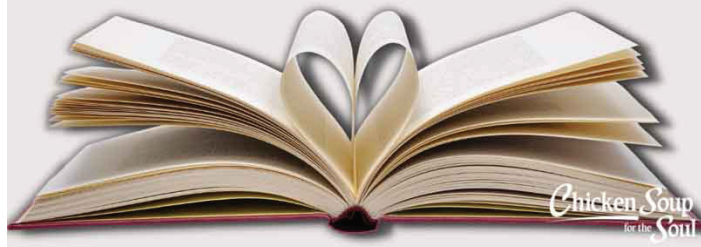
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Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

“There's always room
for a story that can
transport people to
another place.”

-J.K. Rowling



Monday, Feb. 7

Junior High Boys Basketball at Aberdeen Christian. 7th grade at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 8

Girls Basketball hosting Tiospa Zina with JV game at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Boys Basketball vs. North Central at Edmunds Central with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Thursday, Feb. 10

Basketball Double Header at Milbank. 4 p.m.: Girls JV at elementary gym, Boys C game at Armory; 5 p.m.: Girls C game at elementary gym, Boys JV at Armory. 6:15 p.m.: Girls Varsity at HS Gym, 7:45 p.m. Boys Varsity at HS Gym.

Friday, Feb. 11

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, Feb. 12

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, February 12, 2022

9 a.m.: State Junior High Wrestling at Pierre
Basketball Doubleheader with Mobridge-Pollock in Groton. Girls JV at 1 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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The scenery for the Carnival of Silver Skates was put up Tuesday morning. The Groton City Public Works Dept. of Todd Gay, Terry Herron, Branden Abeln, Landon Johnson and Dwight Zerr assembled and erected the scenery. This is what it looks like on the back side to make it stand and withstand the wind.



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The scenery is all set for the Carnival of Silver Skates for Sunday at 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. The background was designed, painted and constructed last year by Katie Anderson and her dad, Ron.

**GUN SHOW: Dakota Territory Gun Collectors Association
ABERDEEN Show, Saturday, Feb. 5, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday,
Feb. 6, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at THE DAKOTA EVENT CENTER.
Laura Ennen 701-214-3388.**

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Death Notice: Joseph Pohlkamp

Joseph Pohlkamp, 64, of Groton and formerly of Buffalo, Minnesota passed away peacefully at home on January 24, 2022. Services will be held in Minnesota at a later date.

#509 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I generally confine my discussions here to the situation in the US. As I've mentioned before, this is not because I think the US is the only country in the world that matters, but because I happen to live in the US and my bandwidth is limited. That said, I'm also not totally tuned out of the big picture globally, and so I read about the WHO's executive board meeting yesterday with some interest. Director-General Tedros Adham Ghebreyesus's comments should receive a fair amount of attention. He pointed out that there were more new cases reported in the nine weeks since the Omicron variant was first reported than there were in the entire first year of the pandemic. He also mentioned that last week, on average worldwide, 100 cases were reported every three seconds and a death was caused by this coronavirus every 12 seconds. But his take-home message was this: "It is dangerous to assume . . . that we're in the endgame. On the contrary, globally the conditions are ideal for more variants to emerge." We know why, right? We've had this talk before: The virus mutates when it replicates. All this transmission, it's replicating like crazy. That is not good. We need to get vaccines spread around the world. No one is safe until we're all safe.

Now, back to our regularly scheduled programming.

It's been difficult to get a handle on trends here because the various parts of the country have such very different situations. The good news is that, in the country as a whole, we are seeing a steady decline in the seven-day new-case average. That's been climbing since just after Thanksgiving—about the time Omicron hit us—and hit a high well over 800,000; we're now at 668,312. Now, that's still ridiculous when you consider this was at 92,000 (which was also unsustainably high) on Thanksgiving night, but we are showing progress. The daily reports have been veering all over the place, falling as low as 200,000 or 300,000 on a weekend and then spiking yesterday at over one million; that's what makes averages useful. That said, we have passed some more milestones since we last talked, notably 70 and 71 million, putting us at a current total of 71,697,688; we'll pass that tonight.

January 2 – 55 million – 3 days
January 3 – 56 million – 1 day
January 4 – 57 million – 1 day
January 6 – 58 million – 2 days
January 7 – 59 million – 1 day
January 9 – 60 million – 2 days
January 10 – 61 million – 1 day
January 11 – 62 million – 1 day
January 12 – 63 million – 1 day
January 13 – 64 million – 1 day
January 14 – 65 million – 1 day
January 17 – 66 million – 3 days
January 18 – 67 million – 1 day
January 19 – 68 million – 1 day
January 20 – 69 million – 1 day
January 21 – 70 million – 1 day
January 24 – 71 million – 3 days

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We are seeing leveling off or declines in many regions. Nationally, new-case reports are dropping and hospitalizations are leveling off. We do still have regions with continuing increases—the West, the South, and the Great Plains. Hospitals are full. College campuses are burgeoning with cases as the spring semester begins. Deaths continue to increase. As bad as things are, they seem to be moving in a positive direction. This looks a lot like what happened in South Africa a while back; cases have fallen 84 percent there from mid-December even though they remain above what they were seeing before Omicron reared its ugly head. I think the most relevant comment on the current situation comes from Manhattan's borough president, to the New York Times when he said, "What we have to do now is not pretend like Covid has disappeared, but manage it to the point where it does not disrupt our life." None of this means it's over. It could be, but I wouldn't bet on it. We may well have many variants yet to go.

I note with zero pleasure that some Pacific islands, which shut down early and often, are seeing cases for the first time. The Republic of Kiribati in the South Pacific, incidentally the first country expected to lose all of its territory to climate change, opened up to international travel only to have 36 out of 54 passengers on a flight in plus one worker stationed outside their quarantine area test positive. There is another positive test unassociated with the quarantine center, so the assumption is that the virus may be spreading in the community. It appears they have some fairly stringent quarantine provisions in place, but only 53 percent of adult residents have been fully vaccinated. I hope they can contain this virus because they do not have the resources to deal with a swath of death across their islands.

Additionally, Samoa (the country, not American Samoa the US territory, which is a different entity entirely) is in lockdown after 15 out of 73 passengers on a flight from Australia tested positive. They'd had just two cases previously in the entire pandemic. They're serious about their lockdown; failure to comply with restrictions could result in a \$2000 fine. I hope this works to eliminate spread; they also lack resources to contain an outbreak.

Tonga is in a particularly difficult situation; the only case reported there during this pandemic was in a traveler arriving in October. Spread was prevented by their strict quarantine requirements for arriving travelers. But recently, after an underwater volcanic eruption on one of their islands, a 50-foot tsunami slammed into several islands, wreaking destruction; and many islands were blanketed in ash which contaminates water and damages plants that are food sources. (The tsunami was so powerful that there were deaths in far-away Peru and effects even on beaches in California over 6000 miles away.) Additionally, an underwater cable was damaged in the eruption, and so communication is limited. The people seriously need to be reached with international relief efforts, but in the current state of the pandemic, there is real risk to these under resourced islands in establishing extensive contacts with incoming relief workers. And now an aid ship on the way to Tonga has reported 23 cases of Covid-19. That's going to complicate unloading the supplies it carries.

Hospitalizations are even more problematic for much of the country. The seven-day average is 157,276, slightly below the peak reached just about a week ago. An example of the trouble we're seeing is Mississippi, which has almost no hospitals left that are not pushed to capacity. Staff have been leaving in droves with more calling in sick from Covid-19, which exacerbates the crisis; some hospitals have had to close up to a third of their beds as a result, leaving pretty much every other bed filled and patients languishing in the emergency department waiting for somewhere to go. This is not an unusual picture; I've heard and read reports of similar issues in many parts of the country. There is a long-term consequence here too. Nurses have gone to travel agencies which offer higher pay and better situations; and small community hospitals cannot compete with those terms. Even after the pandemic, we're going to have community facilities unable to meet their communities' needs. I expect we're going to see many closures in upcoming months, which are going to change the complexion of health care in the country.

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Hospitals are now to the point that they are asking employees with Covid-19—still infectious—to return to work if they are able to function. This is a sign of the serious crunch they are experiencing with staffing. CDC guidelines now say health care workers who have tested positive may continue to work. However much this seems like a terrible idea, having hospitals collapsing due to staffing shortages would be a worse idea. If workers wear high-quality personal protective equipment, this is not an entirely insupportable plan. It's not great, but it may be the best we can do in a crisis. And make no mistake: This is a crisis. Carlos del Rio, president-elect of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, told the Washington Post, "The last thing you want is to say, well, we're closing the hospital because we don't have enough doctors and nurses." This is not optimal, but nothing about this pandemic is.

Deaths are still surging with no real indication anything's leveling off at this point. Our seven-day average sits at 2083, and the total now sits at 867,868. We could go over 900,000 before the end of next month.

Worker absenteeism is hitting new highs; it tripled between December and January, specifically due to Covid-19 from 1.2 percent to 3.5 percent, according to the latest Household Pulse Survey of 75,000 people. That's 12 million people staying home because they were sick, they were taking care of someone who was sick, or they were scared of getting sick. This represents significant economic damage, messing with all kinds of essential services. Any business in which workers spend time in public-facing roles is suffering. Air travel, restaurant dining, and any number of other sectors show declines in demand as well as shortfalls in worker availability. The folks who thought we just need to open up the economy and power through this are wrong; we are learning you can't open an economy up without workers.

I've read a paper in preprint, so not yet peer-reviewed, reporting on work done at the University of Texas Medical Branch looking at neutralizing antibodies in the blood of people who've received a third dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Using a virus engineered to incorporate Omicron's mutations to test antibody responses, they found that the protective antibodies persist four months after the third, that is, booster, dose is given. Now it is important to note they did not find the antibodies persist for only four months; they found the antibodies last at least four months. That was the limit of the study since boosters only started going out in substantial numbers just about four months ago. There are plans to extend the study to longer intervals, but we'll have to wait until more time has elapsed before those can be completed.

They did note that "three doses of vaccine increased the magnitude and breadth of neutralization against Omicron; at 4 months post-dose-3." This means there weren't just more antibodies; there was a more potent repertoire of antibodies, which results from a known immunological phenomenon called affinity maturation. Essentially, what's going on there is that B cells early in a response produce a diverse set of antibody molecules; some of these antibodies will have higher affinity (ability to bind to a virus) than others. Binding sends signals to the B cells that produced them, and these B cells undergo preferential expansion (increased reproductive rate) in response to the signals. It so happens, B cells can mutate at a high rate, a process called somatic hypermutation, and we know the frequency of mutation is increased by rapid reproduction, right? Thing is this mutation is not random; it is a directed process which allows for the selection of B cells that express high-affinity antibodies and drives the cells toward the production of higher-quality antibodies. So this clone of cells that produce high-affinity antibodies reproduces fast and mutates fast and produces antibodies with even higher affinities, better equipped to compete for virus-binding sites, which stimulates further preferential expansion and somatic hypermutation. With subsequent antigen exposures, wash, rinse, and repeat. After a few rounds of this mutation and selection, we get a massive increase in the effectiveness of antibodies over the course of an immune response, and that's affinity maturation. This iterative process is considered to be a big contributor to the higher effectiveness of that third dose against this new variant. What we're finding out now is how long that can be expected to last—and so far, at least four months is how long.

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We do know that effectiveness against symptomatic infection drops off with time even after a third dose, but effectiveness against hospitalization is holding pretty well. We talked about those studies last time we got together. We will also want to remember that antibodies are not the sum total of our immunologic protection against a virus; there is that whole cell-mediated thing we recently discussed too (Update #507 posted January 19 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5559265774089783>.) So far, so good.

You should know the free home tests (four per household) being shipped from the federal government to those who've ordered them are beginning to arrive in homes; that's much quicker than promised, which is a good thing. Also, the masks from the federal stockpile are starting to appear at some pharmacies and grocery stores in some parts of the country. There are allocated at three per person. I had read that the allocation was only for adults, but that's not what the current messaging is, so it appears every member of a household can receive three. I read that the Midwest seems to be receiving some already and the Southeast appears to be next up. You'll want to be watching for these.

I saw a CNN analysis of our current state of vaccination in the US. From CDC figures, they have gleaned that 84.3 million of us are vaccinated and boosted. Another 31.6 million are 12 or older and have completed their initial vaccination series, but are not yet eligible for a booster dose. Then 5.6 million children from 5 to 11 have completed their initial series and are not eligible for boosters at all. And we have 8.5 million who received their first dose less than a month ago and are not yet ready for the second dose. When you add all this up, about 40 percent of us are, to use the CDC's new term that encompasses the boosters, up-to-date on their vaccinations, that is, as vaccinated as they can be at the moment. And 60 percent of us who are not. In case you were wondering why we're having this big surge in infections.

There is a new version of the Omicron variant circulating in various places in the world; designated for the time being as BA.2, it is clearly a descendant of Omicron, which is being designated as BA.1. It has some different mutations than BA.1; but no one knows yet just what those represent. So far, we don't have any evidence it is more transmissible, more virulent, or better at escaping immunity than the current variant; but those issues are all under investigation now. It has been detected in Europe, most notably in Denmark where it accounts for 40 percent of new cases. We should note that hospitalizations have declined in that country as this variant has become more abundant, which is certainly a reason not to get too excited. The UK is reporting it in about five percent of specimen, and the US has detected just three cases. Of course, we do some of the worse genomic surveillance of all, so could be we're just missing cases. This is something to watch, but not yet something to freak out about.

Pfizer and BioNTech announced today that they've embarked on clinical trials for their Omicron-specific vaccine; this is pretty much the same one that's been going into arms for over a year now, but tweaked to include the spike mutations from Omicron. I presume, although I can find no definitive information on this point, that it also includes the old Delta S antigens as well because there is no guarantee Delta will not re-emerge when Omicron's finished battering us. There is at this point no way to know whether we're going to need this updated vaccine, but it makes good sense to have it in our hip pocket just in case.

The trial is small; at this point we know the vaccine is safe, so we're just trying to determine that it is effective. There are around 1400 volunteers in the trial divided into three groups: those who've received two doses of vaccine, those who've received three doses of vaccine, and those who are unvaccinated who will receive three doses of the trial vaccine. I haven't seen an anticipated timeline; it will, of course, depend on numbers of infections, but there's generally an estimate of how long that's going to take. I'll watch for that.

That wraps things up for today. Be well, and I'll be back in a few days.

Grace Miller Signs to Join Northern State Women

Aberdeen, S.D. – Northern State University head women's basketball coach Paula Krueger announced today the signing of Grace Miller of Fargo to a national letter of intent. Miller joins Madelyn Bragg (Aberdeen, S.D.) and Morgan Fielder (Aberdeen, S.D.) as a member of the 2022 signing class.

"We are excited to add Grace to our Wolves family next season," explained Krueger. "Grace is a very good athlete with a high basketball ceiling. We look forward to growing her game and building on her quickness and jumping ability."

Miller is a 5-foot-10, forward out of Fargo North High School. She is a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Spartans under the direction of head coach Brian Kaluza. Miller averaged 11.5 points and 7.1 rebounds per game a season ago for FNHS. She was honored as the team's offensive MVP in 2018-19 and 2019-20. In addition, Miller is a member of the ND Flight, averaging 15.0 points and 11.0 rebounds per game. She is the daughter of Jim and Allison Miller. Jim is a former Wolves football student-athlete.

January Students of the Month



Madison Bjerke
(12th)



Jackson Dinger
(11th)



Hannah Monson
(10th)



Elizabeth Flihs
(9th)



**Olivia
Stiegelmeier**
(8th)



**Ashlynn
Warrington**
(7th)



Addison Hoeft
(6th)

These students have been chosen as "Student of the Month" for the month of January.

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 30, 2022

10:00am-1:00pm

Groton Community Center



Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice will be served!

Free will donation!

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics.

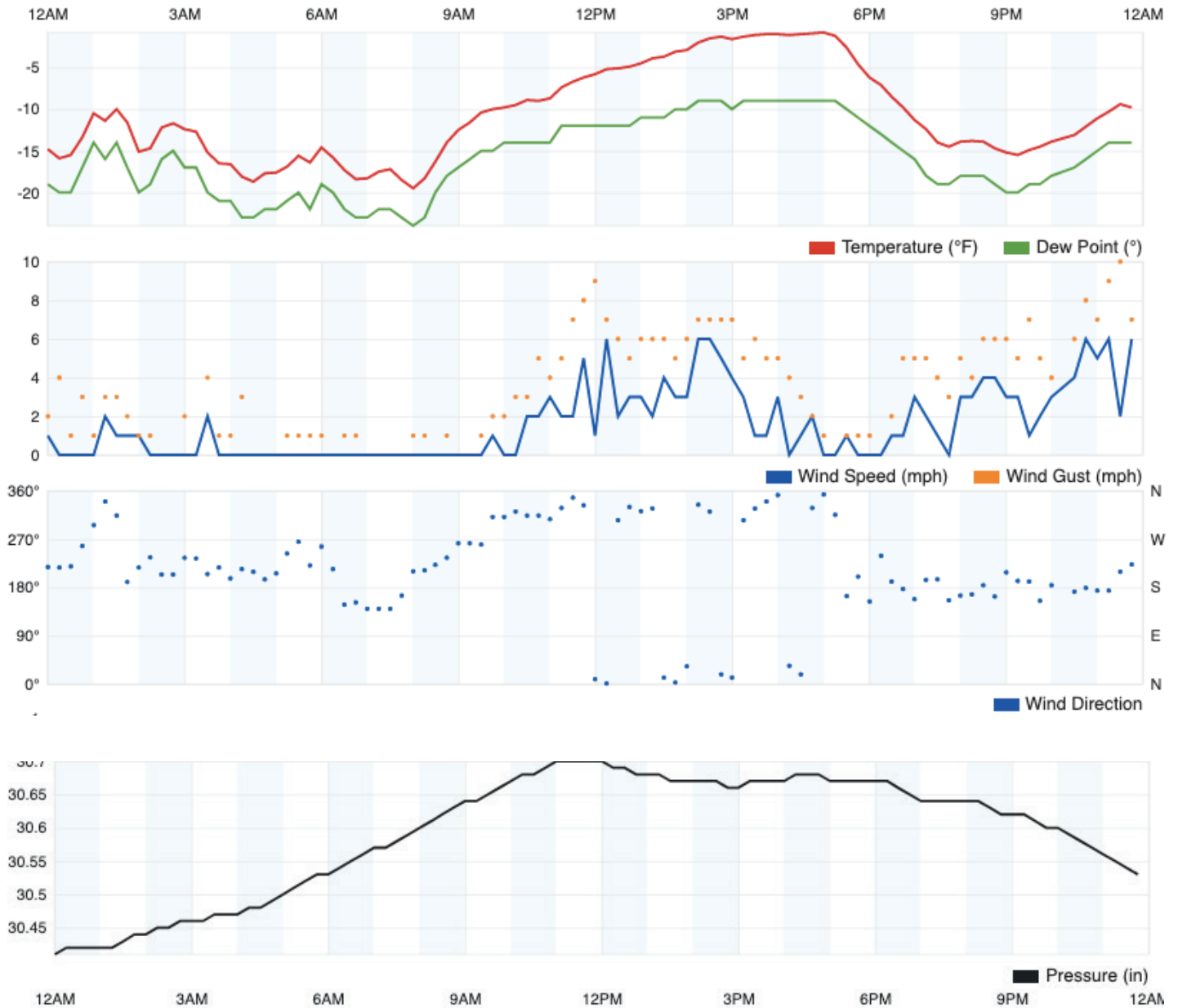


Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Patchy Blowing Snow and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 37 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 21 °F ↓	Low: -2 °F	High: 25 °F

Much Warmer, A Bit Breezy Today

This Morning

- Bitterly cold wind chills through ~6am across far ne SD and wc MN
- Strong winds mainly across the eastern side of the Prairie Coteau
 - *Blowing and drifting snow possible*

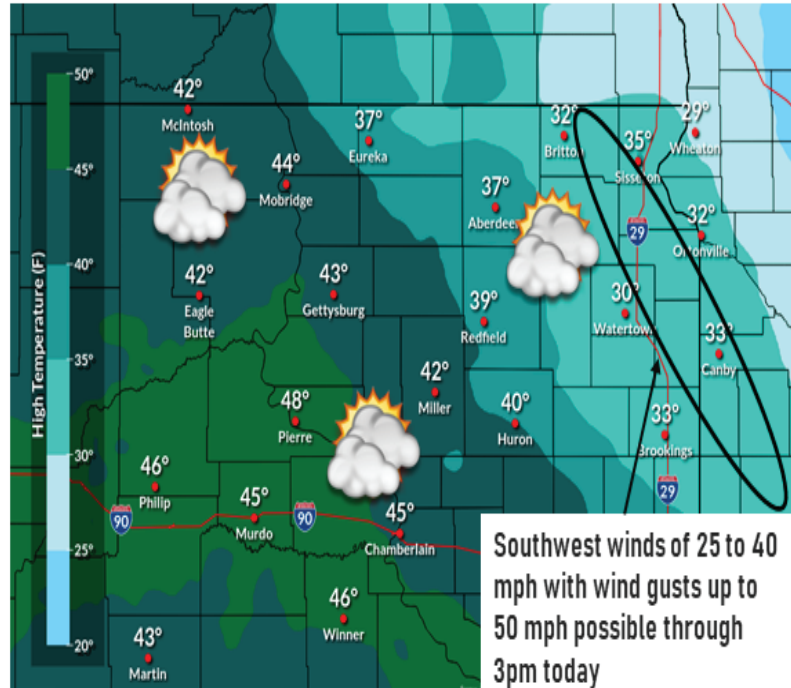
This Afternoon

- Mild with highs in the 30s and 40s
- Breezy southwest winds, especially across the eastern side of the Prairie Coteau

Rest of the Week

- Light snow showers possible Thursday morning and afternoon
- Mild weekend

High Temperatures Wednesday, Jan 26th 2022



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD



Updated: 1/26/2022 4:11 AM Central

Good news is temperatures will be quite a bit warmer today than yesterday. Bad news is it comes at a cost for those across the eastern side of the Prairie Coteau - a Wind Advisory is in effect from 6am to 3pm today with wind gusts up to 50 mph anticipated. Heads up for perhaps drifting and blowing snow in these areas.

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Today in Weather History

January 26, 1977: Four days of very strong winds occurred from the 26th through the 29th, with a strong low-pressure area over western Ontario. Strong northwest winds of 30 to 45 mph with gusts into the 60s caused widespread blowing and drifting snow, with most roads closed with many traffic accidents. The winds combined with subzero temperatures creating wind chills of 60 to 80 below zero. Many schools were closed for several days.

January 26, 2014: A strong Alberta Clipper system-generated light snow and strong winds across the region resulting in blizzard conditions. On Sunday morning, a band of moderate to heavy snow showers developed over North Dakota and swept down through our region producing cloud to ground lightning and thundersnow at times. Snowfall amounts were generally three inches or less. Wind gusts ranged from 45 to 55 mph at times. Several no travel advisories were issued due to poor visibilities in blizzard conditions, with state officials closing a large portion of Interstate-29 from Brookings to the North Dakota border.

1700: A powerful earthquake struck the Pacific Northwest along the Cascadia Subduction zone. The estimated moment magnitude of 8.7-9.2 caused about a 1,000-kilometer rupture from mid-Vancouver Island to northern California. The ocean floor heaved upward approximately 20 feet, and with 10-20 minutes, a giant wave, 30-40 feet high, reached the shore. The earthquake caused a tsunami, which struck the coast of Japan.

1772: Possibly the greatest snowfall ever recorded in the Washington DC area started on this day. When the storm began, Thomas Jefferson was returning home from his honeymoon with his new bride, Martha Wayles Skelton. The newlyweds made it to within eight miles of Monticello before having to abandon their carriage in the deep snow. Both finished the ride on horseback in the blinding snow. The newlyweds arrived home late on the night of January 26th. In Jefferson's "Garden Book," he wrote, "the deepest snow we have ever seen. In Albermarle, it was about 3. F. deep."

1937: The wettest month ever in Cincinnati, Ohio, is January 1937, when 13.68 inches fell. Their average January amount is 3.00 inches of precipitation. The overabundance of precipitation over the Ohio River basin caused near-record to record flooding in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. On this day, the river gauge reached 80 feet in Cincinnati, the highest level in the city's history. The Ohio River reached 57 feet in Louisville, Kentucky, on the 27th, setting a new record by ten feet. Seventy percent of the city was underwater at that time.

1978 - A paralyzing blizzard struck the Midwest. One to three feet of snow fell in Michigan, and 20 to 40 inches was reported across Indiana. Winds reached 70 mph in Michigan, and gusted above 100 mph in Ohio. The high winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high in Michigan and Indiana stranding thousands on the interstate highways. Temperatures in Ohio dropped from the 40s to near zero during the storm. (David Ludlum)

1983 - The California coast was battered by a storm which produced record high tides, thirty-two foot waves, and mudslides, causing millions of dollars damage. The storm then moved east and dumped four feet of snow on Lake Tahoe. (22nd-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm spread heavy snow across the Middle and Northern Atlantic Coast States, with 18 inches reported at Vineland NJ, and wind gusts to 65 mph at Chatham MA. Snow cover in Virginia ranged up to thirty inches following this second major storm in just one week. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A snowstorm in the northeastern U.S. produced 19 inches at Austerlitz NY and Stillwater NY. A storm in the Great Lakes Region left 16.5 inches at Marquette MI, for a total of 43 inches in six days. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Snow and high winds created blizzard-like conditions in northwestern Vermont. Winds at Saint Albans gusted to 88 mph. In Alaska, the town of Cold Foot (located north of Fairbanks) reported a morning low of 75 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

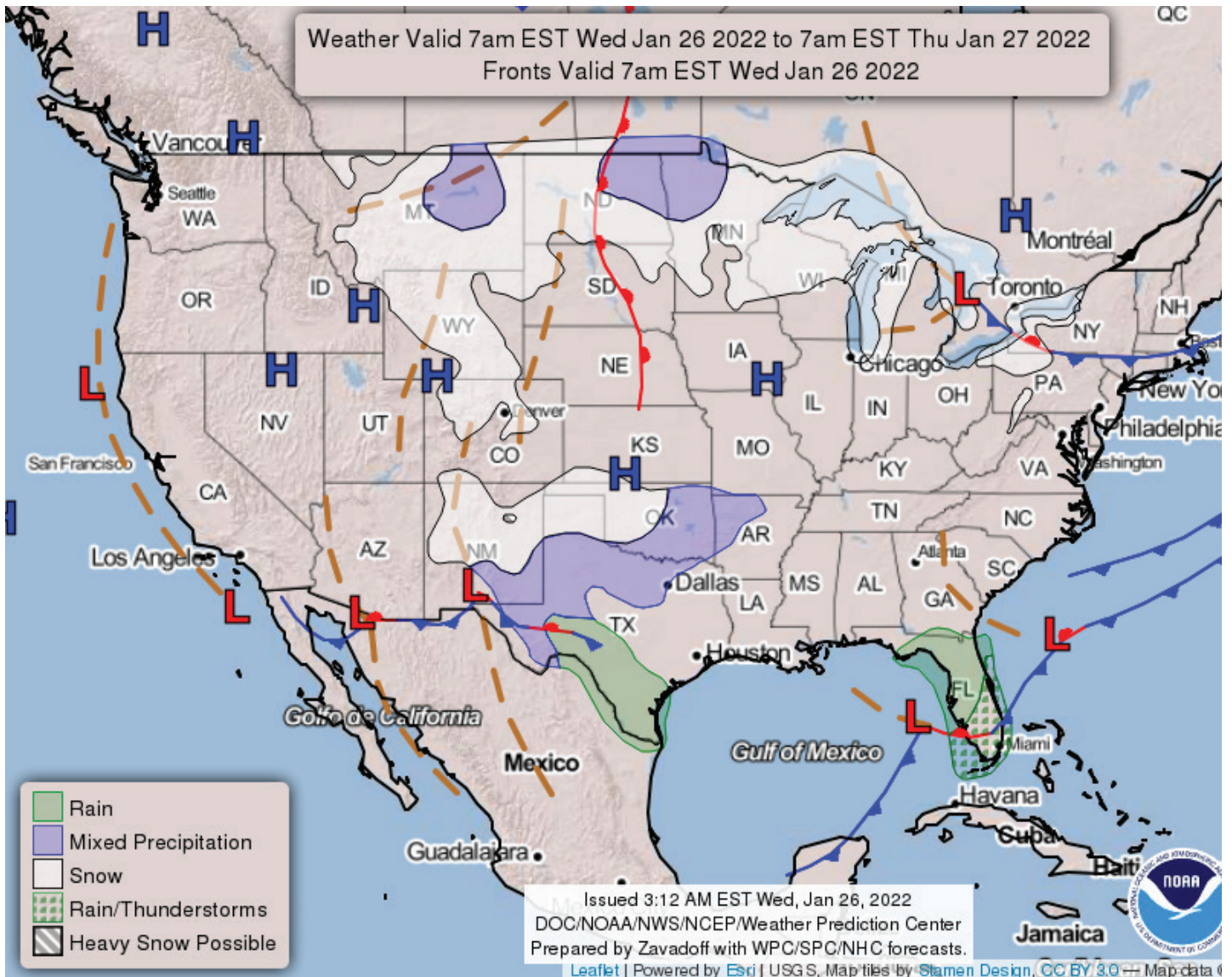
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: -1 °F at 4:55 PM
Low Temp: -20 °F at 7:59 AM
Wind: 11 mph at 11:56 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 58 in 1947
Record Low: -30 in 1950
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 1°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.47
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.59
Average Precip to date: 0.47
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:32:10 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:56:45 AM



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IT'S THERE - WAITING

Mary and I had been on a long trip. We had been driving for hours. We arrived home in the midst of a storm. The wind seemed to be coming from every direction, and the rain was cold and biting. We sat in our car for a moment looking at our home that was dark and empty. I left the lights on in the car and made my way up the steps, turned on the lights and turned up the thermostat. Suddenly, what had once been dark and dismal was now warm and welcoming.

Although our home was cold and dark, power was available to eliminate the darkness and provide energy for warmth. But it was necessary for me to do "something" to change things.

In a spiritual sense, this is true of prayer. The writer of Psalm 118 was in a situation where he desperately needed help. He knew there was a source of power that was beyond himself that he could go to if he chose to. And he did! Hear his words: "In my anguish, I cried to the Lord, and He answered me by setting me free!"

The prayer of faith is far more powerful than any source of power we know. It is the most unused force for good that is available to man.

It was Jesus who challenged us to go to this Source of power for anything and everything: "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it!" Jesus set no limits on what we might ask for as long as it is in keeping with His nature and character. Whatever we ask for, if it will bring honor and glory to His name, He will give us.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to take Your challenge to pray for anything that we might need as long as it honors You. Thank You for Your light and warmth. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – In my anguish, I cried to the Lord, and He answered me by setting me free. Psalm 118:5

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Dacotah Bank Back To School Supply Drive
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
JVT School Supply Drive
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

Groton Daily Independent

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 50, Pierre 35

Belle Fourche 65, Lemmon 51

Bon Homme 50, Kimball/White Lake 44

Brandon Valley 50, Brookings 40

Britton-Hecla 61, Leola/Frederick 44

Canistota 58, Chester 51

Canton 67, Tri-Valley 39

Castlewood 62, Colman-Egan 35

Centerville 44, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 42

Chamberlain 47, Madison 44

Dell Rapids 62, Elkton-Lake Benton 57

Dell Rapids St. Mary 81, Deubrook 62

Deuel 60, Milbank 54

Elk Point-Jefferson 62, Sisseton 36

Flandreau 75, Garretson 46

Florence/Henry 57, Arlington 40

Freeman Academy/Marion 52, Bridgewater-Emery 44

Gayville-Volin 62, Menno 37

Hamlin 55, Aberdeen Roncalli 23

Hanson 63, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 48

Harding County 67, Hulett, Wyo. 35

Herreid/Selby Area 52, Aberdeen Christian 36

Highmore-Harrold 59, James Valley Christian 53

Hot Springs 49, Wall 38

Little Wound 74, Pine Ridge 64

Lyman 64, Jones County 44

McCook Central/Montrose 59, Baltic 42

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 73, Wagner 53

New Underwood 73, Newell 32

Parker 59, Irene-Wakonda 31

Platte-Geddes 67, Parkston 55

Potter County 73, Faith 72

Rapid City Christian 71, Custer 38

Red Cloud 71, Douglas 58

Redfield 51, Hitchcock-Tulare 39

St. Thomas More 61, Spearfish 50

Stanley County 55, Sully Buttes 35

Sturgis Brown 59, Hill City 42

Tea Area 61, Sioux Falls Christian 48

Timber Lake 58, Kadoka Area 55

Watertown 59, Huron 44

Webster 60, Waverly-South Shore 46

West Central 62, Vermillion 58

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Wolsey-Wessington 79, Sunshine Bible Academy 14
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
McLaughlin vs. Mobridge-Pollock, ppd.

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=
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Andes Central/Dakota Christian 55, Wessington Springs 38
Avon 53, Burke 35
Bon Homme 62, Kimball/White Lake 54
Boyd County, Neb. 57, Colome 19
Brandon Valley 63, Brookings 30
Castlewood 55, Colman-Egan 30
Centerville 55, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 33
DeSmet 64, Sioux Valley 55, OT
Dell Rapids 60, Elkton-Lake Benton 46
Faulkton 60, Northwestern 44
Florence/Henry 55, Arlington 38
Gayville-Volin 57, Menno 42
Gregory 68, Stanley County 36
Hamlin 49, Aberdeen Roncalli 45
Hanson 47, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 39
Herreid/Selby Area 54, Aberdeen Christian 36
Hill City 52, Sturgis Brown 43
Irene-Wakonda 59, Parker 27
Langford 51, Great Plains Lutheran 48
Leola/Frederick 31, Britton-Hecla 30
Milbank 45, Deuel 28
Mitchell 46, Harrisburg 42
Parkston 48, Platte-Geddes 41
Rapid City Christian 70, Custer 52
Red Cloud 60, Douglas 26
Redfield 44, Hitchcock-Tulare 26
Scotland 43, Alcester-Hudson 41
Sioux Falls Jefferson 59, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 46
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 64, Tea Area 34
Sioux Falls Washington 61, Sioux Falls Lincoln 49
Sisseton 43, Elk Point-Jefferson 41
St. Thomas More 50, Spearfish 25
Tri-Valley 53, Canton 45
Wagner 48, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 40
Watertown 47, Huron 43
West Central 63, Vermillion 49
Wolsey-Wessington 51, Sunshine Bible Academy 11
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Clark/Willow Lake vs. Tiospa Zina Tribal, ppd.
Timber Lake vs. Bison, ppd.

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

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SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

03-12-38-53-58, Mega Ball: 13, Megaplier: 3

(three, twelve, thirty-eight, fifty-three, fifty-eight; Mega Ball: thirteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$396 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$91 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. January 24, 2022.

Editorial: South Dakota Voter Registration Bill A Step Forward

A bill that advanced last week in the South Dakota Legislature appears to be a modest but practical attempt to moving at least part of the voter registration process in this state into the 21st century.

Senate Bill 69 would allow registered voters here to use the internet to make changes in their status. According to the language of the bill, the measure would allow a voter to electronically "submit changes of last name, residence address, mailing address, telephone number, email address, previous voter registration information, party affiliation, and willingness to serve as an election worker."

This isn't the first time state legislators have tried to bring online access into the voter registration process. According to KELO, state senators approved similar legislation last year, only to see it shot down in a House committee. The House also blocked efforts to purchase an online voter registration system. Two years ago, a House bill that would have allowed voters to register online was killed in the Senate.

This measure doesn't go so far as to allow online voter registration, but it does make it easier for voters already registered to make changes in their status without going through a sometimes-contradictory process now on the books. As KELO reported online, "State law puts county auditors in 'complete charge' of voter registration. But another state law requires county auditors to submit registrations to the secretary of state for compilation of a computerized master list. Yet a third law says the county auditor prevails in case of a discrepancy."

The bill would allow voters to submit changes using a secure state website. After that, the secretary of state would notify county auditors of the changes filed.

This step is a reasonable and overdue upgrade to the process.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, South Dakota is one of just 11 states that does not allow online voter registration. It's not so much the wave of the future so much as the fact of the present. It provides more ease to voters and to prospective voters.

Again, SB69 doesn't go so far, but it does create more convenience for voters, which should help keep more voters eligible.

As Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, put it, "This bill is user friendly for our taxpayers in South Dakota." And he encouraged lawmakers to "step into the modern age."

This bill would be a smart stride in that direction.

END

House committee approves bill requiring teacher salary boost

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee on Monday approved a proposal to prod school districts to use most of their boost in state funding for teachers' salaries.

The Republican-dominated committee approved the bill on an eight to six vote, sending it to debate on the House floor. Lawmakers were also considering whether to approve a historic 6% boost in state fund-

ing for schools to keep up with inflation.

In recent years, South Dakota has been trying to climb up the rankings of states with the lowest average teacher pay in the country. But even as a 2016 sales tax hike channeled more money to school districts, South Dakota's average teacher pay has remained among the lowest in the nation.

Republican Rep. Hugh Bartels is championing the bill, which would extend for three years a requirement that came with the 2016 tax plan. School districts would risk losing funding if they don't at least match average teacher compensation from 2017, but they could also apply for a waiver if they fail to.

"This is a way to collect some data to make sure that we raise teacher salaries so we don't fall behind," Bartels told the committee.

The teacher's union, South Dakota Education Association, is pushing the bill, while the organization that represents school districts, Associated School Boards of South Dakota, has not joined a side in the debate.

However, one district superintendent, Kimberly Kludt of the Deubrook Area School District, spoke against it, arguing that it would create "unintended and significant consequences" as school boards see year-to-year fluctuations in teacher compensation.

As teachers retire or change their health care plans, districts may see a drop in average teacher compensation, even if they are raising salaries across the board. Kludt said the requirement forces school boards "to give raises to teachers that they weren't planning and may not be able to sustain."

Noem names public land commissioner as policy advisor

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Tuesday announced that the state's current commissioner of school and public lands will join her office as a senior policy advisor.

Ryan Brunner, who was in his second term as commissioner of school and public lands, will move into the role next month. The Republican governor said in a statement that she had appointed Jarrod Johnson to take over Brunner's office, which oversees lands designated for educational use by the federal government.

Noem has lost several senior staff in recent months, including John Coleman, a senior policy advisor who left earlier this month and focused on the Department of Labor and Regulation, Bureau of Human Resources and Bureau of Information and Telecommunications. The governor's spokesman, Ian Fury, said he had taken a job that would allow him to live closer to family.

Johnson previously held the position of commissioner of school and public lands for six years starting in 2007.

"Jarrod will be a capable and qualified steward of the office until the next commissioner is elected by the people," Noem said in a statement.

Two Republicans, Sen. Brock Greenfield and former Sen. Jordan Youngberg, have said they are running for the position, which will be elected in November.

Senate and House pass medical pot bills, collision looms

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's Senate on Tuesday passed a slate of bills to put lawmakers' mark on the state's new voter-passed medical marijuana law.

Several of the bills approved by the Senate would ease access to medical pot for some patients, but House Republican lawmakers are moving in the opposite direction. On Monday, they passed a proposal that would bar patients from growing cannabis plants at home, setting up a potential collision as the Senate seeks to cap the number of homegrown plants.

Legislators this year are honing in on a law passed by voters in 2020, bringing over 30 bills addressing the medical marijuana program. They touch on everything from how many plants can be grown in patients' homes to which state agencies can investigate medical pot businesses that run afoul of the law.

Republicans' ability to change the state's new medical marijuana program will largely depend on whether House and Senate lawmakers can find consensus. So far, lawmakers who want to restrict medical pot hold

sway in the Republican-held House, while many senators have shown a reluctance to step too heavily on a law that voters passed.

"I keep going back to what happened when the earth shook in November of 2020, when 70% of the voters wanted medical marijuana," Republican Sen. V.J. Smith told a committee. "It was a wake-up call."

A joint committee of senators and House members spent the last year studying marijuana industries in other states and crafting bills to hone South Dakota's program. But any cohesion from that committee has quickly dissipated in the early weeks of this year's legislative session.

House lawmakers arguing for a ban on homegrown cannabis tapped into fears that it would fuel the black market for the drug, invite drug cartels to set up in the state and lead to more children getting high.

"Homegrown is impossible to regulate," said Republican Rep. Fred Deutsch, pointing out that other states in the region have not allowed it.

When Deutsch's bill passed the House on a 41-29 vote, Republican Sen. Michael Rohl said it showed that even though the Legislature has accepted the medical marijuana law, attitudes towards the drug have changed little since last year when an effort to delay implementation of the program passed the House before being halted in the Senate.

Gov. Kristi Noem led that effort last year, but she has mostly removed herself from this year's marijuana debate — an indication of just how politically fraught the issue has become for the Republican governor, who was once a powerful foe of any legislation that would move the state closer to full pot legalization.

Several House lawmakers appear undeterred, however, and have brought several bills that would chip at parts of the voter-passed law. That has left the nascent medical marijuana industry once again busy lobbying lawmakers in the halls of the Capitol.

Kittrick Jeffries, who runs Dakota Cannabis Consulting, said of the dozens of bills before lawmakers this year, "Last year, we did play defense. This year, we're playing defense times five."

South Dakota GOP hires North Dakota native as new director

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The new executive director of the South Dakota Republican Party says one of his top goals is to achieve 100% GOP membership in the state Legislature.

North Dakota native Terin Lucero was most recently the director of data analytics for newly elected Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who upset Democrat Terry McAuliffe in the last election.

South Dakota Republicans control 32 of the 35 seats in the Senate and 62 of the 70 slots in the House, but Lucero wants more.

"That's a pretty lofty goal, but what I wanted to do when I came out here is to help put the party in the best position to achieve that, Lucero said. "If you keep doing that kind of thing, where you kind of get complacent, I guess you can kind of run into issues where the other party can make gains."

Lucero, a Williston, North Dakota native and graduate of North Dakota State University, is the first new executive director for the South Dakota GOP in five years.

Dan Lederman, chairman of the state Republican Party, said Lucero's analytics background should help increase voter registration and help the GOP take aim on the 11 seats currently occupied by Democrats.

"We hope to utilize the skills that Terin has gained with RNC data to have the best ground game on data in the state," Lederman said

The upcoming election will feature the first legislative races since lawmakers set new political boundaries.

Plea deal reached in fatal Sioux Falls shooting in 2020

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls man accused in a 2020 shooting death has taken a plea deal in the case instead of going to trial.

Rashaun Guest, 25, has pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in the death of Lamar Hood. Guest had been charged with first- and second-degree murder along with the manslaughter charge.

First-degree manslaughter carries a sentence of up to life in prison. By taking the plea deal, Guest avoids

being possibly convicted by a jury of first-degree murder that has a mandatory life-sentence.

Skylar Jorgensen, 24, from Sioux Falls, was also arrested in the case and is charged with accessory to a felony in connection with Hood's death.

Police at the time of the pair's arrest said the homicide was not a random act. Both Guest and Jorgensen knew Hood, the Argus Leader reported. After the shooting, the pair fled the scene.

They were found at separate locations in Sioux Falls the night of the shooting and were taken into custody without incident. Police said a number of firearms were also recovered during the arrests.

A sentencing date for Guest has not been scheduled. Jorgensen is scheduled for a jury trial on Feb. 28, according to court documents.

Man arrested in weekend stabbing outside Sioux Falls bar

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sioux Falls police have made an arrest in a stabbing outside a downtown bar during the weekend.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens says a 24-year-old Sioux Falls man could face charges of aggravated assault. The man was arrested about 1 a.m. Sunday.

Clemens says police were called to the Top Hat Bar & Lounge by a group of men who heard a commotion, went outside and discovered a 23-year-old man had been stabbed repeatedly.

The victim suffered wounds to his head, neck, shoulder and arm and was taken to the hospital. There's no word on his condition.

Officers located the suspect a few blocks away and arrested him.

Coast Guard searches vast sea for 39 people lost off Florida

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The Coast Guard searched through the night Wednesday for 39 people missing from a capsized boat after a solitary survivor was found clinging to the overturned hull off the Florida coast. Crews on at least four ships and five aircraft already scanned a vast area about the size of Rhode Island on Tuesday after the man was pulled to safety.

The man told a good Samaritan who rescued him that he was part of a group of 40 people who left the island of Bimini in the Bahamas on Saturday night in what the maritime security agency suspects was a human smuggling operation. He said none wore life jackets as they capsized in severe weather.

The Coast Guard said a small craft advisory had been issued as a severe cold front blew through the dangerous passage on Saturday and Sunday, with winds up to 23 mph (37 kph) and swells up to 9 feet (3 meters) high. Tommy Sewell, a local bonefishing guide, said there were high winds and fierce squalls of rain on Sunday into Monday.

The survivor was brought to a hospital for symptoms of dehydration and sun exposure after he was found early Tuesday sitting on the hull 45 miles (72 kilometers) east of Fort Pierce, the agency reported. The Coast Guard did not immediately describe the nationality of the survivor or the people lost at sea.

Migrants have long used the islands of the Bahamas as a steppingstone to reach Florida and the United States. They typically try to take advantage of breaks in the weather to make the crossing, but the vessels are often dangerously overloaded and prone to capsizing. There have been thousands of deaths over the years.

For the most part, these migrants are from Haiti and Cuba, but the Royal Bahamas Defense Force has reported apprehending migrants from other parts of the world, including from Colombia and Ecuador earlier this month.

The Coast Guard constantly patrols the waters around Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and the Bahamas. On Friday, its crews pulled 88 Haitians from an overloaded sail freighter west of Great Inagua, Bahamas.

"Navigating the Florida straits, Windward and Mona Passages ... is extremely dangerous and can result in loss of life," the Coast Guard said last weekend.

Last July, the Coast Guard rescued 13 people after their boat capsized off of Key West as Tropical Storm Elsa approached.

The survivors said they had left Cuba with 22 people aboard. Nine went missing in the water.

China's Olympics COVID measures test residents' patience

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Repeated COVID-19 testing of millions of Beijing residents is starting to test the patience of some as the city clamps down on the virus ahead of the coming Winter Olympics.

A third round of mass testing that started Wednesday for the the 2 million residents of Fengtai district drew complaints online and from residents bundled up against the wind to wait in line outdoors. The skies were sunny, but the daytime high hovered around the freezing point.

"I think it is too frequent," said a woman who only gave her surname, Ma. "I just did it yesterday and was asked to do it again today. I asked the question to the staff and they said, 'Under the principle of testing everyone who should be tested, just do it since you are here.'"

As health workers set up multiple testing stations around the city, there were scattered reports of people being told their testing would be delayed because of a system issue. It was unclear what the problem was and whether it would significantly set back the effort.

Athletes and others participating in the Games are being completely isolated from the general public to try to avoid cross-infection. Thirteen people who have come for the Games tested positive on Tuesday, bringing the total to 106 among the 3,695 who have arrived. Two of the positive cases are either athletes or team officials.

Those who test positive are taken to a hospital if they have symptoms and to a quarantine hotel if they do not.

Beijing officials said Wednesday that eight people had tested positive in the 24-hour period ending at 4 p.m., bringing the total in the city's delta variant outbreak to 69. Of those, 54 have symptoms and 15 do not.

The numbers are small compared to other countries — South Korea's latest daily tally topped 13,000 — but they are a major concern for the government as it prepares to host the Winter Games in nine days.

The Chinese capital has stepped up the country's already strict pandemic response measures. Mass testing of neighborhoods and buildings is being conducted around the city, and the local government announced this week that anyone who buys fever, headache or other cold medicines would have to take a COVID-19 test within 72 hours.

At one pharmacy, anyone purchasing such medicines was required to scan a QR code before making the purchase. A notice from the government said that purchasers were required to register their name, phone number, address and official ID number.

"This is not convenient, but we should cooperate with whatever policies the government comes up with," Zhang Jianping, a salesperson at a shopping mall, said of the new cold medicine requirement. "We should protect ourselves from catching a cold so we don't become a burden on the country."

All 2 million residents in Fengtai district, where half of the cases in Beijing have been found, are being tested for the third time since last weekend. Some areas of the district have been locked down, with residents not allowed to leave their housing complex or neighborhood.

An official announcement of the testing on social media late Tuesday drew about 90 comments, mostly critical. Some said the frequent testing wastes resources, disrupts work and daily life, and burdens health care workers and community officials.

The mass testing is conducted in groups of 10 people. One of the people holds a container, and a health worker takes samples from each of the 10 people and drops the swabs into the same container. They are tested together, and if the result come back positive, than each of the 10 people is tested individually.

"I have gotten used to it," said Tang Yupeng, a restaurant worker who was being tested in Dongcheng district. "I took my last test two days ago, and it caught us off guard, but this time we received notice beforehand so it's ok."

China's government has stuck to a zero-COVID approach, even as others have loosened restrictions on movement. Authorities snuff out any outbreak, no matter how small, with lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions. The policy has kept the number of cases and deaths relatively low in China but makes it challenging for the government to exit that strategy.

Ukraine's front line: Where lives turn on distant decisions

By INNA VARENYTSIA and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

In trenches dusted with snow and tinged with soot, men search for enough cellphone signal to hear the latest from the distant capitals that will decide their fate.

Moscow, Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna. Sometimes Kyiv. But only sometimes.

These Ukrainians are far from the Russian ships headed to a naval exercise off the coast of Ireland, from the American-built fighter jets streaming to the Baltics and from the U.S. aircraft carrier steadily sailing the Mediterranean.

As Western-supplied weapons land by the planeload in Kyiv, soldiers and civilians alike wait here with helpless anticipation for decisions made by people who know little about the lives of those on the eastern front lines — a battle-weary region near where Russia has massed tens of thousands of soldiers in a troop buildup that U.S. President Joe Biden said could mount the largest invasion since World War II.

The soldiers in Zolote 4 have been defending against Russian encroachment for years. They are just a few hundred meters from pro-Russia separatist fighters, who are on the other side of a checkpoint that no one can safely cross. The soldiers assume that's where the snipers are, though they've never seen any gunmen.

After three days with no shooting, "all of a sudden they opened up with grenade launchers and firearms. One mortar shell flew over and fell in the field behind us. Two more hit between ours and the next position. In 15 minutes, everything was quiet again. Why? What for? Nobody knows. And that's how it is around here," said Oleh Surhov, a Ukrainian soldier who fled Crimea in 2014 after the Russians seized the peninsula. He joined the fight soon after he evacuated his wife, children and grandchildren to western Ukraine.

Zolote 1 through 5 got their names decades ago during the Soviet era — the name means "Golden" — when they were labeled as units of the local coal mining operation. Now 1 through 4 are in Ukraine and 5 sits less than a kilometer (half-mile) away, across the checkpoint.

The sense of waiting for someone else's decisions has also infected the nearby village of Katerynivka, which bears the scars of eight years of shelling. It has newer trenches, which are heated by rough wood stoves whose warmth draws nearly as many dogs and cats as soldiers. The luckiest trench cats get taken back by soldiers when they rotate off the front.

"We joke that hope is the last thing to die. All of us are waiting for peace. Neither our children nor grandkids can visit us," said Liubov, a local woman who wouldn't give her last name. "We talk on the phone and that's enough. Let's wait until peace comes!"

If war comes instead, it is as likely as not to strike first in eastern Ukraine, where the pro-Russia separatists have been in control since 2014. In Russia, across the border, more than 100,000 troops are gathering, and thousands more are going into position for what Russia says are military exercises on Ukraine's border to the north with Belarus.

Moscow denies it is planning an assault, but the United States and its NATO allies are preparing for a possible war, bolstering their presence in the Baltics and putting 8,500 American troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe. Britain and the U.S. have sent multiple planeloads of weapons to Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials have accepted the help but found themselves on the sidelines of several rounds of high-stakes diplomacy that so far have not yielded a breakthrough. "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said early this month after one such meeting.

On Monday, the White House summoned European leaders, including NATO's secretary-general, to a videoconference about Ukraine to discuss U.S. ideas on how to respond to Russia's demands.

"We have shared those ideas with our European allies and partners. We are taking their feedback. We are

incorporating that feedback into the written response," U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

Ukraine wasn't invited to the videoconference. And Ukraine's president was left to fume on Twitter last week when Biden mused aloud about how to respond to a "minor incursion."

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote.

Ukrainian and Russian diplomats are scheduled to meet Wednesday in Paris to discuss the prospects for a stalled 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. If Ukraine sometimes seems to be an afterthought for the powerful countries deciding its fate, the country's east is even farther from the centers of power.

In Vesele, a separatist area in the eastern Donetsk region, little has changed since the fighting in 2014. Signs still warn about minefields. Concrete block buildings have only crumbled further in the years since they were shelled, and no one has come to tow away the cars hastily abandoned under gunfire.

"There is practically no one here, because everything is broken. There is light, gas, water supply, but there is no life," said Vladimir, a local man who refused to give his last name. He estimated Ukrainian troops were about a kilometer (half-mile) away, and he wanted them gone so people could decide their own fates.

"If they would completely leave and liberate" the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, "then we could decide. I think nobody wants (to be a part of) Ukraine here," he said.

But he, like most in the east, believed those decisions were in someone else's hands.

Russia threatens retaliation if Ukraine demands not met

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia warned Wednesday it would quickly take "retaliatory measures" if the U.S. and its allies reject its security demands and continue their "aggressive" policies, ratcheting up pressure on the West amid concerns that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly denied it has any such designs, but the United States and its NATO allies are worried because Russia has massed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border and launched a series of war games in the region.

At the heart of the standoff are questions about Ukraine's future: Russia has demanded guarantees that NATO will never admit the country and other ex-Soviet nations as members and that the alliance will roll back troop deployments in other former Soviet bloc countries. Some of these, like the membership pledge, are nonstarters for NATO, creating a seemingly intractable stalemate that many fear can only end in a war.

Speaking to lawmakers Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he and other top officials will advise President Vladimir Putin on the next steps after receiving written replies from the United States to the demands. Those answers are expected this week — even though the U.S. and its allies have already made clear they will reject the top Russian demands.

"If the West continues its aggressive course, Moscow will take the necessary retaliatory measures," he said.

While Russia is currently waiting for the American reply, Lavrov indicated it wouldn't wait forever: "We won't allow our proposals to be drowned in endless discussions," he said.

Asked by lawmakers if Russia could expand military cooperation with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, Lavrov responded that Moscow has close ties with those countries. Earlier this month, Lavrov's deputy pointedly refused to rule out the deployment of Russian military assets to Cuba and Venezuela — far closer to the U.S. than Ukraine — if Moscow's security demands aren't met.

NATO said this week it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe. Western nations have also sent planeloads of weapons to help Ukraine strengthen its defenses.

Amid the escalating tensions, Ukrainian officials have sought to calm nerves.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Wednesday that while the concentration of Russian troops

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near Ukraine poses a threat, "their number is now insufficient for a large-scale offensive."

"They are still missing some key military elements and systems to mount a big, full-scale offensive," Kuleba told reporters.

As others have, he noted that causing alarm could be an end in itself. Russia, he said, hopes to destabilize Ukraine by "spreading panic, raising pressure on Ukraine's financial system and launching cyberattacks."

"President Putin would be happy to see that plan succeed so that he doesn't even need to turn to military force to put Ukraine in a vulnerable position," he said.

His comments were latest from Ukrainian officials who have sought to reassure their citizens. Speaking late Tuesday in the second televised speech to the nation in as many days, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine was "strong enough to keep everything under control and derail any attempts at destabilization."

Several rounds of high-stakes diplomacy have failed to yield any breakthroughs in the standoff, but another attempt was going forward Wednesday.

Presidential advisers from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany are set to meet in Paris to discuss ways to revive a stalled peace agreement for eastern Ukraine.

In 2014, following the ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland. Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a settlement have stalled.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow expects a "good frank" talk at the Paris meeting.

In addition to the military moves, the U.S. and its allies have threatened sanctions like never before if Moscow sends its troops into Ukraine, but they have given few details, saying it's best to keep Putin guessing.

On Tuesday, U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters that Putin "continues to build forces along Ukraine's border," and an attack "would be the largest invasion since World War II. It would change the world." He warned that there would be serious economic consequences for Putin, including personal sanctions, in the event of an invasion.

Asked to comment on Biden's statement, Peskov pointed out that the Russian president and other top officials don't have assets in the West but reaffirmed that such U.S. sanctions would be "politically destructive" for bilateral ties.

Britain is also promising sanctions, and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has urged European nations to do more to support Ukraine.

The U.K. has sent anti-tank weapons to Ukraine, though it has ruled out sending combat troops.

"We'll be legislating to toughen up our sanctions regime and make sure we are fully able to hit both individuals and companies and banks in Russia in the event of an incursion," she told the BBC. "What's important is that all of our allies do the same."

Amid the soaring tensions, the U.S., Britain, Australia, Germany and Canada have also moved to withdraw some of their diplomats and dependents from Kyiv.

As Fed meets, investor angst over rate hikes spooks markets

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wild volatility in the stock market this week has put heightened scrutiny on the Federal Reserve's meeting Wednesday and whether the Fed will clarify just how fast it plans to tighten credit and potentially slow the economy.

With high inflation squeezing consumers and businesses, the Fed is expected to signal that it will raise its benchmark short-term interest rate in March in a dramatic reversal from the ultra-low-rate policies it imposed during the pandemic recession. To further tighten credit, the Fed also plans to end its monthly bond purchases in March. And later this year, it may start reducing its huge stockpile of Treasury and mortgage bonds.

Investors fear there may be still more to come. Some on Wall Street worry that on Wednesday, the Fed may signal a forthcoming half-point increase in its key rate. There is also concern that at a news confer-

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ence, Fed Chair Jerome Powell could suggest that the central bank will raise rates more times this year than the four hikes most economists expect.

Another wild card — particularly for Wall Street — is the Fed's bond holdings. As recently as September, those holdings were growing by \$120 billion a month. The bond purchases, which the Fed financed by creating money, were intended to reduce longer-term rates to spur borrowing and spending. Many investors saw the bond buying as helping fuel stock market gains by pouring cash into the financial system.

Earlier this month, minutes of the Fed's December meeting revealed that the central bank was considering reducing its bond holdings by not replacing bonds that mature — a more aggressive step than just ending the purchases. Analysts now forecast that the Fed could begin shrinking its holding as early as July, much sooner than was expected even a few months ago.

The impact of reducing the Fed's bond stockpile isn't well known. But the last time the Fed raised rates and reduced its balance sheet simultaneously was in 2018. The S&P 500 stock index tumbled 20% in three months.

If, as expected, the Fed raises its key rate in March by a quarter-point, it would lift the rate to a range of 0.25% to 0.5%, up from near zero. The Fed's moves are likely to make a wide range of borrowing — from mortgages and credit cards to auto loans and corporate credit — more expensive. Those higher borrowing costs, in turn, could slow spending and weaken corporate profits. The gravest risk is that the Fed's abandonment of low rates, which have nurtured the economy and the financial markets for years, could trigger another recession.

Those worries have sent stock prices fluctuating wildly. The Dow Jones average plunged more than 1,000 points during Monday's trading session before recovering and finishing with a modest gain. On Tuesday, the S&P 500 closed down 1.2%. Steady declines since the start of the year have left the S&P down nearly 10% — the level that investors define as a "correction."

Economists have forecast that when the Fed does start allowing some of its \$8.8 trillion in bond holdings to roll off its balance sheet, it will do so at a pace of \$100 billion a month. By not replacing some securities, the Fed in effect reduces demand for Treasuries. This raises their yields and makes borrowing more expensive.

Yet some analysts say they aren't sure how big the impact on interest rates will be or how much the Fed will rely on reducing its balance sheet to affect interest rates.

"There is a fair bit of uncertainty about what to expect," said Michael Hanson, global economist at JPMorgan Chase.

Gennadiy Goldberg, U.S. rates strategist at TD Securities, said that Wall Street has also been unnerved by the sharp jump in the inflation-adjusted interest rate on the 10-year Treasury. That rate has jumped by one-half a percentage point just this month, an unusually swift rise.

All of which means Powell will face a delicate and even risky balancing act at his news conference Wednesday.

"It's a threading-the-needle story," Goldberg said. "They want to continue to sound hawkish — just not so hawkish as to create extreme market volatility."

If the stock market is engulfed by more chaotic declines, economists say, the Fed might decide to delay some of its credit-tightening plans. Modest drops in share prices, though, won't likely affect its plans.

"The Fed does not at all mind seeing a repricing of risk here but would want to see it in an orderly fashion," said Ellen Gaske, lead economist at PGIM Fixed Income, a global asset manager.

Some economists have expressed concern that the Fed is already moving too late to combat high inflation. Others say they worry that the Fed may act too aggressively. They argue that numerous rate hikes would risk causing a recession and wouldn't slow inflation in any case. In this view, high prices mostly reflect snarled supply chains that the Fed's rate hikes are powerless to cure.

This week's Fed meeting comes against the backdrop of not only high inflation — consumer prices have surged 7% in the past year, the fastest pace in nearly four decades — but also an economy gripped by another wave of COVID-19 infections.

Powell has acknowledged that he failed to foresee the persistence of high inflation, having long expressed the belief that it would prove temporary. The inflation spike has broadened to areas beyond those that were affected by supply shortages — to apartment rents, for example — which suggests it could endure even after goods and parts flow more freely.

EPA acts on environmental justice in 3 Gulf Coast states

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency is taking a series of enforcement actions to address air pollution, unsafe drinking water and other problems afflicting minority communities in three Gulf Coast states, following a "Journey to Justice" tour by Administrator Michael Regan last fall.

The agency will conduct unannounced inspections of chemical plants, refineries and other industrial sites suspected of polluting air and water and causing health problems to nearby residents, Regan said. And it will install air monitoring equipment in Louisiana's "chemical corridor" to enhance enforcement at chemical and plastics plants between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The region contains several hotspots where cancer risks are far above national levels.

The EPA also issued a notice to the city of Jackson, Mississippi, saying its aging and overwhelmed drinking water system violates the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. The order directs the city to outline a plan to "correct the significant deficiencies identified" in an EPA report within 45 days.

In separate letters, Regan urged city and state officials to use nearly \$79 million in funding allocated to Mississippi under the bipartisan infrastructure law "to solve some of the most dire water needs in Jackson and other areas of need across Mississippi."

The actions were among more than a dozen steps being taken in response to Regan's tour last November. Regan visited low-income, mostly minority communities in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas as part of an effort to focus federal attention on communities adversely affected by decades of industrial pollution.

A Toxics Release Inventory prepared by the EPA shows that minority groups make up 56% of those living near toxic sites such as refineries, landfills and chemical plants. Negative effects include chronic health problems such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension.

"In every community I visited during the Journey to Justice tour, the message was clear: residents have suffered far too long and local, state, and federal agencies have to do better," Regan said in a statement. "Our actions will begin to help not only the communities I visited on this tour, but also others across the country who have suffered from environmental injustices."

The unannounced inspections of chemical plants and other sites "are going to keep these facilities on their toes," Regan said Tuesday in a conference call with reporters.

Inspections currently are done on a schedule or with advance notice, Regan said, but that is about to change. "We are amping up our aggressiveness to utilize a tool that's in our toolbox that ... has been there for quite some time," he said.

When facilities are found to be noncompliant, the EPA "will use all available tools to hold them accountable," he added.

A pilot project combining high-tech air pollution monitoring with additional inspectors will begin in three Louisiana parishes, including St. John the Baptist, St. James and Calcasieu. The parishes are home to scores of industrial sites and are long plagued by water and air pollution.

Regan, a former environmental regulator in North Carolina, has made environmental justice a top priority since taking over as EPA head last year. As the first Black man to lead the agency, the issue "is really personal for me, as well as professional," he told The Associated Press in November.

"As I look at many of the folks in these communities, they look just like me. They look just like my son, and it's really tough to see them question the quality of their drinking water," Regan said.

Historically marginalized communities like St. John and St. James, along with cities such as New Orleans, Jackson, Mississippi and Houston, will benefit from the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law signed by President Joe Biden, Regan said. The law includes \$55 billion for water and wastewater infrastructure, while

a sweeping climate and social policy bill pending in the Senate would pump more than twice that amount into EPA programs to clean up the environment and address water and environmental justice issues.

As part of its enforcement action, the EPA is requiring a former DuPont petrochemical plant in La Place, Louisiana, to install fence-line monitors to identify emissions from the site, Regan said. The plant is now owned by the Japanese conglomerate Denka.

The agency also said it will push for greater scrutiny of a proposed expansion of a Formosa Plastics plant in St. James and issued a notice of violation to a Nucor Steel plant that emits hydrogen sulfide and other harmful chemicals.

Regan said he has spoken with New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell about Gordon Plaza, a city neighborhood built on the site of a former toxic landfill. Gordon Plaza was designated as a Superfund site in the 1990s, but dozens of mostly Black families still live there.

The EPA will review the site, starting in March, Regan said, and will add nine homes not included in earlier plans to help families move. City officials hope to use money from the infrastructure law to relocate families and build a solar farm on the site.

France bans gay 'conversion therapy' with new law

PARIS (AP) — France has a new law that bans so-called conversion therapies and authorizes jail time and fines for practitioners who use the scientifically discredited practice to attempt to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ people.

The National Assembly approved the new law unanimously, voting 142-0 on Tuesday evening.

The legislation includes criminal penalties for people who are convicted of trying to "convert" LGBTQ people to heterosexuality or traditional gender expectations.

The law also opens the possibility for campaigners to file civil suits on behalf of victims, an advance hailed in parliament as a breakthrough for people who hesitate or are unable to alert police themselves.

Lawmaker Laurence Vanceunebrock, who helped steer the law's passage through parliament, said it will target "all those who equated an identity or a sexual orientation with sickness."

"There is nothing to cure," she told the National Assembly.

The French government's equalities and diversity minister, Elisabeth Moreno, described so-called conversion therapies as "barbaric" and told lawmakers that the suffering they inflict "very often leaves permanent marks on bodies and minds."

Under the new law, sustained efforts "that aim to modify or reprimand sexual orientation or gender identity" and which impact the physical or mental health of victims are punishable by up to two years in jail and 30,000 euros (\$34,000) in fines.

The punishment can increase to three years imprisonment and fines of 45,000 euros (\$50,000) for attempts involving minors or other particularly vulnerable people.

Practicing therapy to change a person's sexual orientation already is prohibited in multiple U.S. states and the U.S. Caribbean territory of Puerto Rico.

The law will take effect in the next 14 days with President Emmanuel Macron's signoff. Macron hailed its passage.

"Let's be proud of it," the French leader tweeted. "Because being oneself is not a crime."

California city approves 1st US insurance law for gun owners

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — A California city voted Tuesday night to require gun owners to carry liability insurance in what's believed to be the first measure of its kind in the United States.

The San Jose City Council overwhelmingly approved the measure despite opposition from gun owners who said it would violate their Second Amendment rights and promised to sue.

The Silicon Valley city of about 1 million followed a trend of other Democratic-led cities that have sought to rein in violence through stricter rules. But while similar laws have been proposed, San Jose is the first

city to pass one, according to Brady United, a national nonprofit that advocates against gun violence.

Council members, including several who had lost friends to gun violence, said it was a step toward dealing with gun violence that Councilman Sergio Jimenez called "a scourge on our society."

Having liability insurance would encourage people in the 55,000 households in San Jose who legally own at least one registered gun to have gun safes, install trigger locks and take gun safety classes, Mayor Sam Liccardo said.

The liability insurance would cover losses or damages resulting from any accidental use of the firearm, including death, injury, or property damage, according to the ordinance. If a gun is stolen or lost, the owner of the firearm would be considered liable until the theft or loss is reported to authorities.

However, gun owners who don't have insurance won't lose their guns or face any criminal charges, the mayor said.

The council also voted to require gun owners to pay an estimated \$25 fee, which would be collected by a yet-to-be-named nonprofit and doled out to community groups to be used for firearm safety education and training, suicide prevention, domestic violence, and mental health services.

The proposed ordinance is part of a broad gun control plan that Liccardo announced following the May 26 mass shooting at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority rail yard that left nine people dead, including the employee who opened fire on his colleagues then killed himself.

At an hours-long meeting, critics argued that the fee and liability requirements violated their right to bear arms and would do nothing to stop gun crimes, including the use of untraceable, build-it-yourself "ghost guns."

"You cannot tax a constitutional right. This does nothing to reduce crime," one speaker said.

The measure didn't address the massive problem of illegally obtained weapons that are stolen or purchased without background checks.

Liccardo acknowledged those concerns.

"This won't stop mass shootings and keep bad people from committing violent crime," the mayor said, but added most gun deaths nationally are from suicide, accidental shootings or other causes and even many homicides stem from domestic violence.

Liccardo also said gun violence costs San Jose taxpayers \$40 million a year in emergency response services.

Some speakers argued that the law would face costly and lengthy court challenges.

Before the vote, Sam Paredes, executive director of Gun Owners of California, said his group would sue if the proposal takes effect, calling it "totally unconstitutional in any configuration."

However, Liccardo said some attorneys had already offered to defend the city pro bono.

Biden nominating 6 lawyers for federal prosecutor posts

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is nominating six lawyers to run U.S. attorney's offices across the country, a diverse group of candidates in the latest picks for the top law enforcement positions.

The nominees, being announced by the White House on Wednesday, would run the federal prosecutors' offices in Alaska, Connecticut, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico and Utah. They would include the first woman to serve as U.S. attorney in Utah and the first Black woman to serve as U.S. attorney in Connecticut.

The Justice Department's 93 U.S. attorneys, who are responsible for federal criminal prosecutions in their respective districts, are likely to be central to efforts to combat violent crime. Biden has now nominated 43 people to serve as U.S. attorneys, positions that have been filled for months by acting U.S. attorneys.

The candidates were "chosen for their devotion to enforcing the law, their professionalism, their experience and credentials in this field, their dedication to pursuing equal justice for all, and their commitment to the independence of the Department of Justice," the White House said.

The nominees include Vanessa Avery, a former federal prosecutor who is now a top prosecutor in the

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Connecticut attorney general's office, to be the U.S. attorney there. Since 2021, she has served as the chief of the Division of Enforcement and Public Protection at the state attorney general's office. She was an associate state attorney general and worked as an assistant U.S. attorney in Connecticut. If confirmed, Avery would be the first African American woman to serve as U.S. attorney in Connecticut.

The last Senate-confirmed U.S. attorney in the state, John Durham, currently serves as special counsel overseeing the investigation into the origins of the Russia probe that shadowed Donald Trump's presidency for years. Durham left his position as U.S. attorney last year — the Justice Department asked prosecutors appointed by Trump to resign from their posts as the Biden administration moved to transition to its own nominees — but has remained as a special counsel after being appointed by then-Attorney General William Barr.

Biden is also nominating Trina Higgins, a longtime federal prosecutor, to serve as U.S. attorney in Utah. If confirmed, she would be the first woman to serve as U.S. attorney for Utah.

The Democratic president is tapping Jesse Laslovich, a health care executive and former state legislator, to be the U.S. attorney in Montana. Since 2017, Laslovich has worked as a regional vice president for SCL Health Montana-Wyoming region. Before that, he was the chief legal counsel for the Montana Commissioner of Securities and Insurance and worked as a state prosecutor and special assistant U.S. attorney. He served in Montana's state Senate from 2005 to 2010 and in the state House of Representatives from 2001 to 2004.

S. Lane Tucker, an attorney in the Anchorage office of the law firm Stoe Rives LLP, is being nominated to be the U.S. attorney in Alaska. The former federal prosecutor worked at the Justice Department in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Alexander M.M. Uballez, a federal prosecutor in the U.S. attorney's office in New Mexico, is being nominated to run that office. Uballez has worked in the office since 2016 and was previously an assistant district attorney in Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

The Biden administration is also nominating Jane E. Young, the deputy attorney general for the New Hampshire Department of Justice, to be the U.S. attorney in that state. Young has held a variety of roles in the New Hampshire Department of Justice since she joined the office in 1992.

WHO: Record weekly COVID cases last week but deaths stable

GENEVA (AP) —

The World Health Organization said there were 21 million new coronavirus cases reported globally last week, the highest weekly number of COVID-19 cases recorded since the pandemic began. The number of deaths was largely unchanged, at more than 50,000.

In its weekly assessment of the pandemic, issued late Tuesday, the U.N. health agency said the number of new coronavirus infections rose by 5% and that the rate of increase appears to be slowing; only half of regions reported an increase in COVID-19. Earlier this month, the previous highest number of cases — 9.5 million — was recorded amid a 71% spike from the week before, as the hugely contagious omicron variant swept the world.

WHO said the biggest increase in cases was seen in the Middle East, with a 39% rise, followed by a 36% jump in Southeast Asia. Deaths increased in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the Americas, but fell in other regions.

On Monday, WHO's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus cautioned against talk that the pandemic might be entering its "endgame," warning that conditions remain ripe for new variants to emerge, with vast swathes of unvaccinated people in some countries amid rapid virus transmission. Still, Tedros said it might be possible for the world to exit the acute phase of the pandemic, if goals like immunizing at least 70% of each country's population are met later this year.

In Britain, researchers at Imperial College London recorded the highest-ever prevalence rate of COVID-19 in England earlier this month, estimating that about one in every 23 people tested had the virus.

The scientists said there were indications the massive spike caused by omicron had started to level off

but that infection rates remained high. Scientists have said that omicron is far less likely to cause serious disease and hospitalization but spreads much faster than previous COVID-19 variants, including delta.

Picasso heirs launch digital art piece to ride 'crypto' wave

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Pablo, meet Crypto.

Heirs of Pablo Picasso, the famed 20th-century Spanish artist, are vaulting into 21st-century commerce by selling 1,010 digital art pieces of one of his ceramic works that has never before been seen publicly — riding a fad for "crypto" assets that have taken the art and financial worlds by storm.

For an exclusive interview before the formal launch this week, Picasso's granddaughter, Marina Picasso, and her son Florian Picasso opened up their apartment — which is swimming in works from their illustrious ancestor — in an upscale Geneva neighborhood. There they offered up a glimpse, however tantalizingly slim, of the piece behind what they're billing as an unprecedented fusion of old-school fine art and digital assets.

They're looking to cash in on and ride a wave of interest in so-called non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, which have netted millions for far-less-known artists and been criticized by some as environmentally costly get rich schemes.

A Picasso, his family's promoters say, would mark the entry of a Grand Master into the game.

In economics jargon, a fungible token is an asset that can be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. Think of dollars or bitcoins — each one has the exact same value and can be traded freely. A non-fungible object, by contrast, has its own distinct value, like an old house or a classic car.

Cross this notion with cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain and you get NFTs. They are effectively digital certificates of authenticity that can be attached to digital art or, well, pretty much anything else that comes in digital form — audio files, video clips, animated stickers, even a news article read online.

"We're trying to build a bridge between the NFT world and the fine art world," said Florian Picasso, the artist's great-grandson.

The artist's descendants are playing close to the vest, to drum up interest and protect — for now — a family heirloom. They're showing only a sliver of the underside of the work linked to the NFTs, a ceramic piece about the size of a large salad bowl. The exposed parts show forms like a thick yellow line, a dribbling green splotch, and a brushed-on number "58" at the base.

Marina Picasso says the cherished pottery piece dates to October 1958, when she was a child.

"It's a work that represents a face, and it's very expressive," she said. "It's joyful, happy. It represents life ... It's one of those objects that have been part of our life, our intimate lives — my life with my children."

Sotheby's is hosting an auction in March that will include a unique NFT as well as the actual ceramic bowl.

Florian Picasso said they agreed on the colorful ceramic piece because it was "a fun one" to start.

An NFT Picasso brings with it almost epochal symbolism, something like when the Beatles collection was finally put up on iTunes. The family and its business managers say the aim is to create a younger community of Picasso fans.

"Everything is evolving," said Florian Picasso, insisting that the NFT honors the great artist.

"I think it fits within Picasso's legacies because we are paying tribute to him and his way of working, which was always being creative," he said.

How quaint seem those days of yore when Picasso, as the legend has it, would simply doodle on a napkin as payment for a restaurant meal — his handiwork supposedly carrying a value far in excess of the cost of the food and drinks he had enjoyed.

Some of the proceeds will be donated — one portion to a charity that aims to help overcome a shortage of nurses, and another to a nongovernmental organization that wants to help reduce carbon in the atmosphere. The NFTs will also come with music put together by Florian Picasso, who is a DJ and music producer, along with songwriter John Legend and rapper Nas.

Even a full rendering of that track isn't being publicly released just yet: Florian Picasso played a snippet

for a reporter, then turned it off.

"And to hear more, you gotta purchase the NFT," he quipped.

UK government holds breath as it awaits 'partygate' report

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson is bracing for the conclusions of an investigation into allegations of lockdown-breaching parties, a document that could help him end weeks of scandal and discontent, or bring his time in office to an abrupt close.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray could turn in her report to the government as soon as Wednesday. Johnson's office has promised to publish its findings, and the prime minister will address Parliament about it soon after.

Gray's office wouldn't comment on timing, and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said the Conservative government hadn't yet received the report Wednesday morning.

"I expect we won't have much longer to wait," she told the BBC.

Truss said she couldn't guarantee the government would publish the full report, saying there could be "security issues that mean parts of it are problematic to publish. But we will absolutely publish the findings of the report."

Allegations that the prime minister and his staff flouted restrictions imposed on the country to curb the spread of the coronavirus have caused public anger, led some Conservative lawmakers to call for Johnson's resignation and triggered intense infighting inside the governing party.

Wednesday's headlines provided more bad news for Johnson, whose popularity in opinion polls has plunged amid the scandal. The Guardian's front-page headline spoke of "PM's peril," while the left-leaning Daily Mirror said bluntly: "Number's up, PM." The right-of-center Daily Mail differed, declaring Britain: "A nation that has lost all sense of proportion."

Johnson has urged his critics to wait for Gray's conclusions, but his "wait and see" defense weakened Tuesday when police said they had opened a criminal investigation into some of the gatherings.

London's Metropolitan Police force said "a number of events" at Johnson's Downing Street office and other government buildings met the force's criteria for investigating the "most serious and flagrant" breaches of coronavirus rules.

Gray is investigating claims that government staff held late-night soirees, boozy parties and "wine time Fridays" while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions in 2020 and 2021.

The "partygate" allegations have infuriated many in Britain, who were barred from meeting with friends and family for months in 2020 and 2021 to curb the spread of COVID-19. Tens of thousands of people were fined by police for breaking the rules.

Johnson and his allies have tried, without much success, to calm a scandal that is consuming government energies that could be better spent confronting the international crisis over Russia's military build-up near Ukraine and a far-from-finished coronavirus pandemic.

Johnson has apologized for attending one event, a "bring your own booze" gathering in the garden of his Downing Street offices in May 2020, but said he had considered the party a work gathering that fell within the rules.

His office and supporters have also defended a June 2020 surprise birthday party for the prime minister inside Downing Street.

Loyal lawmaker Conor Burns said Johnson didn't know about the gathering in advance.

"It was not a premeditated, organized party ... He was, in a sense, ambushed with a cake," Burns told Channel 4 News.

In Germany, activists rise up to counter vaccine skeptics

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Stefanie Hoener was at home one night in Berlin when she heard police sirens wail-

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ing through her Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood and anti-vaccine protesters shouting angry slurs as they marched down to the Gethsemane Church — a symbol of the peaceful 1989 revolution in East Germany that ended the communist dictatorship.

“That night these people really crossed a line,” Hoener said Monday as she stood with 200 others— many of them neighbors — in front of the red brick church to protect it from anti-vaccine protesters glaring from the other side of the street.

“If today, when everyone is allowed to express themselves freely without having to fear anything, they stand here and say we live in a dictatorship, then I can no longer tolerate that,” Hoener told The Associated Press. “I for one am very happy to have been vaccinated free of charge and to have received financial support from the government during the pandemic.”

The 55-year-old actress is one of a growing number of Germans who have joined grassroots initiatives and spontaneous demonstrations to speak out against vaccination opponents, conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists who have led protests against Germany’s COVID-19 measures.

Across the country, the new counter-protesters have turned out in favor of the government’s pandemic restrictions and a universal vaccine mandate, which will be debated Wednesday for the first time in German parliament.

Tens of thousands have signed manifestos against illegal anti-vaccine demonstrations in cities including Leipzig, Bautzen and Freiberg. Others have formed human chains in Oldenburg or Rottweil to push back far-right protesters, while dozens of medical students recently held a silent vigil outside a hospital in Dresden to protest a rally by far-right vaccine skeptics.

The silent majority in Germany that has obediently reduced their social contacts, got vaccinated and looked out for each other for close to two years to protect themselves and the most vulnerable from COVID-19 seems fed up by the small but loud minority of coronavirus deniers.

Not all of the anti-vaccine protesters in Germany are outright deniers of the pandemic, some are simply afraid of possible side effects of the vaccines or feel that the country’s health authorities have been too pushy. However, radical opponents on the far-right have tried to seize the protest movement for their own purposes.

The new counter-protesters feel that the radical vaccine refusers have been getting outsized media attention and have too much influence on the public debate about how Germany should handle the pandemic.

Even the German president this week called on the country’s silent majority to stand up and protect the country’s democracy.

“Being the majority is not enough. The majority must become politically recognizable. It must not retreat. The silent center must become more visible, more self-confident and also louder,” President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said at a panel Monday in Berlin.

Stephan Thiel, a theater director, said he was initially hesitant to join the rally in front of Gethsemane Church on Monday because he didn’t want to mingle with too many people amid quickly spreading virus infections. At the same time, he also felt he had no choice but to express his opinion.

“There are many sensible people who are staying at home because of the virus. I also find it a bit problematic to be here. But we have to be here,” he said, speaking from behind a black anti-virus mask. “We have to show that we are here and that they are not the majority. And I hope that more and more people will come every time.”

Thiel, 51, grew up under communism. He still remembers how millions of East Germans brought down the regime with their weekly demonstrations in 1989. He said he was especially offended that the anti-vaccine protesters tried to exploit the Gethsemane Church’s symbolism as a famous meeting place for opponents of the Communist regime.

“I really don’t like how they try to use that history. That’s also a reason why I came here to make a stand,” he added.

The call for action among pro-vaccine activists comes at a time when German society may become even more polarized as a universal COVID-19 vaccine mandate is up for discussion in parliament. Divisions on that issue cut across party lines. The coalition government has left it to lawmakers to draw up cross-party

proposals on whether there should be a mandate and how it should be designed.

So far, at least 73.5% of Germany's 83 million residents have been fully vaccinated, and 50.8% have already received a booster shot.

For Hoener, who has joined a neighborhood initiative that organizes weekly vigils in front of the church, there's no question that Germany should introduce a vaccine mandate shortly.

"In Germany, unfortunately, there are not enough people who would get vaccinated voluntarily, so I think it has to be made mandatory," she said. "Otherwise we will never get rid of this pandemic."

Meet Methuselah, the oldest living aquarium fish

By HAVEN DALEY Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Meet Methuselah, the fish that likes to eat fresh figs, get belly rubs and is believed to be the oldest living aquarium fish in the world.

In the Bible, Methuselah was Noah's grandfather and was said to have lived to be 969 years old. Methuselah the fish is not quite that ancient, but biologists at the California Academy of Sciences believe it is about 90 years old, with no known living peers.

Methuselah is a 4-foot-long (1.2-meter), 40-pound (18.1-kilogram) Australian lungfish that was brought to the San Francisco museum in 1938 from Australia.

A primitive species with lungs and gills, Australian lungfish are believed to be the evolutionary link between fish and amphibians.

No stranger to publicity, Methuselah's first appearance in the San Francisco Chronicle was in 1947: "These strange creatures — with green scales looking like fresh artichoke leaves — are known to scientists as a possible 'missing link' between terrestrial and aquatic animals."

Until a few years ago, the oldest Australian lungfish was at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. But that fish, named Granddad, died in 2017 at the age of 95.

"By default, Methuselah is the oldest," said Allan Jan, senior biologist at the Academy and the fish's keeper. Methuselah's caretakers believe the fish is female, although it's difficult to determine the species' sex without a risky blood draw. The Academy plans to send a tiny sample of her fin to researchers in Australia, who will try to confirm the sex and figure out the fish's exact age.

Jan says Methuselah likes getting rubbed on her back and belly and has a "mellow" personality.

"I tell my volunteers, pretend she's an underwater puppy, very mellow, gentle, but of course if she gets spooked she will have sudden bouts of energy. But for the most part she's just calm," Jan said. Methuselah has developed a taste for seasonal figs.

"She's a little picky and only likes figs when they are fresh and in season. She won't eat them when they're frozen," said Jeanette Peach, spokeswoman for the California Academy of Sciences.

The Academy has two other Australian lungfish that are younger, both believed to be in their 40s or 50s, Jan said.

The Australian lungfish is now a threatened species and can no longer be exported from Australian waters so biologists at the Academy say it's unlikely they'll get a replacement once Methuselah passes away.

"We just give her the best possible care we can provide, and hopefully she thrives," Jan said.

At a West Bank outpost, Israeli settlers flaunt their power

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

BURQA, West Bank (AP) — The Jewish settlement of Homesh, built on privately owned Palestinian land deep inside the occupied West Bank, was dismantled in 2005 and cannot be rebuilt.

At least, that's what Israeli law says.

But when a group of settlers drove up to the site last week, they were waved through army checkpoints that were closed to Palestinian vehicles and arrived at a cluster of tents on the windy hilltop. There, dozens of settlers were studying in a makeshift yeshiva, or religious school.

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Empty wine bottles and bags of trash stood out for collection, the remains of a holiday feast attended by hundreds of settlers the night before and documented on social media.

The settlers' ability to maintain a presence at Homesh, guarded by a detachment of Israeli soldiers, is a vivid display of the power of the settler movement nearly 55 years after Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war.

Their strength has also been on display in a wave of attacks against Palestinians and Israeli peace activists in recent months, many in plain view of Israeli soldiers, who appear unable or unwilling to stop them, despite Israeli officials' promises to maintain law and order. The worst of the violence has been linked to hard-line settler outposts like Homesh.

That Israeli authorities have not cleared Homesh — which under Israeli law is blatantly illegal — makes it nearly impossible to imagine the removal of any of Israel's 130 officially authorized settlements as part of any future peace deal. Nearly 500,000 settlers now live in those settlements, as well as dozens of unauthorized outposts like Homesh.

The Palestinians view the settlements as the main obstacle to any two-state solution to the century-old conflict, and most countries view them as a violation of international law. But in an increasingly hawkish Israel, the settlers enjoy wide support.

"We are privileged, thank God, to live here and study Torah, and we shall continue to do so with God's help," said Rabbi Menachem Ben Shachar, a teacher at the yeshiva.

"The people of Israel need to hold onto Homesh, to study Torah here and in every other place in the Land of Israel," he said, using a biblical term for what is today Israel and the West Bank.

Israel dismantled the settlement in 2005 as part of its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and the law prohibits Israeli citizens from entering the area. Israel's Supreme Court has acknowledged that the land belongs to Palestinians from the nearby village of Burqa.

But the settlers have repeatedly returned, setting up tents and other structures on the foundations of former homes, now overgrown with weeds.

The army has demolished the structures on several occasions, but more often tolerates their presence. The Jan. 16 party was just the latest in a series of marches, political rallies and other gatherings held at the site over the years, some attended by Israeli lawmakers.

The Israeli military said in a statement that it did not approve the event and took steps to prevent civilians from reaching the area, including setting up checkpoints. The settlers appear to have walked around them. The military declined to discuss the larger issues around Homesh, and a government spokeswoman declined to comment.

The killing of a yeshiva student by a Palestinian gunman near the outpost last month has become a rallying cry for the settlers, who say evacuating Homesh now would amount to appeasing terrorism. But the survival of the outpost after 16 years is rooted in a deeper shift in Israel that makes it nearly impossible to rein in even the settlers' most brazen activities.

Israel's parliament is dominated by parties that support the settlers. The current government, a fragile coalition reliant on factions from across the political spectrum, knows that any major confrontation with the settlers could spell its demise. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is a former settler leader and is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

The consequences are felt by Palestinians in Burqa and surrounding villages.

Over the weekend, masked settlers descended on another village in the northern West Bank, attacked a group of Palestinians and Israeli peace activists with stones and clubs, and set a car on fire. Israel's public security minister, Omer Barlev, called the attackers "terrorists" but said police have struggled to catch them because they flee before authorities arrive.

The owners of the land where Homesh was built risk being attacked by settlers if they try to access it. Yesh Din, an Israeli rights group that represents the residents of Burqa in court, has documented at least 20 attacks and seven incidents of property damage since 2017.

A 15-year-old Palestinian said he was kidnapped and tortured by settlers in August. Six farmers were

hospitalized after settlers attacked them with metal batons and stones in November, according to B'Tselem, another Israeli rights group.

Ben Shachar, the teacher at the yeshiva, said farmers should coordinate their entry with the Israeli military. He said he's open to dialogue with "any Arab who accepts that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people," but that terrorism is "part of the DNA of Arab society."

Yesh Din is currently petitioning the Supreme Court on behalf of the Palestinians, hoping it will pressure authorities to remove the outpost and allow them to access their land.

"It's a funny petition, right?" said Lior Amihai, the director of Yesh Din. "We have a petition to enable Palestinians to enter their land, but according to the law they (already) have access to their land."

Ghalib Hajah, who was born and raised in Burqa and now runs a prosperous construction firm inside Israel, is putting the finishing touches on what he had hoped would be a quiet country home for him and his wife. The balconies look out over rolling hills and olive terraces.

The day after the yeshiva student was killed, a group of settlers pelted Hajah's house with stones, shattering several of the newly installed windows as well as tiles from Italy stacked outside. Others smashed gravestones in the village cemetery.

"I hid inside, like a thief in my own house," he said. "It's not the first time they've been here ... Before you leave your house, you have to see whether there are settlers outside. They block the roads, they throw stones at cars."

He and other residents say settlers have attacked the village on more than a dozen occasions in recent years, with the army appearing powerless to stop them.

Instead, he has turned his new home into a fortress, with cameras mounted on the roof and heavy aluminum shutters on all windows and doors.

"There's no stability here," he said.

Indonesia's capital is sinking, polluted and now moving

By EDNA TARIGAN and NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Jakarta is congested, polluted, prone to earthquakes and rapidly sinking into the Java Sea. Now the government is leaving, and moving the country's capital to the island of Borneo.

President Joko Widodo envisions the construction of a new capital as a panacea for the problems plaguing Jakarta, reducing its population while allowing the country to start fresh with a "sustainable city" that has good public transportation, is integrated with its natural environment and is in an area that's not prone to natural disasters.

"The construction of the new capital city is not merely a physical move of government offices," Widodo said last week ahead of parliament's approval of the plan. "The main goal is to build a smart new city, a new city that is competitive at the global level, to build a new locomotive for the transformation ... toward an Indonesia based on innovation and technology based on a green economy."

Skeptics worry, however, about the environmental impact of plunking a sprawling 256,000-hectare (990 square mile) city down in Borneo's East Kalimantan province, which is home to orangutans, leopards and a wide array of other wildlife, as well as committing \$34 billion to the ambitious project amid a global pandemic.

"The new capital city's strategic environmental study shows that there are at least three basic problems," said Dwi Sawung, an official with the WALHI environmental group.

"There are threats to water systems and risks of climate change, threats to flora and fauna, and threats of pollution and environmental damage," she said.

First proposed in 2019, Widodo's plan to establish the city of Nusantara — an old Javanese term meaning "archipelago" — will entail constructing government buildings and housing from scratch. Initial estimates were that some 1.5 million civil servants would be relocated to the city, some 2,000 kilometers northeast of Jakarta, though ministries and government agencies are still working to finalize that number.

It will be located in the vicinity of Balikpapan, an East Kalimantan seaport with a population of about

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700,000.

Indonesia is an archipelago nation of more than 17,000 islands, but currently 54% of the country's more than 270 million people live on Java, the country's most densely populated island and where Jakarta is located.

Jakarta itself is home to about 10 million people and three times that number in the greater metropolitan area.

It has been described as the world's most rapidly sinking city, and at the current rate, it is estimated that one-third of the city could be submerged by 2050. The main cause is uncontrolled ground water extraction, but it has been exacerbated by the rising Java Sea due to climate change.

Beyond that, its air and ground water are heavily polluted, it floods regularly and its streets are so clogged that it is estimated congestion costs the economy \$4.5 billion a year.

In constructing a purpose-built capital, Indonesia will be taking a path that others have in the past, including Pakistan, Brazil and Myanmar.

The committee overseeing the construction is led by Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan — no stranger to ambitious building projects at home in the United Arab Emirates — and also includes Masayoshi Son, the billionaire founder and chief executive of Japanese holding company SoftBank, and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who currently runs the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

State funds will pay for 19% of the project, with the rest coming from cooperation between the government and business entities and from direct investment by state-run companies and the private sector.

Public Works and Housing Minister Basuki Hadimuljono said initial planning had been carried out by clearing 56,180 hectares (138,800 acres) of land to build the presidential palace, the national parliament and government offices, as well as roads linking the capital to other cities in East Kalimantan.

The idea is to have the core government area done by 2024, Hadimuljono said. Current plans are for about 8,000 civil servants to have moved to the city by then.

Widodo previously said he expected the Presidential Palace would be moved to the new capital city before he ends his second term in 2024, along with the Home, Foreign, and Defense Ministries and the State Secretariat.

The whole relocation process is scheduled to be completed by 2045.

What effect it will have on Jakarta and the people who stay behind is unclear, said Agus Pambagio, a public policy expert from the University of Indonesia, who urged that anthropologists be brought on to study the issue.

"There will be very big social changes, both for people who work as civil servants, society in general and local residents," he said.

Biden's big test: Proving he can rally allies against Putin

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's effort to rally support, both at home and abroad, ahead of a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine is just the latest big test of his ability to bridge ideological gaps and balance competing interests to build effective coalitions.

His record so far as president suggests it's no sure thing. Biden is trying to pull off the kind of alliance on the international front that has eluded him on his domestic agenda as he faces defeats on voting rights and his signature \$2.2 trillion domestic and climate spending bill.

Now, he faces a complicated and globally more dangerous task: keeping the West unified as it faces what White House officials say is an increasingly likely further invasion of Ukrainian territory ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The pileup of difficult moments is providing a major test of the twin pillars of Biden's 2020 candidacy: that he could get things done competently at home and restore America's standing in the world after Donald Trump's volatile four years in the White House.

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"Starting with the messy end of the war in Afghanistan in the late summer, the upsurge in COVID cases into the fall, overlaid by economic concerns of inflation and labor shortages and his issues with his legislative agenda, Biden's found himself with a weary American public who are seeing a number of unfulfilled promises," said Christopher Borick, director of the Institute of Public Opinion at Muhlenberg College. "The situation in Ukraine presents another test of his competency."

The latest crisis comes as Biden already has seen his public support dragging.

Only about a quarter of Americans have significant confidence in Biden to effectively manage the military or promote U.S. standing in the world. Close to 4 in 10 have little confidence in Biden in these areas, according to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research Poll. Democrats are now less likely than they were as he took office to say they have "a great deal of confidence" (48% vs. 65%), according to the poll.

Administration officials have been scrambling to get NATO allies on the same page with a Russian attack seen as more likely.

Biden's national security aides have been working with individual European nations, the European Commission and global suppliers on contingency plans if Russia interrupts energy supplies to the continent.

The president has said repeatedly that he will not send U.S. troops to Ukraine. But he has ordered 8,500 to be on heightened alert for deployment to the Baltic Region. And he warned again on Tuesday of "enormous consequences" and severe sanctions for Russia — as well as Putin personally — if Russia takes military action against Ukraine.

He said he'd spoken with every NATO ally "and we're all on the same page."

In fact, Biden, who met by secure video call with several key European leaders on Monday, claims there's "total unanimity" in the Western alliance's approach to the crisis. But there are signs of differences.

Germany declined to send military aid to Ukraine even as the U.S. and other NATO allies sent aid and looked to assist Kyiv further. The Germans argued that such aid could further inflame tensions.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy bristled at Biden's comment last week that a "minor incursion" of Ukraine would result in more limited consequences for Moscow. The president and White House quickly moved to clarify that the U.S. would impose severe sanctions against Russia for any invasion of Ukrainian territory. Ukrainian officials also complained that the U.S. State Department was "premature" in calling on families of American Embassy workers and nonessential employees in Ukraine to leave the country was "premature."

French President Emmanuel Macron said Tuesday it was a "good thing" that the U.S. and Russia have been talking, but he noted he did not see any concrete results. Macron said he planned to speak directly with Putin on Friday.

Meanwhile, Croatian President Zoran Milanovic blamed the escalation of tensions on the Biden administration and the pressure from "hawks" on both sides of the U.S. political scene. Croatia is a member of NATO, and its troops have taken part in the alliance's missions abroad.

Biden's task in wrangling a global community with such differing perspectives and motivations is somewhat similar to his challenge at home, where he's been confronted by the realities of a 50-50 Senate and a Democratic coalition whose members don't always see eye-to-eye.

Yet the stakes for Biden and the world are potentially much greater as he tries to reassert American leadership after Europe began looking inward during the Trump years.

At home, as the crisis has developed in recent weeks, Biden has faced criticism from Republican lawmakers who have pushed for the White House to preemptively levy sanctions against Moscow. Biden says the U.S. has made clear to Russia that sanctions would be unprecedented and severe, but officials argue that preemptively acting would undermine any chance of moving Russia to step back from action.

Skeptical Republicans have sought to remind voters about Biden's decision last year to waive sanctions against the Russia-to-Germany Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

The United States had long argued that the pipeline project would threaten European energy security by increasing the continent's reliance on Russian gas and allowing Russia to exert political pressure on

vulnerable Eastern and Central European nations, particularly Ukraine.

But Biden, who raised his own concerns about the pipeline dating back to his time as vice president, announced last year he would waive sanctions against German entities because of the damage they would have done to U.S.-German relations.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, a potential 2024 White House contender, earlier this month made an unsuccessful legislative attempt to impose sanctions on the pipeline, which is completed but not yet operating. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other administration officials have said it is unlikely gas will flow through the pipeline if Russia invades.

Republican National Committee spokesman Tommy Pigott said, "Biden ignored his own advice and handed Putin a major geopolitical win by waiving sanctions on his pipeline."

White House officials pushed back that GOP criticism ought to ring hollow after Trump tried unsuccessfully in his final months in office to dramatically scale back the U.S. troop presence in Europe, which they viewed as only emboldening Russian aggression in the region.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who previously criticized the Biden administration for not taking preemptive action against Moscow, offered a measure of support for the president on Tuesday. The senator called it "encouraging" that Biden was surging military aid and putting U.S. troops on heightened alert for deployment to NATO allies in the Baltics

"It appears to me the administration is moving in the right direction," McConnell said.

Indigenous town in Mexico survives on remittances from US

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

COMACHUEN, Mexico (AP) — In Comachuen, a Purepecha Indigenous community of about 10,000 inhabitants nestled high in the pine-clad mountains of the western state of Michoacan, the whole town survives because of the money sent home by migrants working in the United States.

That money, known as remittances, kept families fed after local woodworking sales dropped off a decade ago when pine lumber started to become scarce. The money has allowed their families to remain in Comachuen rather than moving to other parts of Mexico for work. That — and the fact kids spend much of the year with their mothers and grandparents — has helped preserve the Purepecha language among almost everyone in town.

The traditional textiles, woodworking and construction live on, largely because such enterprises are funded by migrants who send money home to build houses here. Many things here — the church, the bull ring, the charity donations — are paid for by migrants.

The Mexican government believes remittances last year will surpass \$50 billion for the first time. But whether the remittances allow families to just survive or progress enough so their kids won't have to emigrate varies, reflecting a person's plans and outlook.

The cold winter mornings in Comachuen are a throwback to another era. The men are back in town because of the seasonal lull in agricultural work in the United States.

Many workers from Comachuen get H2A temporary U.S. work visas, while others go without documents. Hundreds of men here work at the same vegetable farm in upstate New York every year, planting onions, harvesting squash, cabbage and beans. Porfirio Gabriel, an organizer who recruits workers to go north, estimates that one farm alone has brought \$5 million into the town over three years, by far its largest single source of income.

Inhabitants exchange greetings in Purepecha as they pass each other in the narrow streets. At one end of town, three drovers head their teams of oxen through the streets and into the surrounding hills to haul down freshly cut pine trunks on narrow carts. The tree trunks are laid in the street in front of the homes of those who purchase them, to be sawn down in backyard workshops.

The whirl of wood lathes mixes with the shouts of men hauling bricks and wheelbarrows of sand and gravel into half-built houses. Comachuen comes alive in winter.

Tranquilino Gabriel — it is a common last name here — is turning out decorative wood spindles on a primitive lathe. The 59-year-old does this only on his downtime from working in the U.S., to keep his

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decades-old family business alive. The 5 pesos (25 cents) he gets for each is just supplementary income.

He says wood is getting scarce and it's unclear how much longer they will be able to do it. "More people are clearing land and planting avocado trees," Gabriel says.

Gabriel is resigned to working in the United States as long as he can. He sends home about \$7,500 each year from what he earns working the fields. That money is largely used to fund his children's education, paying private college fees so his eldest son can be a registered nurse.

His hope is that his children will get university degrees and not have to emigrate. "I am paying for their studies, so that they don't have to do what we had to do," Gabriel says.

Apart from spindles, which are shipped to a nearby town to be assembled into bookcases and shelves, the economy here largely involves migrants selling to other migrants.

José González, 55, works at the corner shop that he remodeled, stocked and extended with money he has earned over a decade working in the United States.

González, who has the stern, thoughtful face of an Indigenous drill sergeant, says he used to do wood-working, "but it wasn't enough to meet our basic needs." After working the fields in Mexico for a while, he had to emigrate. Now his well-stocked store sells canned goods and food to the families of migrants.

Omar Gabriel, 28, sells sand, gravel, cement and rebar to migrants who are building or expanding their homes in Comachuen with money they earn in the U.S. Gabriel, one of the younger and better educated of the migrant workers, studied accounting at a university nearby. He has plans that don't include forever going north to plant onions each spring.

His money from U.S. farm work goes to expand the family firm, Don Beto Materials, and pay for his younger brother's university education as an architect. The family just bought a used bulldozer with money he earned in the north. Previously they bought a dump truck.

"My goal is to work for five more years (in the United States) to get together enough capital to get the company going right" as a full-services construction firm, from blueprints to excavation to building, he says.

But even if Gabriel will no longer have to migrate some day, it appears his business will probably always be dependent on a steady stream of migrant customers with dollars in their pockets.

The next generation is the key: Will the influx of remittances allow Comachuen's young adults to build a life in Mexico, instead of doing stoop labor in U.S. fields?

Andrés Reyes Baltazar, 20, is studying business administration at a public university in the state capital, Morelia. On winter break, he was helping his father, Asención Reyes Julian, 41, in the family's furniture workshop, where they're building a huge wooden cupboard about six feet wide and eight feet tall. (Many Mexican homes don't have closets.)

The father has been going north to work since 2011 because, he says, in the furniture trade "sometimes there are customers, and sometimes there aren't." Reyes Julian spends much of the money he earns in New York to pay for his son's education.

Andrés has dreams of using his education to build the business, perhaps buying a truck to reach broader markets and get better prices for their furniture. Making finished pieces brings better profit margins than turning out furniture parts, and the Reyes family is one of the few here that still do it.

But when asked whether he too will someday go north to work in the United States, Andrés is evasive. "I might, perhaps. But first I'm going to finish my education."

Andrea Sánchez, 21, speaks perfect English. She migrated without documents to California with her family as a young child in 2002 and studied at U.S. schools through the sixth grade.

When her family returned to Comachuen, she said, "it was a big shock ... it was really different." In the decade since, she has learned to love her hometown, even if it doesn't have the large homes and well-kept yards she saw in her childhood. "This is home. This culture calls to me."

Even though she is studying here to be a teacher, and helping her mother with the family's traditional embroidered textile business, she still holds dreams of returning to the United States someday.

"If there is that possibility, I would," she said, adding: "I would rather do things legally. That would be the goal."

China 2008 vs 2022: Richer, stronger, more confrontational

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China has undergone history-making change since the last time it was an Olympic host in 2008: It is richer, more heavily armed and openly confrontational.

As President Xi Jinping's government prepares for February's Winter Olympics, it has greater leverage to exert influence abroad and resist complaints from the United States and other governments over trade, technology theft and its treatment of Taiwan, Hong Kong and China's Muslim minorities.

The economy is three times larger today. The ruling Communist Party is using that wealth to try to become a "technology power" and is spending more on its military than any country other than the United States.

"2008 was a turning point," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, an expert on Chinese politics at Hong Kong Baptist University. "That was the beginning of China's assertiveness."

As fireworks exploded over Beijing in August 2008, China was about to overtake Japan as the No. 2 global economy. The ruling party celebrated with the most expensive Summer Games to date.

Foreign media dubbed it China's "coming out party," echoing the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 that symbolized Japan's recovery from World War II. After three decades of keeping its head down to focus on development, Beijing was ready to emerge on the global stage as an economic and political force.

The ruling party declared its more assertive stance in 2012, the year Xi took power, in a document that called for "more strategic rights," military status and a bigger global role.

Xi's government sees its system of one-party dictatorship under threat and accuses Washington of trying to deny China its rightful role as a global leader. The ruling party is tightening control over society and business and using internet filters and other censorship to shut out what it deems unhealthy foreign influences. It is doing more to intimidate Taiwan, the island democracy Beijing says belongs to China.

"You can see that China is forced by the United States and its allies such as Australia, Japan and Britain to do so," said Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing.

Xi is seeking to cement his control over the country. He is expected to use key political meetings late in 2022 to try to break with tradition and stay in power for a third five-year term as head of the ruling party. Earlier, he had the Chinese constitution changed to get rid of term limits on his role as president.

Once "more open to the outside world," China now is "much more paranoid," Cabestan said.

Beijing has sent warplanes in growing numbers to fly near Taiwan. It is pouring money into developing nuclear-capable missiles that can hit the United States and aircraft carriers and other weapons to extend its military reach beyond China's shores.

Chinese leaders believe, Shi said, that they need to defend themselves on several fronts: a tariff war launched by then-President Donald Trump in 2018; curbs on access to U.S. technology; and military alliances involving Japan, Australia and other governments to counter Beijing's claims to the South China Sea and other territory.

"If there is a bad relationship between China and another country, it is because the other country harms China," Shi said.

In 2008, Summer Games preparations included a \$43 billion makeover of the Chinese capital. The party built the eye-catching Bird's Nest stadium and other Olympic venues, installed new subway lines and upgrading roads. Exercise equipment was installed in thousands of public parks across China.

The capital, one of the world's smoggiest cities, launched a "blue sky" campaign that shut down or replaced power plants, steel mills and other facilities and imposed traffic controls at an estimated cost of \$10 billion.

Today, Xi's government is wrestling with debt, pollution and other excesses of earlier years. It's also in the midst of a marathon campaign, launched before he took power, to steer the economy to sustainable growth based on consumer spending instead of exports and investment.

Under a vaguely defined initiative — dubbed "common prosperity" after a 1950s slogan — the ruling party is trying to narrow a politically volatile wealth gap between a billionaire elite and China's working-class majority.

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Successful private sector companies in e-commerce and other fields are under pressure to invest in the party's efforts to reduce reliance on the United States, Europe and Japan as technology suppliers by developing computer chips and other products. They are paying for rural job creation and other political initiatives.

Xi and other leaders promise to open markets wider to foreign and private competitors while also saying government-owned banks, oil producers, telecom carriers and other companies are the "core of the economy." Business groups complain that despite steps such as ending limits on foreign ownership in auto manufacturing, global companies are being squeezed out of promising technology and other fields.

"China will continue to expand its opening up to the outside world," Xi said in a Jan. 17 speech by video link to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He promised to "ensure all enterprises have equal status before the law and equal opportunities."

In a slap at Washington, Xi complained about "hegemonic bullying" and said governments need to "abandon a Cold War mentality."

As athletes and reporters arrive ahead of the Feb. 4 opening of the Winter Games, Chinese leaders face the challenge of shoring up slumping economic growth while they try to contain coronavirus outbreaks and force real estate developers, an industry that supports millions of jobs, to cut debt that Beijing worries is dangerously high.

China rebounded quickly from the 2020 pandemic and became the only major economy to grow that year. But growth fell abruptly in late 2021 as Beijing's debt crackdown bit, triggering a slump in real estate sales and construction.

The economy expanded by a robust 8.1% in 2021 but growth tumbled in the last quarter to 4% over a year earlier. Forecasters say the slump will deepen before interest rate cuts and other stimulus measures can take effect. The World Bank and private sector economists have trimmed this year's growth forecasts to as low as 5%, though that still would be among the world's strongest.

"Economic stability is the top focus in 2022," said Tommy Wu of Oxford Economics in a report.

Capsized boat found near Florida; 39 people missing

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The U.S. Coast Guard searched on Tuesday for 39 people missing for several days after a boat believed to be used for human smuggling capsized off Florida's coast en route from the Bahamas.

A good Samaritan called the Coast Guard early Tuesday after rescuing a man clinging to the boat 45 miles (72 kilometers) east of Fort Pierce, the maritime security agency reported on Twitter.

The man said he was with a group of 39 others that left the island of Bimini in the Bahamas on Saturday night. He said the boat capsized in severe weather and that no one was wearing life jackets.

The survivor was brought to a hospital for symptoms of dehydration and sun exposure.

The Coast Guard is calling it a suspected human smuggling case. Officials said on Twitter that they are searching by both air and sea over a roughly 135-mile (218-kilometer) area extending from Bimini to the Fort Pierce Inlet.

A cold front late Saturday brought rough weather to the Bimini area. Tommy Sewell, a local bonefishing guide, said there were 20-mph (32-kph) winds and fierce squalls of rain on Sunday into Monday.

Migrants have long used the islands of the Bahamas as a steppingstone to reach Florida and the United States. They typically try to take advantage of breaks in the weather to make the crossing, but the vessels are often dangerously overloaded and prone to capsizing. There have been thousands of deaths over the years.

The Coast Guard patrols the waters around Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and the Bahamas.

For the most part, the migrants are from Haiti and Cuba but the Royal Bahamas Defense Force has reported apprehending migrants from other parts of the world, including from Colombia and Ecuador earlier this month.

On Friday, the Coast Guard found 88 Haitians in an overloaded sail freighter west of Great Inagua, Ba-

hamas.

"Navigating the Florida straits, Windward and Mona Passages ... is extremely dangerous and can result in loss of life," the Coast Guard said in a statement last weekend.

Last July, the Coast Guard rescued 13 people after their boat capsized off of Key West as Tropical Storm Elsa approached.

The survivors said they had left Cuba with 22 people aboard. Nine went missing in the water.

Asian shares mixed in narrow trading ahead of Fed meeting

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Asian shares were mixed in muted trading Wednesday as many investors stayed on the sidelines ahead of a U.S. Federal Reserve meeting that will indicate how aggressive it will be in fighting inflation.

Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 slipped 0.7% in morning trading to 26,929.94. South Korea's Kospi edged up 0.2% to 2,726.43. Hong Kong's Hang Seng added 0.9% to 24,461.63, while the Shanghai Composite rose 0.5% to 3,450.55. Trading was closed in Australia for Australia Day.

Worries about omicron remain throughout the region. In China, reported COVID-19 cases have dropped but worries remain, especially ahead of the Lunar New Year holidays next week and the Beijing Olympics opening Feb. 4.

In Japan, the government has widened to much of the nation restrictive measures, which ask restaurants to close early. But surveys show people are responding more to the reports of surging cases, not necessarily the government measures.

On Wall Street, shares came well off their lows by late afternoon. But another burst of selling in the final hour of trading pulled them lower again. Technology stocks were the biggest drag on the market.

The S&P 500 fell 1.2% after having been down as much as 2.8%. The benchmark index has been falling steadily all month and is now down 9.2% from the all-time high it set Jan. 3. The Dow Jones Industrial Average slipped 0.2% and the tech-heavy Nasdaq gave up 2.3%.

Higher inflation has been squeezing businesses and consumers, and the Federal Reserve is expected to combat it in 2022 by raising interest rates. Investors fear that the Fed could either be moving too late or could be too aggressive. The central bank issues its latest policy statement Wednesday.

The virus pandemic still hovers over the economy and threatens to crimp progress with every new wave. The International Monetary Fund cited the omicron variant as the reason it has downgraded its forecast for global economic growth this year.

And a potential conflict between Russia and Ukraine threatens to push energy prices even higher while forcing more countries to focus on fighting a war instead of inflation and COVID-19.

Wall Street is dealing with signs of slowing economic growth because of COVID-19 and a Fed that can't really go back on what it said it would do, said Barry Bannister, chief equity strategist at Stifel.

"The market has come to terms with that and that's a big deal," he said. "Fiscal and monetary tightening, together, is tough on financial assets when they're coming off of a rip-roaring party from stimulus."

Still, the fact that the major stock indexes came off their lows of the day could be a sign that some investors are betting that a dimmer outlook for economic growth may prompt the Fed to take a more measured approach to raising interest rates.

"Weaker economic growth projections have contributed to investors breathing a sigh of relief that the Fed won't have to be overly aggressive," said Sam Stovall, chief investment strategist at CFRA.

The S&P 500 fell 53.68 points to 4,356.45. This week, the index has come within striking distance of entering a "correction," which among markets watchers means a drop of 10% from a peak.

The Dow fell 66.77 points to 34,297.73. The blue-chip index had been down 818 points in morning trading.

The Nasdaq fell 315.83 points to 13,539.29. The index had initially slumped 3.2%. It entered a correction last week and is now down more than 15% from its high set on Nov. 19.

Small company stocks also lost ground. The Russell 2000 index fell 29.48 points, or 1.5%, to 2,004.03.

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Technology stocks again led the losses as investors worry about rising interest rates. Higher interest rates tend to make shares in high-flying tech companies and other expensive growth stocks less attractive. Microsoft fell 2.7%.

Retailers and communications companies also fell. Home Depot fell 1.3% and Netflix fell 5.4%. American Express surged 8.9% for the biggest gain in the S&P 500 after the credit card company reported that its fourth-quarter earnings rose 20% from a year earlier.

In energy trading, benchmark U.S. crude lost 26 cents to \$85.34 a barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, fell 10 cents to \$88.10 a barrel.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar was unchanged at 113.87 Japanese yen. The euro was also unchanged at \$1.1306.

Big Papi elected to HOF; Bonds, Clemens, Schilling left out

By JAKE SEINER AP Baseball Writer

David Ortiz gazed at his phone, his pursed lips revealing nerves rarely seen from one of the game's great clutch hitters.

Pedro Martinez's hand rested on Ortiz's shoulder, and Martinez grinned when the good news came through. The former teammates embraced, and Martinez welcomed Ortiz into a rare space in baseball history.

Big Papi is bound for Cooperstown — and on the first ballot, too.

Ortiz was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in his first try Tuesday, while steroid-tainted stars Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens were denied entry in their final year under consideration by the Baseball Writers' Association of America.

Ortiz, a 10-time All-Star over 20 seasons mostly with the Boston Red Sox, was named on 77.9% of ballots, clearing the 75% threshold needed for enshrinement. He's the 58th player inducted in his first time up for consideration.

"Man, it's a wonderful honor to be able to get in on my first rodeo," Ortiz said.

Big Papi was among baseball's most recognizable faces through the 2000s and 2010s. His enormous grin endeared him to fans, but the Dominican's hulking frame menaced pitchers, especially in the late innings. Three of his 23 career game-ending hits came during Boston's drought-breaking 2004 postseason, when the Red Sox thwarted the rival Yankees and then won their first World Series title in 86 years.

He's the fourth Hall of Famer born in the Dominican Republic, joining Juan Marichal, Martinez and Vladimir Guerrero.

"I can imagine how New England has to feel about one of its babies getting into the Hall of Fame today," Ortiz said. "I'm not even going to tell you about the Dominican Republic."

The left-handed hitter was signed by Seattle as a teenager and traded to Minnesota as a minor leaguer. He made his major league debut with the Twins in 1997 but hardly looked like a future Hall of Famer there. He was released in 2002, signed by Boston and slugged 31 homers the next season.

Ortiz said he joined the Red Sox to learn what made stars like Martinez, Manny Ramirez and Nomar Garciaparra great. Martinez helped pave the way, encouraging first-year general manager Theo Epstein to sign the 6-foot-3 slugger.

"Once I figured it out, it was going to be a wrap," Ortiz said. "That team was surrounded by so many superstars, and I went in there like a sponge ready to learn."

Martinez became a mentor for his countryman. Now, they share the honor of being first-ballot inductees.

"I feel so proud to have been your teammate, to have been your brother, to have been someone there for you when you needed me," Martinez said. "I'm so glad I have you in my life."

"Well deserved," he added. "Welcome to Cooperstown."

Ortiz batted .286 with 541 home runs with Boston and Minnesota while making 88% of his plate appearances as a designated hitter, the most by anyone in the Hall. He passes Edgar Martinez, who was a DH for 71.7% of his plate appearances.

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Ortiz also has performance-enhancing drug baggage, but enough voters looked past a reported positive test that came during survey testing in 2003 that was supposed to be anonymous. Ortiz has denied using steroids, and Commissioner Rob Manfred said in 2016 "I think it would be wrong" to exclude him from the Hall of Fame based on that lone test.

"I never failed a test, so what does that tell you?" Ortiz said.

Ortiz will be enshrined in Cooperstown, New York, on July 24 along with era committee selections Buck O'Neil, Minnie Miñoso, Gil Hodges, Tony Oliva, Jim Kaat and Bud Fowler.

Bonds, Clemens, Curt Schilling and Sammy Sosa were all rejected in their 10th and final year on the BBWAA ballot. Bonds is MLB's career home run leader and Clemens won a record seven Cy Young Awards, but voters denied them the game's highest honor over allegations they used PEDs. Bonds got 66% of the vote, and Clemens was at 65.2%.

"My family and I put the HOF in the rear view mirror ten years ago," Clemens said on Twitter. "Hopefully everyone can now close this book and keep their eyes forward focusing on what is really important in life."

Schilling's support dropped off sharply after he finished 16 votes shy in 2021. Many voters chose not to back the right-hander due to hateful remarks he has made in retirement toward Muslims, transgender people, journalists and others.

Schilling asked the Hall to remove him from this year's voting, but he remained an option. He was named on 58.6% of ballots, down from 71.1% last year.

"I say it every year and especially this year, focus on who did get in," Schilling tweeted. "@davidortiz deserved a 1st ballot induction! Congratulations my friend you earned it! #bigpapiHoF"

Bonds, Clemens, Schilling and Sosa are done on the BBWAA ballot, but they will be considered again next year by the Today's Game era committee. The 16-person committee of Hall members, executives and veteran media members will convene in December to consider players who played between 1988-2016 and are no longer eligible for BBWAA selection.

"Not having them join me is hard for me to believe," Ortiz said of Bonds and Clemens. "Those guys did it all."

Among other first-timers on the ballot, Alex Rodriguez and Jimmy Rollins got the most support.

Rodriguez won three MVPs and hit 696 homers, fourth most of all time, but also has PED use clouding his case. He was banned by Major League Baseball for the entire 2014 season after violating the league's drug policy. Voters named him on 34.3% of ballots.

Rollins, a four-time Gold Glove winner with Philadelphia, appeared on 9.4% of ballots and was the only other first-timer to earn the 5% necessary to remain under consideration. Joe Nathan, Tim Lincecum and Ryan Howard were among 10 one-and-done players.

The only others to earn more than 50% support were third baseman Scott Rolen (63.2%, up from 52.9%), first baseman Todd Helton (52%, up from 44.9%) and reliever Billy Wagner (51%, up from 46.4%). Outfielder Andruw Jones also made gains, rising to 41.1% from 33.9%.

Next year's ballot will introduce a new wrinkle of controversy when Carlos Beltrán joins the list. The nine-time All-Star was implicated by MLB in the Houston Astros' 2017 sign-stealing scandal before the 2020 season and was let go as manager of the New York Mets.

Beltrán is likely to be joined on the ballot by John Lackey, Jered Weaver, Jacoby Ellsbury and Francisco Rodriguez.

2nd NYPD officer dies, days after Harlem shooting

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York City police officer gravely wounded last week in a Harlem shooting that killed his partner has also died of his injuries, the city's police commissioner said Tuesday, adding to what she called "incalculable" grief within the department.

Officer Wilbert Mora, 27, was taken off life support at a Manhattan hospital four days after a gunman shot him and Officer Jason Rivera, 22, as they responded to a domestic disturbance call. Rivera died Friday.

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Mora had been in critical condition since the shooting. He was moved Sunday from Harlem Hospital to NYU Langone Medical Center, where he died.

"It's with great sadness I announce the passing of Police Officer Wilbert Mora," police Commissioner Keechant Sewell said in a tweet. "Wilbert is 3 times a hero. For choosing a life of service. For sacrificing his life to protect others. For giving life even in death through organ donation. Our heads are bowed & our hearts are heavy."

In a message to officers announcing Mora's death, Sewell said: "The grief in this Department is incalculable. We will stand, salute and shed tears, yet manage to smile as we remember him during the extremely difficult days ahead."

The two officers were fatally wounded Friday after they were called to a Harlem apartment by a woman who said she needed help with her adult son. Lashawn J. McNeil threw open a bedroom door and shot the officers as they walked down a narrow hall, authorities said.

A third officer, Sumit Sulan, a rookie who was shadowing Mora and Rivera — shot McNeil as he tried to flee. The gunman, 47, died Monday, authorities said.

McNeil's mother told the New York Post she was trying to convince her son to get help for mental health issues and that she wouldn't have called 911 had she known he was going to use violence against the officers.

Mora and Rivera "were dedicated, courageous and compassionate officers, loved by many. The pain their families feel is immeasurable. We pray for them; we will be strong for them," Sewell said in the message.

Even after it was clear Mora wouldn't survive the shooting, he was kept on life support and moved to NYU Langone so his organs could be donated in accordance with his and his family's wishes — a gift that Leonard Achan, head of organ donation organization LiveOnNY, said was expected to save "many lives."

The officers' deaths echoed the 2014 killings of another pair of officers, Wenjian Liu, 32, and Rafael Ramos, 40, who were fatally shot by a man who ambushed them as they sat in their patrol car.

Mora and Rivera were the first NYPD officers killed in the line of duty by a gunman since 2017, when Miosotis Familia, 48, was ambushed as she wrote in a notebook in a mobile command post in the Bronx. Two officers killed in 2019 died by friendly fire.

Police said McNeil used a handgun that had been reported stolen in Baltimore in 2017 and that the gun was equipped with a high-capacity magazine. Police said they also found a loaded semi-automatic rifle under his mattress.

Mora entered the police academy in October 2018 and was assigned to the Harlem precinct where the shooting happened since November 2019. He made 33 arrests, police records show.

An officer who worked with Mora and Rivera remembered how Mora's powerful physique — tall and stocky with a football player's frame — belied how approachable he was.

"He was a very humble young man. He was always happy, always eager to help any way he could," Officer Keith Hall said Tuesday.

"I just grieve for his family. I'm grieving on my own, but I can only imagine what the family's feeling," said Hall, who has collected more than \$310,000 in a fundraiser for the slain officers' families.

"The city should be grieving after losing two great people who were great, great individuals who served the community and then paid the ultimate sacrifice. So we all should be heavy hearted right now," he said.

Irina Zakirova, a professor who taught Mora at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, remembered the officer as an earnest and engaged student.

"He was so certain about becoming a police officer — a good police officer — and he was looking forward to taking the next step for a police career," she said Tuesday.

"He cared about people and the community," Zakirova said, adding that he was particularly interested in finding different and innovative ways in improving relationships between police and the neighborhoods they patrolled.

The head of the city's largest police union, the Police Benevolent Association, said Tuesday "True heroes never die," and that Mora will "live on in the heart of every New York City police officer from this day

forward.”

“We are called upon to put ourselves between evil and the good people of this city,” PBA President Patrick Lynch said in a statement. “Police Officer Mora showed us what it means to carry out our mission with courage, skill and humanity.”

Mora’s funeral arrangements have not been announced.

Rivera’s funeral is scheduled for Friday at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan, with a viewing planned Thursday at the church.

Rivera wrote in an essay upon joining the force in 2020 that he became an officer to “better the relationship between the community and the police.”

Pelosi to seek reelection with Democratic majority at risk

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced Tuesday she will seek reelection, ending speculation that she would retire as Democrats face the threat of losing control of Congress in the 2022 midterms.

“While we have made progress, much more needs to be done to improve people’s lives,” the 81-year-old Pelosi said in an online video.

“This election is crucial. Nothing less is at stake than our democracy,” she added.

By announcing she would seek a 19th term, Pelosi avoids becoming a lame duck in a year when Democrats are clinging to a fragile majority in the House and the party is under pressure to raise vast sums of money to defend control of Congress.

Her decision to remain in the chamber follows announcements by 29 House Democrats that they won’t seek reelection this year, compared to 13 Republicans as the GOP looks toward taking back the House.

The party that controls the White House typically loses seats in Congress in midterm elections, and Democrats are defending both chambers at a time when President Joe Biden’s approval rating has been slipping.

“Our democracy is at risk because the assault on the truth, assault on the U.S. Capitol and the state-by-state assault on voting rights,” she added.

In the video, Pelosi never addresses if she intends to seek another term as the House’s Democratic leader, if reelected.

The San Francisco Democrat made history 15 years ago when she became the first female speaker of the House. She has served in Congress since 1987.

Earlier this month in an interview with The Associated Press, Pelosi only hinted at another run, saying she “may” seek reelection.

In a Twitter post, California Republican Kevin Kiley, a congressional candidate and state assemblyman, said Pelosi’s announcement was “all the more reason we need Republicans in Congress who will fight.”

Pelosi will be a overwhelming favorite in her heavily Democratic district — she won with 78% of the vote in 2020. But she’s also running at a time when her hometown has been criticized for squalor and crime, including daytime shootings in tourist areas, widespread homelessness and smash-and-grab thefts at high-end stores.

COVID-19 vaccine booster drive is faltering in the US

By MAE ANDERSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The COVID-19 booster drive in the U.S. is losing steam, worrying health experts who have pleaded with Americans to get an extra shot to shore up their protection against the highly contagious omicron variant.

Just 40% of fully vaccinated Americans have received a booster dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And the average number of booster shots dispensed per day in the U.S. has plummeted from a peak of 1 million in early December to about 490,000 as of last week.

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Also, a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that Americans are more likely to see the initial vaccinations — rather than a booster — as essential.

"It's clear that the booster effort is falling short," said Jason Schwartz, a vaccine policy expert at Yale University.

Overall, the U.S. vaccination campaign has been sluggish. More than 13 months after it began, just 63% of Americans, or 210 million people, are fully vaccinated with the initial rounds of shots. Mandates that could raise those numbers have been hobbled by legal challenges.

Vaccination numbers are stagnant in states such as Wyoming, Idaho, Mississippi and Alabama, which have been hovering below 50%.

In Wyoming, 44% are fully vaccinated, up just slightly from 41% in September. To boost numbers, the state has been running TV ads with health care workers giving grim accounts of unvaccinated people struggling with COVID-19.

"Certainly we would like to see higher rates. But it would be wrong for anyone to think that the rates we have are due to lack of effort," Wyoming Health Department spokeswoman Kim Deti said Tuesday.

And in neighboring Idaho, which also has one of the country's lowest vaccination rates, the number of people getting their first vaccine dose has remained under 1,000 almost every day this year and the number getting booster shots is also declining. Still, officials say they won't give up.

"I don't like to use the word 'resigned,'" said Elke Shaw-Tulloch, administrator of the Idaho Division of Public Health. "I think we just need to keep saying it over and over again, how important it is."

At the other end of the spectrum, Vermont is a national leader in the percentage of people who have been fully vaccinated and received a booster shot. About 60% of the population over 18 has gotten a booster. But it's not enough, said Vermont Health Commissioner Mark Levine.

"I'd love to see that percentage much closer to 90%," Levine said.

The U.S. and many other nations have been urging adults to get boosters because the vaccine's protection can wane. Also, research has shown that while the vaccines have proved less effective against omicron, boosters can rev up the body's defenses against the threat.

As for why an estimated 86 million Americans who have been fully vaccinated and are eligible for a booster have not yet gotten one, Schwartz said public confusion is one important reason.

"I think the evidence is now overwhelming that the booster is not simply an optional supplement, but it is a foundational part of protection," he said. "But clearly that message has been lost."

The need for all Americans to get boosters initially was debated by scientists, and at first the government recommended only that certain groups of people, such as senior citizens, get additional doses. The arrival of omicron, and additional evidence about falling immunity, showed more clearly a widespread need for boosters.

But the message "has been lost in the sea of changing recommendations and guidance," Schwartz said.

The AP-NORC Center poll found that 59% of Americans think it is essential that they receive a vaccine to fully participate in public life without feeling at risk of COVID-19 infection. Only 47% say the same about a booster shot.

Keller Anne Ruble, 32, of Denver, received her two doses of the Moderna vaccine but hasn't gotten her booster. She said she had a bad reaction to the second dose and was in bed for four days with a fever and flu-like symptoms.

"I believe in the power of vaccines, and I know that's going to protect me," said Ruble, the owner of a greeting card sending service. But the vaccine "just knocked me out completely and freaked me out about getting the booster."

She said she does plan to get the booster in the next few weeks and in the meantime wears an N95 mask and tries to stay home.

"I just don't want to get COVID in general," she said. "It does scare me."

Blake Hassler, 26, of Nashville, Tennessee, said he doesn't plan to get the booster. He received Pfizer's two doses last year after having a mild case of COVID-19 in 2020. He said he considers himself to be in

a low-risk category.

"At this point, we need to focus on prevention of serious illness at the onset of symptoms rather than creating a new shot every six weeks and more divisive mandates," he said.

Judge temporarily restores New York's mask mandate

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

An appeals judge restored New York's mask mandate Tuesday, a day after a judge in a lower court ruled that Gov. Kathy Hochul's administration lacked the constitutional authority to order people to wear face coverings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After hearing brief arguments, Appellate Division Justice Robert Miller granted the state's request to keep the masking rule in place while the governor's administration pursues an appeal.

He offered no opinion on the mandate's legality.

The stay came after a day of confusion, in which some New York school districts — particularly in areas that lean Republican — rushed to make masks optional for students and teachers, and state education officials told administrators they should continue enforcing the mask mandate.

Attorney General Letitia James, a Democrat, said her office would continue defending the mandate in court.

"Nearly three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that wearing a mask saves lives. This mandate and today's decision are critical in helping to stop the spread of this virus and protect individuals young and old," James said.

At issue is the legality of an order the state's health commissioner issued in mid-December as the omicron variant fueled a huge wave of COVID-19 infections in the state.

The order required masks in schools, health care facilities, homeless shelters, jails, public transportation, and in any indoor public area where vaccination wasn't required for entry.

As of now, the statewide mandate is only set to be in place until Feb. 1.

Ruling Monday in a case brought by a group of parents, a judge on Long Island, Thomas Rademaker said the governor and state health commissioner didn't have authority to issue such a mandate without legislative approval.

The mandate "is a law that was promulgated and enacted unlawfully by an executive branch state agency, and therefore void and unenforceable," the judge said.

As school districts waited for the legal questions to play out, parents received mixed instructions, depending on where they live.

In the Massapequa School District, on Long Island, administrators immediately made masking optional.

"While it is certain this decision will face legal challenges, until otherwise litigated, mask wearing will be optional for students and staff in the Massapequa Schools beginning Tuesday," the district said on its website.

Syracuse City Schools were among those the stuck with the state guidance. "That means that anyone entering any of our schools must continue to wear a mask," a notice on the district's website said. New York City also stuck with its masking rule, which pre-existed the state's order.

In Westchester County, Mamaroneck Superintendent Robert Shaps made mask-wearing optional.

Republican U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik criticized Hochul for "ignoring" the lower court's ruling. She told parents in her northern New York congressional district to call her office if their children were not allowed in school without a mask.

"Masks are not mandatory for students, period. Yet Kathy Hochul is still trying to force young children to wear a mask in school, shamefully disregarding the rule of law," Stefanik said in a news release issued before the appeals court acted.

Nothing in Rademaker's ruling had barred school districts from adopting masking rules on their own.

Arguing before Miller on Tuesday, Judith Vale, an attorney for the state, said that if Rademaker's ruling were left in place it would endanger people's health.

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"The order, if not stayed will allow individuals to refuse to wear face coverings in indoor public settings where the risk of COVID-19 spread is high, including in schools where many children remain unvaccinated against COVID-19," the state said in a court filing.

Attorney Chad Laveglia, who brought the challenge on behalf of a group of parents, vowed to take it "as far as it needs to go."

"The judge got it wrong entirely," he said of Miller's decision to put Rademaker's on hold until the appeals court has a chance to hear more detailed arguments.

Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt criticized Hochul for relying on mandates and said she should instead send a bill to the Legislature for debate.

"We are two years into this pandemic, and it's absurd that this administration is still ruling by mandates — which continue to cause confusion, frustration and division among New Yorkers," he said.

The legal fight comes as the omicron wave that gripped New York state has been easing. The state averaged just under 22,000 new cases of the virus per day in the seven-day period that ended Monday, down from 74,600 per day during the wave's peak in early January. Hospitalizations are dropping, too, declining 17% statewide in the past seven days.

New York State United Teachers President Andy Pallotta cited current public health guidance that favored masks at a time of elevated infection rates.

"In the meantime, we're looking to state health officials to set a clear off-ramp for when mask requirements in schools can be relaxed," Pallotta said, "so students, families and educators have some certainty that there is light at the end of this long tunnel."

Stock investors' nerves tested by inflation, omicron, Russia

By STAN CHOE and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The stock market is losing crucial support from the Federal Reserve. Omicron is causing havoc at businesses around the world. And Russia just might be preparing to invade Ukraine, creating more uncertainty and raising the prospect of even higher oil prices.

No wonder investors are freaking out — and selling stocks.

The S&P 500 has dropped nearly 10% from its record set on the first trading day of the year, the biggest setback for Wall Street since its collapse when the pandemic first struck. And the market's moves have been fierce amid the mounting uncertainty.

The S&P 500 had four straight drops of 1% through Friday, the longest such streak since late 2018. The streak broke only after the S&P 500 eked out a slight gain on Monday, when a furious 11th-hour rally erased what had been a 4% loss. Tuesday was another volatile, down day for stocks.

For nearly two years, investors had poured money into stocks, confident that the Federal Reserve would help keep share prices upright. The Fed's super-low interest rates and the rapid U.S. economic recovery from the pandemic recession made stocks a more lucrative bet than safer investments such as low-yielding bonds.

The S&P 500 more than doubled between its pandemic low in March 2020 and the end of last year.

But the Fed is now threatening to end the party.

Determined to cool down the hottest inflation in four decades, the U.S. central bank is moving away from its easy money policies and preparing to raise interest rates. And that spells trouble for the stock market. As rates rise, bonds will look more attractive, likely encouraging investors to shift money out of riskier areas of the market.

Worse, higher rates are likely to slow the U.S. economy, reducing consumer spending — and hurting the corporate profits that drive stock prices. The prospect of higher rates is one reason the International Monetary Fund on Tuesday slashed its forecast for U.S. economic growth this year to 4% from the 5.2% it had predicted in October.

The unknowns are daunting: The Fed hasn't had to raise interest rates sharply to combat inflation since the early 1980s, and policymakers have no experience at all dealing with the aftershocks of a global pan-

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demic. Omicron and other COVID-19 variants threaten to disrupt business activity in unpredictable ways.

As if all that weren't enough, tension over Russia's threat to invade Ukraine — and the likelihood that the United States will retaliate with sanctions — could send oil prices higher and put more pressure on the global economy.

Investors don't see the volatility going away soon. The VIX index, which measures how much investors are paying to protect against drops for stocks in the upcoming 30 days, recently touched its highest level since October 2020.

The heaviest losses in the market's swift readjustment have hit the big, fast-growing companies that were earlier the biggest stars of the pandemic. Amazon has lost nearly 18% since Jan. 3, and Tesla has lost more than 23%. Netflix, another pandemic darling, is down nearly 39%.

The damage has been widespread, with the most speculative corners of the market hit in particular. Bitcoin has fallen by more than 40% since hitting an all-time high in November. The smaller companies in the Russell 2000 index, many of which are losing money, have lost 18% since peaking in early November.

And the "meme stocks" that rocketed higher almost exactly a year ago have also come down. GameStop has lost nearly a third of its value so far in 2022, and AMC Entertainment is down 41%.

"It's scary a little bit," said investor Emily Binder, 34, of Austin, Texas, who puts money in a wide range of investments - from stocks to bitcoin. But she says things were a lot scarier when COVID-19 hit the U.S. economy and shook markets in early 2020.

"I try to tune it out and stick with the plan," said Binder, who started a company that lets financial planners and other clients broadcast voice messages to customers over Amazon Alexa. The stock market's track record, she said, suggests it usually makes more sense to wait out turbulence than to try to pick a good time to sell. For the past four decades, she said, the S&P 500 "has always found its way back to record highs."

"Whenever I've tried to time anything or panic-sell, statistically if I look at the returns and what ended up happening, I would have done better to sit tight. Just don't mess with it."

For those who've been warning that prices were too high, this looks like the overdue beginning of the end for a spectacular run.

"Today in the U.S. we are in the fourth superbubble of the last hundred years," famed value investor Jeremy Grantham said in a recent report. He says not only are U.S. stocks in a bubble, but so are real estate and bonds.

Grantham lays the blame squarely on the Fed for keeping conditions too easy and encouraging prices to run too high, just as he said it did before the 2000 dot-com bubble burst and before the 2008 financial crisis.

"How did this happen: Will the Fed never learn?" Grantham wrote.

Now, with the consumer price index showing inflation at 7%, Wall Street sees the Fed moving aggressively in the opposite direction. Investors are pricing in a 66% chance the Fed will raise the short-term rates it controls by a full percentage point this year. A month ago, those same investors saw less than a 35% probability of that.

At the same time, they expect the Fed to offload some of the trillions of dollars of bonds that it amassed through the pandemic to keep longer-term rates low. Doing so would also have the effect of pushing up bond yields and tightening credit, just as another rate hike would.

Even before the Fed starts tightening, the U.S. economy appears to be losing momentum.

Omicron and other variants can make Americans warier about going out shopping, reducing the consumer spending that drives 70% of U.S. economic activity. Continued virus outbreaks also risk disrupting factories and ports, worsening existing supply chain bottlenecks and pushing inflation higher. And the economy won't get a repeat of the massive government spending that fueled strong growth last year.

Higher U.S. rates could also have global repercussions, luring investment out of other countries, especially in the developing world, and destabilizing the world's financial markets.

While the European Central Bank is not expected to raise rates until well into 2023, bond market rates have started rising from very low levels, indicating that investors think eventually the ECB will step up the pace of stimulus withdrawal as well.

Compared to the U.S., Europe's near-term growth prospects have weakened amid high COVID-19 cases from the omicron variant, high oil and gas prices and continuing shortages of semiconductors and other parts that have hampered manufacturers, particularly the auto industry.

Higher rates just add to the risks and uncertainties.

"Fed tightening always 'breaks' something," Michael Hartnett, Bank of America's chief investment strategist, wrote in a recent BofA Global Research report. He's expecting stocks to fall in 2022 due to the "rates shock" in the early part of the year and then "recession panic" in the back half of the year.

Others on Wall Street see the market's decline as temporary. Stocks have historically lost an average of 6% in the three months after the Fed's first increase in a rate-hike campaign. But the S&P 500 usually goes on to recover and return an average 5% during the six months after the first hike, according to Goldman Sachs.

EXPLAINER: What's known about 'stealth' version of omicron?

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Scientists and health officials around the world are keeping their eyes on a descendant of the omicron variant that has been found in at least 40 countries, including the United States.

This version of the coronavirus, which scientists call BA.2, is widely considered stealthier than the original version of omicron because particular genetic traits make it somewhat harder to detect. Some scientists worry it could also be more contagious.

But they say there's a lot they still don't know about it, including whether it evades vaccines better or causes more severe disease.

WHERE HAS IT SPREAD?

Since mid-November, more than three dozen countries have uploaded nearly 15,000 genetic sequences of BA.2 to GISAID, a global platform for sharing coronavirus data. As of Tuesday morning, 96 of those sequenced cases came from the U.S.

"Thus far, we haven't seen it start to gain ground" in the U.S., said Dr. Wesley Long, a pathologist at Houston Methodist in Texas, which has identified three cases of BA.2.

The mutant appears much more common in Asia and Europe. In Denmark, it made up 45% of all COVID-19 cases in mid-January, up from 20% two weeks earlier, according to Statens Serum Institut, which falls under the Danish Ministry of Health.

WHAT'S KNOWN ABOUT THIS VERSION OF THE VIRUS?

BA.2 has lots of mutations. About 20 of them in the spike protein that studs the outside of the virus are shared with the original omicron. But it also has additional genetic changes not seen in the initial version.

It's unclear how significant those mutations are, especially in a population that has encountered the original omicron, said Dr. Jeremy Luban, a virologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

For now, the original version, known as BA.1, and BA.2 are considered subsets of omicron. But global health leaders could give it its own Greek letter name if it is deemed a globally significant "variant of concern."

The quick spread of BA.2 in some places raises concerns it could take off.

"We have some indications that it just may be as contagious or perhaps slightly more contagious than (original) omicron since it's able to compete with it in some areas," Long said. "But we don't necessarily know why that is."

An initial analysis by scientists in Denmark shows no differences in hospitalizations for BA.2 compared with the original omicron. Scientists there are still looking into this version's infectiousness and how well current vaccines work against it. It's also unclear how well treatments will work against it.

Doctors also don't yet know for sure if someone who's already had COVID-19 caused by omicron can be sickened again by BA.2. But they're hopeful, especially that a prior omicron infection might lessen the severity of disease if someone later contracts BA.2.

The two versions of omicron have enough in common that it's possible that infection with the original mutant "will give you cross-protection against BA.2," said Dr. Daniel Kuritzkes, an infectious diseases expert

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at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

Scientists will be conducting tests to see if antibodies from an infection with the original omicron "are able to neutralize BA.2 in the laboratory and then extrapolate from there," he said.

HOW CONCERNED ARE HEALTH AGENCIES?

The World Health Organization classifies omicron overall as a variant of concern, its most serious designation of a coronavirus mutant, but it doesn't single out BA.2 with a designation of its own. Given its rise in some countries, however, the agency says investigations of BA.2 "should be prioritized."

The UK Health Security Agency, meanwhile, has designated BA.2 a "variant under investigation," citing the rising numbers found in the U.K. and internationally. Still, the original version of omicron remains dominant in the U.K.

WHY IS IT HARDER TO DETECT?

The original version of omicron had specific genetic features that allowed health officials to rapidly differentiate it from delta using a certain PCR test because of what's known as "S gene target failure."

BA.2 doesn't have this same genetic quirk. So on the test, Long said, BA.2 looks like delta.

"It's not that the test doesn't detect it; it's just that it doesn't look like omicron," he said. "Don't get the impression that 'stealth omicron' means we can't detect it. All of our PCR tests can still detect it."

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

Doctors advise the same precautions they have all along: Get vaccinated and follow public health guidance about wearing masks, avoiding crowds and staying home when you're sick.

"The vaccines are still providing good defense against severe disease, hospitalization and death," Long said. "Even if you've had COVID 19 before — you've had a natural infection — the protection from the vaccine is still stronger, longer lasting and actually ... does well for people who've been previously infected."

The latest version is another reminder that the pandemic hasn't ended.

"We all wish that it was over," Long said, "but until we get the world vaccinated, we're going to be at risk of having new variants emerge."

GOP map ties 'woke' Kansas enclave to Trump-loving areas

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — The Republicans who control the Kansas Legislature are close to passing a congressional redistricting plan that marries an eastern Kansas community proud of its "woke" politics to Trump-loving small towns and farms five hours west by car on the expansive and stark plains.

Democratic legislators and some local officials see the worst kind of gerrymandering in the GOP's intentions for Lawrence, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of Kansas City. The northeast Kansas city of almost 95,000 residents is home to the main University of Kansas campus.

A city that has a penchant for irritating conservatives with liberal politics — it's trying to move to entirely renewable energy, for example — would be moved into the sprawling 1st Congressional District of western and central Kansas where former President Donald Trump received almost 70% of the vote in 2020.

The Kansas House debated the bill Tuesday for four hours and set a final vote for Wednesday. The Senate approved the plan last week. Democrats don't have the political strength to prevent its passage and might not be able to sustain a possible veto from Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly. Both parties expect the lines to be settled in court.

Kansas' new 1st District would not look like its GOP-drawn 1st District cousin in North Carolina, held together over the north-south length of that state by islands off its Atlantic coast, or the snaky Chicago-area districts that favor Democrats in Illinois. But it raises eyebrows even among some Republicans who planned to vote for it by having a finger of land extend far into eastern Kansas and end with Lawrence at a small tip.

"It's a travesty," said Democratic state Rep. Boog Highberger, of Lawrence, an attorney. "It really disenfranchises my district, my city."

As for the political divides between Lawrence and western Kansas, Senate President Ty Masterson, a

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Wichita-area Republican and an architect of the GOP plan, said that divide exists now for Lawrence in the 2nd District of eastern Kansas. The 2nd has swaths of conservative rural territory in southeast Kansas. In fact, even some local residents acknowledge that such a divide exists between Lawrence and the less populated areas immediately around it.

"It's a change in a number," Masterson said Tuesday. "They were in District No. 2 and they were the most woke place, and they were with other counties in the 2nd that you could argue were the least-woke places. Now it's District No. 1 with the most woke and the least woke."

Though red Kansas has a few blue strongholds, Lawrence has a reputation as an especially liberal town. In 2018, complaints from the then-Republican governor and others prompted the university to take down an altered American flag that was part of an art display. The following year, conservatives were irked by plans for a course called "Angry White Male Studies." And many residents wanted local officials to resist federal immigration enforcement efforts during the Trump administration.

Democratic legislators and local officials complained about how the GOP map splits the city of Lawrence from the rest of Douglas County and even splits voting precincts. They also argued that Lawrence is oriented toward the Kansas City area, with people commuting there for jobs and fun.

"The map is clearly political gerrymandering in a way that only hurts voters," said Shannon Portillo, a Douglas County commissioner who represents both part of the city and rural areas.

The change for Lawrence stems from other changes top Republicans proposed that would make it harder for the lone Kansas Democrat in Congress, U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids, to win reelection in her Kansas City-area 3rd District, which has swung back and forth between the two parties for nearly 25 years.

Davids' current district is overpopulated by nearly 58,000 residents, so Republicans' map moves part of the Kansas City area — where Davids is the strongest — into the neighboring 2nd District of eastern Kansas. To keep that district close to the ideal population and maintain a safe GOP seat, Democratic voters in Lawrence were moved out of the 2nd.

Republicans contend that the change for Lawrence is just about numbers and complying with mandates established by federal courts that congressional districts be made as equal in population as possible after a decade of population shifts. They argue that the GOP plan achieves that: Each of the four districts hits the target of 734,470 residents, exactly.

"For you over here," Rep. Steve Huebert, a Wichita-area Republican, told Democrats during the House debate, "who says, 'Well, that's not fair,' that's the way it works."

Republican lawmakers argued that the University of Kansas gives Lawrence a common interest with other 1st District communities with universities, most notably Kansas State University in Manhattan, also in northeast Kansas.

When Democrats touted how Lawrence honors diversity, Republicans countered that southwest Kansas has three counties in which non-Hispanic white residents are a minority, largely because of meatpacking plants.

But Highberger and other Lawrence-area lawmakers believe the city's votes for Democratic candidates and progressive candidates will be swallowed by western Kansas conservatives, causing it to be ignored.

Though initially surprised, western Kansas lawmakers seemed to be taking the change in stride — and supporting the map.

"Rural counties are used to being put places, and you just have to make do with it," said former Kansas Agriculture Secretary Josh Svaty, a former House member who sought the Democratic nomination for governor in 2018.

Ukrainian leaders: Stay calm, Russian invasion not imminent

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's leaders sought Tuesday to reassure the nation that an invasion from neighboring Russia was not imminent, even as they acknowledged the threat is real and received a shipment of U.S. military equipment to shore up their defenses.

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Moscow has denied it is planning an assault, but it has massed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine in recent weeks and is holding military drills at multiple locations in Russia. That has led the United States and its NATO allies to rush to prepare for a possible war.

U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters that Russian President Vladimir Putin "continues to build forces along Ukraine's border," and an attack "would be the largest invasion since World War II. It would change the world."

Several rounds of high stakes diplomacy have failed to yield any breakthroughs, and tensions escalated further this week. NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe as part of an alliance "response force" if necessary. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also said he is prepared to send troops to protect NATO allies in Europe.

"We have no intention of putting American forces or NATO forces in Ukraine," Biden said, adding that there would be serious economic consequences for Putin, including personal sanctions, in the event of an invasion.

In a show of European unity in Berlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron called for an easing of the crisis.

Scholz said he wanted "clear steps from Russia that will contribute to a de-escalation of the situation." Macron, who said he would talk to Putin by phone Friday, added: "If there is aggression, there will be retaliation and the cost will be very high."

The U.S. and its allies have threatened sanctions like never before if Moscow sends its military into Ukraine, but they have given few details, saying it's best to keep Putin guessing.

The U.S. State Department has ordered the families of all American personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv to leave the country, and it said that nonessential embassy staff could leave. Britain said it, too, was withdrawing some diplomats and dependents from its embassy, and families of Canadian diplomatic staff also have been told to leave.

Ukrainian authorities, however, have sought to project calm. Speaking in the second televised speech to the nation in as many days, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged Ukrainians not to panic.

"We are strong enough to keep everything under control and derail any attempts at destabilization," he said.

The decision by the U.S., Britain, Australia, Germany and Canada to withdraw some of their diplomats and dependents from Kyiv "doesn't necessarily signal an inevitable escalation and is part of a complex diplomatic game," he said. "We are working together with our partners as a single team."

Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told parliament that "as of today, there are no grounds to believe" Russia will invade imminently, noting that its troops have not formed what he called a battle group to force its way over the border.

"Don't worry, sleep well," he said. "No need to have your bags packed."

In an interview late Monday, however, he acknowledged "risky scenarios" are possible.

Russia has said Western accusations it is planning an attack are merely a cover for NATO's own planned provocations. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov again accused the U.S. of "fomenting tensions" around Ukraine, a former Soviet state that has been in a conflict with Russia for almost eight years.

Moscow has rejected Western demands to pull its troops back from areas near Ukraine, saying it will deploy and train them wherever necessary on its territory as a response to what it called "hostile" moves by the U.S. and its allies. Thousands of troops from Russia's Southern and Western Military Districts took part Tuesday in readiness drills in those regions in maneuvers involving Iskander missiles and dozens of warplanes.

In 2014, following the ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland. Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a settlement have stalled.

In the latest standoff, Russia wants guarantees from the West that NATO will never admit Ukraine as a

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member and that the alliance would curtail other actions, such as stationing troops in former Soviet bloc countries. Some of these, like the membership pledge, are nonstarters for NATO, creating a seemingly intractable stalemate that many fear can only end in a war.

Moscow has accused Ukraine of massing troops near rebel-controlled regions to retake them by force — accusations Kyiv has rejected.

Analysts say Ukraine's leaders are caught between trying to calm the nation and ensuring it gets sufficient assistance from the West in case of an invasion.

"The Kremlin's plans include undermining the situation inside Ukraine, fomenting hysteria and fear among Ukrainians, and the authorities in Kyiv find it increasingly difficult to contain this snowball," said political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko.

Kyiv resident Andrey Chekonovsky said Ukrainians have been living with the threat of a Russian attack for eight years, "and I think that the fact that we are worried now is connected with diplomatic games."

The crisis didn't stop a large group of people from rallying outside parliament, demanding changes to the country's tax regulations and even clashing with police at one point.

Other Ukrainians are watching warily.

"Of course we fear Russia's aggression and a war, which will lead to the further impoverishment of Ukrainians. But we will be forced to fight and defend ourselves," said Dmytro Ugol, a 46-year-old construction worker in Kyiv. "I am prepared to fight, but my entire family doesn't want it and lives in tension. Every day, the news scares us more and more."

Putting U.S.-based troops on heightened alert for Europe on Monday suggested diminishing hope in the West that Putin will back away.

The Pentagon said Tuesday it is still identifying the roughly 8,500 U.S. troops being placed on higher alert for possible deployment to Europe, and said that more could be tapped if needed. The U.S. is still in "active consultation" with allies about the capabilities they might need, said press secretary John Kirby.

As part of a new \$200 million in security assistance directed to Ukraine from the United States, a shipment including equipment and munitions arrived Tuesday in Ukraine, according to Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar.

If Russia invades, "we will provide additional defensive material to the Ukrainians, above and beyond what we have already sent," U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Ukraine Kristina Kvien said at the airport.

"And let me underscore that Russian soldiers sent to Ukraine at the behest of the Kremlin will face fierce resistance. The losses to Russia will be heavy," Kvien said.

The U.S. moves are being coordinated with other NATO members to bolster a defensive presence in Eastern Europe. Denmark is sending a frigate and F-16 warplanes to Lithuania; Spain is sending four fighter jets to Bulgaria and three ships to the Black Sea to join NATO naval forces, and France stands ready to send troops to Romania.

Biden's national security team has been working with several European nations, the European Commission, and global suppliers on contingency plans if Russia cuts off energy, according to two senior administration officials who briefed reporters about efforts to mitigate spillover effects from potential military action. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the deliberations.

If needed, Europe would look to natural gas supplies in North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the U.S. The effort would require "rather smaller volumes from a multitude of sources" to make up for a Russian cutoff, according to one official.

Pfizer begins testing omicron-matched COVID shots in adults

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Pfizer is enrolling healthy adults to test a reformulated COVID-19 vaccine that matches the hugely contagious omicron variant, to see how it compares with the original shots.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech announced the study on Tuesday.

COVID-19 vaccine-makers have been updating their shots to better match omicron in case global health

authorities decide the change is needed.

Omicron is more likely than previous variants to cause infection even in people who've been vaccinated, but it's not yet clear that a change to the vaccine recipe will be ordered. Among the issues regulators are weighing: Some of the first places to face an omicron surge already are seeing the mutant wane — and there's no way to know if the next variant that arises will resemble omicron or be totally different.

The original vaccines still offer good protection against severe illness and death. Studies in the U.S. and elsewhere have made clear that adding a booster dose strengthens that protection and improves the chances of avoiding even a milder infection.

Another wrinkle in deciding whether vaccines need an update: A new U.S. report Tuesday echoes data from Britain and South Africa that omicron infections cause less severe illness — at least in part because so many people have some protection from vaccination or prior infection. During the omicron surge, 13% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients ended up in intensive care, compared with about 18% during two earlier waves, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Still, "we recognize the need to be prepared in the event this protection wanes over time and to potentially help address omicron and new variants in the future," Kathrin Jansen, Pfizer's vaccine research chief, said in a statement.

The new U.S. study will include up to 1,420 volunteers ages 18 to 55 to test the updated omicron-based shots for use as a booster or for primary vaccinations. Researchers will examine the tweaked vaccine's safety and how it revs up the immune system in comparison to the original shots.

Full study results will take many months as volunteers receive multiple vaccine doses — and as researchers measure how long virus-fighting antibodies remain at high levels after an omicron-adapted dose versus the regular booster.

Pfizer's CEO told CNBC earlier this month that the company could have some omicron-matched doses ready as early as March. But doing what the company calls "at-risk" manufacturing doesn't mean those doses will be rolled out to the public. Pfizer and other vaccine makers also have brewed and tested experimental doses to match previous variants, changes that ultimately weren't needed but offered valuable practice at tweaking the recipe.

For the new study, one group of about 600 volunteers who received two doses of the current Pfizer vaccine three to six months ago will receive either one or two omicron-based shots as boosters. Another 600 who have already gotten three regular doses of the Pfizer vaccine will be given a fourth dose of either the regular vaccine or the omicron-matched version.

The study also will enroll some unvaccinated volunteers who will receive three doses of the omicron-based vaccine.

Pfizer plans to produce 4 billion vaccine doses in 2022, and said Tuesday the amount isn't expected to change if an omicron-adapted version is needed.

German caution on arms to Ukraine rooted in history, energy

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's refusal to join other NATO members in providing weapons to Ukraine has annoyed some allies and raised questions about Berlin's resolve in standing up to Russia.

The issue rose to the fore over the weekend following a report that Berlin had gone so far as to block Estonia from supplying old German howitzers to Kyiv to help defend itself against Russian troops massing near the Ukrainian border.

Germany's stance on arms supplies does "not correspond to the level of our relations and the current security situation," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Twitter.

Speaking to reporters Monday in Berlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz denied a decision had been made on the howitzers and insisted that his country stands with its NATO and European Union allies in opposing any Russian incursion into Ukraine.

"Should this situation occur, we will jointly act," he told reporters. "There would be a high price."

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Still, while Germany would continue to provide help to Ukraine, there would be one exception, he said: "We don't provide any lethal weapons."

That stance, criticized in Kyiv and — less loudly — in Washington and London, has caused consternation among some in Germany who worry that their country may not be considered a reliable partner.

"How many in Berlin are actually aware how our seemingly confused Ukraine policy harms not just (Germany) but the entire EU?" asked Wolfgang Ischinger, Germany's former ambassador to the United States and now head of the annual Munich Security Conference.

Experts say Germany's position is partly rooted in its history of aggression during the 20th century.

"There's the obvious legacy of Germany's own militarization in Europe during two World Wars that has led many German leaders to view any military response as the last resort," said Rachel Ellehuus, deputy director of the Europe, Russia and Eurasia program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

That attitude could backfire, she said. "The current government does not seem to grasp that sending defensive weapons to Ukraine might actually deter further Russian aggression."

And while Germany has pointed to its restrictive position on arms exports to conflict zones in the past, analysts say the rule has not been consistently applied.

"There have always been borderline cases here, such as the Kosovo war or support for the Kurds against IS in Syria," said Sabine Fischer, a senior Russia expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

The debate over German weapons is unfolding days after the head of the German navy resigned following criticism at home and abroad for comments he made on Ukraine and Russia. Speaking Friday in India, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach said it was important to have Russia on the same side as the EU against China and suggested that Russian President Vladimir Putin deserved "respect."

With Scholz's Social Democrats are steeped in the legacy of Cold War rapprochement pursued by his predecessor Willy Brandt, his governing partner the Greens are rooted in a tradition of pacifism. That means two out of Germany's three governing parties would balk at the idea of supplying arms to a non-NATO country in a conflict with Russia. But letting Estonia pass on the old Soviet-designed 122-mm D-30 howitzers to Ukraine might be an acceptable compromise.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock made clear that, qualms about exporting arms to Ukraine aside, Berlin takes a dim view of Russia's recent behavior.

"In recent weeks, more than 100,000 Russian troops with tanks and guns have gathered near Ukraine for no understandable reason. And it's hard not to see that as a threat," she said during a visit to Moscow.

Speaking alongside her Russian counterpart, Baerbock acknowledged the "suffering and destruction that we Germans brought upon the peoples of the Soviet Union" during the Nazi era, but warned that Germany was willing to consider tough steps if Russia acts against Ukraine.

This includes calling into question the future of the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline meant to bring natural gas from Russia to Germany.

Such a move against its biggest energy supplier would come at a high price for Germany, too.

With plans to switch off its last three nuclear power plants this year and phase out the use of coal by 2030, Germany's reliance on gas will increase in the short term until enough renewable energy comes online, said Georg Zachmann, a senior fellow at the Bruegel economic think tank in Brussels.

Yet German officials believe that being a large customer of Russian gas can give it leverage, as Moscow won't want to harm its reputation as a reliable supplier.

Germany's neighbors, however, aren't convinced that tactic will work.

"For almost three decades, Germany has been pushing for a more inclusive approach to Russia based on the Wandel durch Handel (change through trade) approach. But it didn't change Russia," said Slawomir Debski, director of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, a think tank in Warsaw.

But the bickering now among NATO and EU allies doesn't help either, he said.

If Berlin wants to focus on putting economic pressure on Moscow while others provide military aid to Ukraine, such a 'good cop, bad cop' approach could work, said Debski, "provided there is part of an agreed

allied strategy and agreement on the fundamental endgame.”

Speaking Monday at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels, Baerbock said the German government’s priority is to deescalate the situation over Ukraine, dampening allies’ calls for military support to Kyiv and swift new sanctions against Moscow.

“Berlin will have to deal with the criticism that is now coming from Ukraine, other European countries and Washington,” Fischer said. “At the same time, Germany remains an important player in the negotiations surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and, I predict, will continue to support sanctions and other measures in the future.”

Winter welcome: Stranded drivers freed in Istanbul, Athens

By MEHMET GUZEL and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Rescue crews in Istanbul and Athens dug through snow and ice Tuesday to clear paralyzed roads and rescue people stranded overnight in their cars after snowstorms and a massive cold front brought much of Turkey and Greece to a standstill. Two storm-related deaths were reported.

Highways and roads in Istanbul became clogged Monday after the storm pounded the city of 16 million that straddles Europe and Asia — dropping more than 80 centimeters (31 inches) of snow in some areas. Stranded motorists spent the night in their cars, abandoned their vehicles to walk home or crowded subways and other limited public transportation.

All highways and main roads in Istanbul were reopened by Tuesday afternoon, Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Adil Karaismailoglu announced on Twitter, while Istanbul Gov. Ali Yerlikaya said restrictions on vehicles traveling into Istanbul were lifted.

Authorities also cleared a runway at Istanbul Airport on Tuesday, allowing limited flights to resume. Flights were suspended on Monday for safety reasons at the airport, where the roof of a cargo facility collapsed from the weight of the snow. Istanbul’s second airport, Sabiha Gokcen, was also operating limited services.

Hundreds of passengers stranded at Istanbul Airport — a key travel hub — shouted “We need (a) hotel!” to protest their ordeal, the Cumhuriyet newspaper reported, and airport police were called in.

Huand Mahperi, who posted a video of the protest on Twitter, said the outcry came Tuesday morning after passengers were given conflicting information and were told that Turkish Airlines flights had been canceled until midnight.

In Athens, rescue crews freed up to 300 drivers trapped on a major highway that connects the Greek capital with the city’s international airport.

Drivers there had abandoned their cars and walked home. Others had trekked to a nearby train station, jumping over barriers to reach the platform after spending the night in their cars. Train service had been suspended, but a train was sent Tuesday to pick stragglers up.

The army was sent out overnight to deliver food and water to those trapped and to help free as many as possible. Officials said each trapped driver would receive 2,000 euros (\$2,265) in compensation, which the highway administration accepted.

“It was a very difficult night and we faced unprecedented conditions,” Civil Protection and Climate Change Minister Christos Stylianides said. “I want to again express an apology from the state for all the difficulties that the (stranded) drivers faced.”

By Tuesday, the heavy snowfall had mostly stopped but many streets in Athens remained blocked by fallen trees and several northern neighborhoods were without power. Authorities had ordered all but essential businesses shut on Tuesday, and have extended that for Wednesday in the wider Athens area and several other regions.

In the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, police said a homeless man who had been sleeping outdoors was found dead Tuesday. Local authorities said the 60-year-old had refused to relocate to a shelter.

In Turkey, authorities recovered the body of a 34-year-old who is believed to have died in heavy snowfall while trying to reach his village in Amasya province, 326 kilometers (202 miles) northwest of Ankara, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

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Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said the snowfall around Istanbul would continue until Thursday and urged people not to venture out in private cars unless necessary. He said many of the stranded vehicles did not have snow tires.

"Nothing is moving. The snow plows can't even reach us," Ahmet Odabasi, 40, one of thousands who stranded overnight on a highway west of Istanbul, told The Associated Press.

The snowstorm, complete with thunder and lightning, hit the Athens area late Monday morning, the second year in a row that Greece has experienced a freak snowstorm.

The severe weather also brought rare snowfall to vacation resorts in Turkey's southwest region, including Bodrum and Datca, with snow and slippery conditions blocking a highway linking the provinces of Mugla and Denizli. Antalya city center, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, saw its first snowfall in 29 years, the private NTV television reported.

Authorities in Istanbul suspended intercity bus services Monday and blocked travel to the city from Turkey's northwestern Thrace region. Civil servants were given leave until Thursday, except for those employed in security, health and transportation sectors. Schools across Turkey were already closed for a winter break and universities decided to close until Jan. 31.

The mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, said the city provided shelter to around 1,500 homeless people. He said he hoped the snow would fill dams and bring relief to the parched region.

The Balkans was also gripped by freezing weather, with temperatures dropping way below freezing in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Croatia.

Montenegrin authorities said a record national low temperature was confirmed in the northern village of Kosanica, which plunged to minus 33.2 C (minus 27.7 F). In Bosnia, ice formed on the Miljacka River after a minus 15 C (5 F) temperature was recorded in the capital of Sarajevo on Tuesday.

Walmart invests in indoor vertical farming startup Plenty

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Walmart said Tuesday it has taken a stake in agriculture startup Plenty, becoming the first large U.S. retailer to significantly invest in indoor vertical farming as a way to deliver fresher produce to its stores.

Vertical farmers tout their high-quality produce that brings higher yields while using less water and land. The method also doesn't use pesticide, and the produce can be grown year round near the point of distribution, increasing the reliability of supply.

Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, declined to comment on the size of its investment or the financial terms of the deal. But the retailer based in Bentonville, Arkansas, said that it will join Plenty's board at the close of the transaction.

The deal comes as grocery stores are under pressure to have more environmentally friendly practices. Plenty, based in San Francisco, is one of many players in the fast-growing field of indoor farming. Others include Morehead, Kentucky-based AppHarvest, and New York-based Gotham Greens.

In a recent global survey, consulting firm Agritecture — which works with urban farmers — found that at least 74 indoor farming companies were founded in 2020 alone.

Plenty, which was founded in 2014 and has a vertical farm in South San Francisco, also operates an indoor plant science research facility in Laramie, Wyoming. It is now building in Compton, California, what it says will be the world's highest output vertical indoor farm, due to open in the second half of this year.

Plenty said its vertical farming towers are designed to grow multiple crops on one platform in a building the size of a big box retail store. Its systems feature vertical plant towers, LED lighting and robots to plant, feed and harvest crops. It says its farms use 1% of the land that an outdoor farm requires while delivering anywhere from 150 to 350 times more food per acre.

Walmart said that under the deal, Plenty's Compton farm will send leafy greens to Walmart's California stores beginning later this year. It said the vertical farms will supplement, but won't replace, traditional farming practices, while helping increase the food supply in a sustainable way.

China less worried about global criticism these Olympics

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

When Beijing was awarded the 2008 Summer Olympics, the International Olympic Committee predicted the Games could improve human rights, and Chinese politicians hinted at the same.

Such talk is all but absent this time as the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics open in just over a week.

The Games are a reminder of both China's rise and its disregard for civil liberties, which has prompted a diplomatic boycott led by the U.S.

Rights groups have documented forced labor, mass detentions and torture, and the U.S. has called China's internment of at least 1 million Uyghurs genocide. China has also come under criticism over the near-disappearance from public view of tennis star Peng Shuai after she accused a former senior member of the ruling Communist Party of sexually assaulting her.

But with more political, economic and military clout than it had 13 1/2 years ago, China appears to be worrying less about global scrutiny this time. And the COVID-19 pandemic has given it even more control over the Olympics, particularly with the isolation of visiting journalists, separated in a "bubble" from the Chinese population.

"There's nothing to 'prove' at this point; 2008 was a 'coming out' party and all this one does is confirm what we've known for the last decade," Amanda Shuman, a China researcher at the University of Freiburg, wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

"If anything, there's a lot less pressure than 2008," she said. "The Chinese government knows full well that its global economic upper hand allows it to do whatever it wishes."

The IOC had few options when it awarded China the Games for the second time. Six possible European candidates, led by Norway and Sweden, bowed out for political or cost reasons. Voters in two other countries — Switzerland and Germany — voted no in referendums.

IOC members eventually picked Beijing — an authoritarian state that doesn't need voter approval to proceed — over Almaty, Kazakhstan, in a close vote, 44-40.

The IOC has allowed China to avoid human rights oversight. Beginning with the 2024 Paris Olympics, host cities must adhere to the U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. But China was not subject to those rules when it was picked in 2015.

"When China hosts the Olympics again, it is no longer the China back in 2008," dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei said in an email to The AP. Ai helped design the famous Bird's Nest stadium that was used in the 2008 Games — hoping it would signify a new openness — and then regretted doing so, calling it and the Olympics China's "fake smile."

Ai was jailed in 2011 in China on unspecified charges and now lives in exile in Portugal. The Bird's Nest will again host the opening ceremony on Feb. 4.

"China today has deviated further away from democracy, freedom of press and human rights, and the reality has become even harsher," Ai added.

China's tone has toughened since the last time it hosted the Games.

In 2008, Beijing put some curbs on broadcasting from Tiananmen Square but allowed it; agreed to "protest zones," though they were never used, with access repeatedly denied; and dropped some reporting restrictions more than a year ahead of the Games. It also unblocked its censored internet for journalists.

In 2022, there is less accommodation. The pandemic will limit journalists to a tightly sealed "bubble," though there will be internet access. Chinese organizers have warned foreign athletes that any statement that goes against Chinese law could be punished. And a smartphone app widely used by athletes and reporters has glaring security vulnerabilities, according to an internet watchdog.

Some national Olympic committees have advised teams and staff not to take personal phones or laptops to Beijing.

The IOC, which generates billions from sponsorships and broadcast rights, seldom pushes back in public against Chinese organizers who are, in reality, the Chinese government.

Some of the changes that affect 2022 began a month after the 2008 Olympics ended, when the global financial crisis hit. China fared better than most countries, which increased its confidence.

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China has since seen the rise of Xi Jinping, who headed the 2008 Olympics and was named general secretary of the Communist Party in 2012.

"Although Xi was in charge of 2008 Olympic Games, the Winter Games is truly Xi's Games," said Xu Guoqi, who teaches history at the University of Hong Kong. He is the author of "Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008."

Mary Gallagher, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, said the state of U.S. democracy and its "poor pandemic response" have further emboldened China.

"Right now the multiple U.S. failures create momentum for renewed nationalism and confidence in China," Gallagher said by email. "This is made all the more effective by the Communist Party's strict control over information, which can rain 'positive energy' down on what's happening in China while only publicizing negative accounts of other countries, especially the U.S."

China complained in 2008 that human rights protests around Tibet politicized the Olympics. The Olympic Torch Relay, taken on a world tour, faced violent protests in London and elsewhere. The IOC has not tried such a relay since.

China, which has called the allegations of human rights abuses the "lie of the century," says mixing sports and politics goes against the Olympic Charter. IOC President Thomas Bach has likewise used that principle as a shield against critics.

But others see hypocrisy on China's part.

"Sports and politics do mix," Laura Luehrmann, a China specialist at Wright State University, said in an email. "Politics is about the distribution and use of limited resources — most notably power and decision-making, but also finances as well. Sports is all about power and money — even if framed as glorifying athletic achievement."

Victor Cha, who served in the White House under President George W. Bush and is the author of "Beyond the Final Score — The Politics of Sport in Asia," said China's moaning about others politicizing sports is "the pot calling the kettle black."

"There is no country that has ignored the Olympic Charter's mandate to keep politics out of sports more than China," Cha, who teaches at Georgetown University, wrote in an essay last week for the Center for Strategic & International Studies.

"Much as the world would like the Olympics to be devoid of politics, as George Orwell once wrote: 'Sport is war minus the shooting.'"

Migrant abuses continue in Libya. So does EU border training

By RENATA BRITO, FRANK JORDANS and LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — A confidential European Union military report calls for continuing a controversial EU program to train and equip Libya's coast guard and navy despite growing concerns about their treatment of migrants, a mounting death toll at sea, and the continued lack of any central authority in the North African nation.

The report, circulated to EU officials this month and obtained by The Associated Press, offers a rare look at Europe's determination to support Libya in the interception and return of tens of thousands of men, women and children to Libya, where they face insufferable abuse.

Compiled by Italian navy Rear Adm. Stefano Turchetto, head of the EU arms embargo surveillance mission, or Operation Irini, the report acknowledges the "excessive use of force" by Libyan authorities, adding that EU training is "no longer fully followed."

Hundreds of thousands of migrants hoping to reach Europe have made their way through Libya, where a lucrative trafficking and smuggling business has flourished in a country without a functioning government, fragmented for years between rival administrations in the east and west, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

The EU report acknowledges "the political stalemate" in Libya has hindered Europe's training program, noting that the country's internal divisions make it difficult to obtain political support for enforcing "proper behavioral standards ... compliant with human rights, especially when dealing with irregular migrants."

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The European Commission and the EU's External Action Service — the equivalent of the 27-nation bloc's foreign office — declined to comment on the report. But spokesman Peter Stano confirmed the EU is determined to train coast guard personnel and bolster Libya's capacity to manage a massive search-and-rescue area of the Mediterranean.

The EU training program "remains firm on the table to increase the capacity of the Libyan authorities to save lives at sea," Stano said.

Criticism of Europe's migration policies has been growing. At least three requests have been filed to the International Criminal Court demanding that Libyan and European officials, as well as traffickers, militiamen and others be investigated for crimes against humanity. A U.N. inquiry published in October also found evidence that abuses committed in Libya may amount to crimes against humanity.

Last week, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for countries to "re-examine policies that support interception at sea and return of refugees and migrants to Libya."

Stano dismissed those criticisms. "When it comes to migration, our objective is to save peoples' lives, protect those in need and fight trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling," Stano said.

Human rights defenders and asylum seekers disagree.

"The Europeans pretend to show the good face," said a Cameroonian woman who arrived in Libya in 2016 with her child thinking she would find work. Instead, she was trafficked and forced into prostitution after being separated from her daughter. The AP does not identify victims of sexual violence.

In 2018 she got on a smuggler's boat bound for Europe but her group was caught by Libyan authorities and taken to the notorious Tajoura detention center where detainees were beaten and abused. She was only released after a friend paid a \$700 ransom to the guards.

"They're calling it saving lives? How is it saving lives when those lives are tortured after being saved?" the woman asked.

Questioned about the detention centers in Libya, Stano said the EU's position is clear: "They are unacceptable. The current arbitrary detention system must end."

But despite such assertions nothing has changed on the ground. The Libyan government last month named Mohammed Al-Khoja, a militia leader implicated in abuses against migrants, to head the Department for Combating Irregular Migration, which oversees the detention centers.

"The same people in charge of dismantling the trafficking business are the traffickers themselves," said Violeta Moreno-Lax, founder of the immigration law program at Queen Mary University of London.

The EU report noted the "excessive use of physical force" by a Libyan patrol during the Sept. 15 interception of a wooden boat with about 20 migrants off the coast of Libya.

The Libyan forces used tactics "never observed before and not in compliance with (EU) training ... as well as international regulation," said the report. It provided no further details about what exactly happened.

A spokesman for the Libyan coast guard did not respond to AP requests for comment about that incident or the EU report. In the past, Libyan interior ministry and coast guard officials have said they are doing their best with limited resources in a country plagued by years of civil war.

In response to AP questions, Frontex, the European coast guard and border agency that documented the Sept. 15 interception said it had filed a "serious incident report" but could not disclose details.

Ozlem Demirel, a German Left party member of the European Parliament, said the report offered "further evidence that there should be no cooperation with this force."

"The fact that Irini is even seeking further training is, in my view, outrageous," she said.

Violent tactics employed by Libyan authorities at sea have been widely documented for years. Last week, activists on a volunteer rescue ship reported seeing a Libyan patrol vessel "shooting at a person who had jumped into the water."

Some 455 million euros (\$516 million) have been earmarked for Libya since 2015 through the EU's Trust Fund for Africa, substantial amounts of which have gone to finance migration and border management.

However, huge sums have been diverted to networks of militiamen and traffickers who exploit migrants, according to a 2019 AP investigation. Coast guard members are also complicit, turning migrants intercepted at sea over to detention centers under deals with militias or demanding payoffs to let others go.

EU money, much of it funneled through Italy, has been used to train staff and refurbish boats for Libyan authorities. The Libyan coast guard also received satellite phones and uniforms and will get three new patrol vessels in the next two years.

To intercept the small unseaworthy migrant boats in the Mediterranean, Libyan authorities also depend on surveillance gathered and shared by European drones, aircraft and radar. But even then the political chaos in the country often impacts search-and-rescue operations.

Irregular migration from North Africa to Italy and Malta spiked in 2021 after a drop in 2020 largely due to the coronavirus pandemic. Crossings on the central Mediterranean accounted for one-third of all reported illegal border-crossings into Europe, according to Frontex.

But as departures increased, so did interceptions. Last year, the Libyan coast guard picked up and returned to Libya more than 32,000 migrants, nearly triple the number for 2020.

Yet despite all the equipment and training provided to Libya to save lives, more than 1,500 people died or went missing last year, the highest death toll since 2017.

EXPLAINER: What are US options for sanctions against Putin?

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The financial options being considered to punish President Vladimir Putin if Russia invades Ukraine range from the sweeping to the acutely personal — from cutting Russia off from U.S. dollars and international banking to slapping sanctions on a former Olympic gymnast reported to be Putin's girlfriend.

Publicly, the United States and European allies have promised to hit Russia financially like never before if Putin does roll his military into Ukraine. Leaders have given few hard details to the public, however, arguing it's best to keep Putin guessing.

And weeks into the negotiations, it's far from clear that Americans have succeeded in achieving U.S. and European consensus on what sanctions will be imposed and what would trigger them.

A look at some of the financial actions under consideration:

SWIFT RETALIATION

For the U.S. and its European allies, cutting Russia out of the SWIFT financial system, which shuffles money from bank to bank around the globe, would be one of the toughest financial steps they could take, damaging Russia's economy immediately and in the long term. The move could cut Russia off from most international financial transactions, including international profits from oil and gas production, which in all accounts for more than 40% of the country's revenue.

Allies on both sides of the Atlantic also considered the SWIFT option in 2014, when Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine's Crimea and backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Russia declared then that kicking it out of SWIFT would be equivalent to a declaration of war. The allies — criticized ever after for responding too weakly to Russia's 2014 aggression — shelved the idea.

Russia since then has tried to develop its own financial transfer system, with limited success.

The U.S. has succeeded before in persuading the SWIFT system to kick out a country — Iran, over its nuclear program.

But kicking Russia out of SWIFT would also hurt other economies, including those of the U.S. and key ally Germany. U.S. lawmakers said last week the Biden administration is still analyzing how bad that impact would be. Annalena Baerbock, the foreign minister for Germany, asked by reporters about the proposed Russian SWIFT ban, seemed to express doubts.

"The toughest stick won't always ultimately be the most intelligent sword," Baerbock said.

DOLLAR CLEARING

The United States already holds one of the most powerful financial weapons to wield against Putin if he invades Ukraine — blocking Russia from access to the U.S. dollar.

Dollars still dominate in financial transactions around the world, with trillions of dollars in play daily.

Transactions in U.S. dollars ultimately are cleared through the Federal Reserve or through U.S. financial

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institutions. Crucially for Putin, that means foreign banks have to be able to access the U.S. financial system to settle dollar transactions.

The ability to block that access gives the United States the ability to inflict financial pain well beyond its borders. Previously, the U.S. has suspended financial institutions from dollar clearing for allegedly violating sanctions against Iran, Sudan and other countries.

Biden indicated to reporters that cutting off Russia's and Russians' ability to deal in dollars was one of the options the U.S. was studying. Unlike the SWIFT option and the other financial measures, it's one the U.S. could do on its own. Many Russians and Russian companies would be stymied in carrying out even the most routine transactions, like making payroll or buying things, because they would have no access to the U.S. banking system.

EXPORT CONTROLS

White House press secretary Jen Psaki has confirmed that the U.S. is considering imposing export controls — potentially cutting off Russia from the high tech that helps warplanes and passenger jets fly and makes smartphones smart, along with the other software and advanced electronic gear that make the modern world run.

That could include adding Russia to the most restrictive group of countries for export control purposes, together with Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Syria, officials said.

That would mean that Russia's ability to obtain integrated circuits, and products containing integrated circuits, would be severely restricted, because of the global dominance of U.S. software, technology and equipment. The impact could extend to aircraft avionics, machine tools, smartphones, game consoles, tablets and televisions.

Such sanctions could also target critical Russian industry, including its defense and civil aviation sectors, which would hit Russia's high-tech ambitions, whether in artificial intelligence or quantum computing.

Like some of the other penalties under consideration, U.S. export restrictions would risk motivating businesses to look for alternatives in other countries, including China.

BOND MARKETS

The Biden administration limited Russia's ability to borrow money by banning U.S. financial institutions from buying Russian government bonds directly from state institutions last year. But the sanctions didn't target the secondary market, leaving this as a possible next step.

NORD STREAM 2 NATURAL GAS PIPELINE

Republicans and Democrats in the Congress fought Russia's new Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany for years, arguing it would help Russia use its control of the gas supply as leverage to achieve its policy aims in Europe. Rival bills in Congress would sanction the pipeline's operators — Republicans want to impose the sanctions right away, but Democrats only if Russia invades Ukraine.

The Biden administration previously has held off from that level of sanctions, to avoid getting crossways with ally Germany.

German officials say blocking operation of the pipeline if Russia moves in to Ukraine would be "on the table" if there's an invasion — but that's as far as they've gone publicly.

GOING AFTER THE OLIGARCHS ... AND A REPORTED GIRLFRIEND

One of the most-used sanctions tactics by the U.S. is sanctioning the immediate circles of leaders, their families, and military and civilian circles. Putin and his friends and family could face that as well, along with Russia's powerful business oligarchs, and its banks.

Sweeping legislation by Indiana Republican Rep. Jim Banks, co-sponsored by nearly 40 other House Republicans, would pile on sanctions even before any further Russian invasion of Ukraine, from the SWIFT cutoff to the Nord Stream penalties.

They also would urge consideration of targeting many in Russia's upper echelon with sanctions.

That includes Putin's family and a woman reported to be Putin's romantic interest, Alina Kabaeva, who won Olympic gold in 2004 in rhythmic gymnastics.

Rare eagle seen in Maine, wowing birders, might stay a bit

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

GEORGETOWN, Maine (AP) — A rare species of eagle that has thrilled bird lovers and baffled scientists since arriving in Maine last month might not be in a hurry to leave.

The Steller's sea eagle arrived in Maine in late December after a brief stop in Massachusetts more than a month ago. It has stuck to Maine's middle coast, eating fish and ducks and attracting hundreds of bird-watchers from all over the world.

The sea eagle numbers only a few thousand worldwide and is native to northeastern Asia, including Russia and Japan, and has wingspans of up to 8 feet (2.4 meters). The bird is far off course, and it's still unclear why it came here at all, said Doug Hitchcox, staff naturalist at Maine Audubon.

But the bird doesn't appear to be in any kind of danger, Hitchcox said. It has an ample food supply and is living in habitat that is similar enough to its native range, he said. It's possible it could eventually return to its home range, but for now it's comfortable in Maine, Hitchcox said.

"This one is so far off course, it's just purely speculation to say it could go back and then return. There is no reason it couldn't make its way back to Japan or Russia," he said. "It seems to be doing OK."

It's not uncommon for vagrant bird species to return year after year to places far from their typical range. A single red-billed tropicbird, a species commonly seen in the Caribbean and tropical oceans, has been seen off Maine in the summer for years. Birders affectionately call it "Tropy."

Maine's lone Steller's sea eagle is an adult, and its sex is not confirmed. It is sometimes seen around bald eagles, dwarfing the national symbol. The Steller's, named for German naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller, is one of the largest eagles in the world, often weighing 13 to 20 pounds (6 to 9 kilograms) — twice as much as a bald eagle.

The bird drew dozens of onlookers to Reid State Park in Georgetown when it was first seen in Maine, and birdwatchers have continued to come to the state for weeks with no sign of stopping.

Allison Black, a birder from Connecticut, made the four-hour drive to see the bird Monday. Many bird fans are relying on websites and social media channels set up to help people track the eagle.

"I took my mom with me, too, who isn't a birder, but heard the story about the eagle and wanted to see it. We actually tried to see it back in December when it was in Massachusetts, but missed it by 10 minutes. That hurt," she said. "I saw in the alerts that it flew not too long after we left, so I'm thankful we were at the right place at the right time to finally see it!"

Ahead of Olympics, abrupt lockdowns loom over Beijing life

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Beijing residents are coping with abrupt local lockdowns and sweeping COVID-19 testing requirements as the Chinese capital seeks to prevent a coronavirus outbreak ahead of the Winter Olympics that opens in less than two weeks.

The lockdowns are part of China's "zero tolerance" measures to fight the pandemic that have been ratcheted-up ahead of the Games. Those now include requiring tests for anyone who purchases medications to treat cold, cough, fever and other maladies.

University student Cheryl Zhang said that the health code app that all Chinese have installed on their smart phones began notifying her to get tested after she bought medication four days previously.

"I was seriously panicking," said Zhang, who was taking a stroll across the street from the Olympic Village. "But when I got to the hospital and saw the medical workers striving to keep things in order, I didn't feel angry any more. The problem was sorted out very quickly."

Such purchases are tracked via a smart phone app that requires customers to swipe their information when they buy health supplies or simply enter pharmacies. China strictly controls sales of medications and a doctor's prescription is often required for ordinary cold medications or even vitamins.

A notice posted at a Beijing pharmacy Tuesday said anyone who had bought any of four types of medication over the past two weeks was required to obtain a test within 72 hours. Failing to do so would affect

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their status health status as listed on their phones, "possibly affecting your going out and daily life," the notice said.

At the Anzhen residential community about 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from the main Olympic Village, residents were confined to their homes from Sunday morning until Tuesday afternoon. A notice said one building remained under isolation.

No word was given about confirmed cases in the area, but all residents were required to be tested for COVID-19, with a second round scheduled for Thursday. Residents must continue monitoring their health for two weeks following the lifting of quarantine.

The strict policies are credited with suppressing major outbreaks. China on Tuesday reported a mere 18 cases of local infection, including five in Beijing. Few have protested the policies, a reflection also of China's authoritarian Communist Party that restricts free speech and tolerates no opposition.

However, at the Anzhen community, an elderly resident said he wished authorities would provide more information.

"I don't worry too much but I hope the situation can be more transparent," said the man, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid trouble from the community management. "We are close to the Olympic Village and if they want to test everyone ahead of the games, we understand, but now the community has been locked down and we were told nothing."

A cluster of COVID-19 cases in Beijing has prompted authorities to test millions and impose new measures, even as the city of Xi'an in north-central China lifted on Monday a monthlong lockdown that had isolated its 13 million residents.

At least six Beijing neighborhoods have been targeted for lockdowns and officials in the capital said they would conduct a second round of mass testing of the Fengtai district's 2 million residents, where the majority of the capital's 40 coronavirus cases since Jan. 15 have been found. Some trains and flights to Beijing have also been suspended to stop travel from areas with outbreaks.

The severe measures, despite a relatively low number of cases, illustrate the acute concern of government officials in the run-up to the Olympics' opening in Beijing on Feb. 4.

All participants in the Games will be tested on arrival and every day and be completely isolated from the general public.

More than 3,000 people have arrived for the Games since Jan. 4, including over 300 athletes and team officials, plus media and other participants, organizers said Monday. So far, 78 people have tested positive, including one who was an athlete or team official.

While taking strict anti-pandemic measures, China has shrugged off political controversies around the Games related to Beijing's record on human rights.

Chinese president and head of the ruling Communist Party Xi Jinping on Tuesday told IOC President Thomas Bach that Beijing was ready to host a "simple, safe and splendid Winter Olympics," the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

"Everything is ready for the Beijing Winter Olympics following more than six years of preparations," Xi was quoted as telling Bach.

Jin Dong-yan, a virologist at Hong Kong University, said the small clusters so far are unlikely to affect the Winter Olympics.

He added that while publicly people may not complain about strict anti-virus policies, it's a different story in private.

"Actually under the table there is a lot of questioning and protesting and a lot of complaints" about the lockdowns and other measures that are often imposed with little notice on residents, Jin said.

He also questioned the usefulness of mass testing, saying the focus should be on those "spreaders" likely to be carrying the virus.

"This mass testing is actually wasting a lot of resources, it's completely unnecessary," Jin said.

Overuse of health code apps have also raised privacy concerns among legal experts, Jin said. While most stores and offices and public buildings still require visitors to scan their codes, the requirement is more

laxly enforced in residential communities, he said.

Back at the Anzhen community, chef Yang Haiping, who specializes in mutton hotpot, said his restaurant had been forced to temporarily close after many of its employees were placed under lockdown.

Yang said he served food through gates guarded by police to co-workers who hadn't had sufficient time to stock up.

"We will wait for the notice about what to do next," Yang said.

SAT going digital in shifting college admissions landscape

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

The SAT exam will move from paper and pencil to a digital format, administrators announced Tuesday, saying the shift will boost its relevancy as more colleges make standardized tests optional for admission.

Test-takers will be allowed to use their own laptops or tablets but they'll still have to sit for the test at a monitored testing site or in school, not at home.

The format change is scheduled to roll out internationally next year and in the U.S. in 2024. It will also shave an hour from the current version, bringing the reading, writing and math assessment from three hours to about two.

"The digital SAT will be easier to take, easier to give, and more relevant," said Priscilla Rodriguez, vice president of College Readiness Assessments at the New York City-based College Board, which administers the SAT and related PSAT. "We're not simply putting the current SAT on a digital platform. We're taking full advantage of what delivering an assessment digitally makes possible."

Once essential for college applications, scores from admission tests like the SAT and rival ACT carry less weight today as colleges and universities pay more attention to the sum of student achievements and activities throughout high school.

Amid criticism that the exams favor wealthy, white applicants and disadvantage minority and low-income students, an increasing number of schools have in recent years adopted test-optional policies, which let students decide whether to include scores with their applications.

The pandemic accelerated the trend as testing sessions were canceled or inaccessible.

Nearly 80% of bachelor's degree-granting institutions are not requiring test scores from students applying for fall 2022, according to a December tally by the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, a watchdog group that opposes standardized testing. The group, known as FairTest, said at least 1,400 of them have extended the policy through at least the fall 2023 admissions cycle.

About 1.5 million members of the class of 2021 took the SAT at least once, down from 2.2 million in the previous year. A College Board survey found many students want to take the SAT to preserve the option of submitting the scores and qualifying for certain scholarships.

Rodriguez said the digital version will be delivered in a format more familiar to students who regularly learn and test online at school.

Also, student score reports will not only focus on connecting students with four-year colleges and scholarships, but also provide information about two-year college and workforce training options. That reflects an increase in the number of students who are given the exam during a designated SAT day at school, with some districts requiring students take it. About 60% of students who take the SAT do so at school, Rodriguez said.

"We want to present students with a wider range of information and resources about their post-secondary options," she said.

Scores will be available in days, rather than weeks, she said. There have been cases through the years of sets of paper exams getting lost in the mail.

"The digital version, I thought, was a lot less stressful than the paper and pencil version. It felt a lot more familiar," said Natalia Cossio, 16, of Fairfax County, Virginia, who took part in a November pilot after first taking the PSAT on paper.

She said the digital format would solve some logistical issues she's seen, like students bringing mechani-

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cal pencils instead of the required No. 2 variety, or advanced calculators that are not allowed. The digital version includes a basic calculator for the math section.

The College Board said students without a personal or school-issued device will be provided one for test day.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 26, the 26th day of 2022. There are 339 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 26, 2020, the U.S. consulate in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus epidemic, said it would evacuate its personnel and some private citizens aboard a charter flight. Five cases of the new coronavirus were now confirmed in the United States, including new cases in California and Arizona; all involved people who had traveled to Wuhan.

On this date:

In 1861, Louisiana passed an Ordinance of Secession, becoming the sixth state to break free from the United States.

In 1911, the Richard Strauss opera "Der Rosenkavalier" (The Cavalier of the Rose) premiered in Dresden, Germany.

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Rocky Mountain National Park Act, which created America's 10th national park.

In 1962, the United States launched Ranger 3 to land scientific instruments on the moon. (The probe ended up missing its target by more than 22,000 miles.)

In 1992, Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, appearing with his wife, Hillary, on CBS' "60 Minutes," acknowledged "causing pain in my marriage," but said past problems were not relevant to the campaign.

In 1993, Vaclav Havel (VAHTS'-lahv HAH'-vel) was elected president of the newly formed Czech Republic.

In 1994, a scare occurred during a visit to Sydney, Australia, by Britain's Prince Charles as college student David Kang lunged at the prince, firing two blank shots from a starter's pistol. (Kang was later sentenced to 500 hours of community service.)

In 1998, President Bill Clinton forcefully denied having an affair with a former White House intern, telling reporters, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

In 2005, a U.S. Marine helicopter crashed in western Iraq, killing 30 Marines and a Navy medic aboard. A man parked his SUV on railroad tracks in Glendale, California, setting off a crash of two commuter trains that killed 11 people. (The SUV's driver, Juan Alvarez, was convicted of murder and sentenced to 11 consecutive life terms.)

In 2009, Nadya Suleman gave birth at Kaiser Permanente Bellflower Medical Center in California to six boys and two girls; criticism came after the public learned that the unemployed, single mother had gotten pregnant with the octuplets and six elder children through in vitro fertilization.

In 2016, the FBI arrested the leaders of an armed group that was occupying a national wildlife refuge in Oregon for more than three weeks during a traffic stop that left one man, Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, dead. Character actor Abe Vigoda, 94, died in Woodland Park, New Jersey.

In 2020, NBA legend Kobe Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter and seven others were killed when their helicopter plunged into a steep hillside in dense morning fog in Southern California; the former Lakers star was 41. Eighteen-year-old singer Billie Eilish made history at the Grammy Awards, becoming the youngest to win one of Grammy's top awards and the first to sweep all four in nearly 40 years.

Ten years ago: The Pentagon outlined a plan for slowing the growth of military spending, including cutting the size of the Army and Marine Corps, retiring older planes and trimming war costs. Capping three days of mourning, some 12,000 people — including Penn State students, fans and football stars — paid

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tribute to the late Joe Paterno in a campus memorial service that exposed a strong undercurrent of anger over his firing.

Five years ago: Tensions flared between President Donald Trump and Mexico, with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto (PAYN'-yuh nee-EH'-toh) scrapping a planned visit to Washington and the White House threatening a 20 percent tax on imports to pay for Trump's proposed wall along the southern border. Actor Mike Connors, 91, who starred as TV's hard-hitting private eye "Mannix," died in Los Angeles. Actor Barbara Hale, 94, who played steadfast secretary Della Street on "Perry Mason," died at her home in Sherman Oaks, California.

One year ago: The interim chief of the Capitol Police, in prepared testimony to lawmakers, apologized for failing to prepare for what became a violent insurrection on Jan. 6 despite warnings that white supremacists and far-right groups would target Congress. President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin held their first phone conversation as counterparts; Biden raised concerns about the arrest of opposition figure Alexei Navalny and other issues. The Biden administration said it was restoring relations with the Palestinians and renewing aid to Palestinian refugees, a reversal of the Trump administration's cutoff. The Justice Department rescinded a Trump-era memo that established a "zero tolerance" enforcement policy for migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, which resulted in thousands of family separations. The San Francisco school board voted to remove the names of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and others from public schools after officials deemed them unworthy of the honor. (The plan was later suspended.)

Today's Birthdays: Cartoonist Jules Feiffer is 93. Sportscaster-actor Bob Uecker is 87. Actor Scott Glenn is 83. Singer Jean Knight is 79. Activist Angela Davis is 78. Actor Richard Portnow is 75. Rock musician Corky Laing (Mountain) is 74. Actor David Strathairn (streh-THEHRN') is 73. Producer-director Mimi Leder is 70. Alt-country singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams is 69. Reggae musician Norman Hassan (UB40) is 64. Actor-comedian-talk show host Ellen DeGeneres is 64. Rock musician Charlie Gillingham (Counting Crows) is 62. Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky is 61. Musician Andrew Ridgeley is 59. R&B singer Jazzie B (Soul II Soul) is 59. Actor Paul Johansson is 58. Director Lenny Abrahamson is 56. Actor Bryan Callen is 55. Gospel singer Kirk Franklin is 52. Actor Nate Mooney is 50. Actor Jennifer Crystal is 49. Rock musician Chris Hesse (Hoobastank) is 48. Actor Matilda Szydagis is 48. Actor Gilles Marini (ZHEEL ma-REE'-nee) is 46. Gospel singer Tye Tribbett is 46. Retired NBA player Vince Carter is 45. Actor Sarah Rue is 44. Actor Colin O'Donoghue is 41.