

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### 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 (5:15 p.m.: Girls JV in new gym, Boys JV in Competition Gym, Girls Varsity in Competition Gym at 6:20 p.m. followed by Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Invitational in Groton

### Friday, Feb. 4

Wrestling triangular at Presho

### 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 1 p.m. followed by 8th grade, JV and Varsity).

### Monday, Feb. 7

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

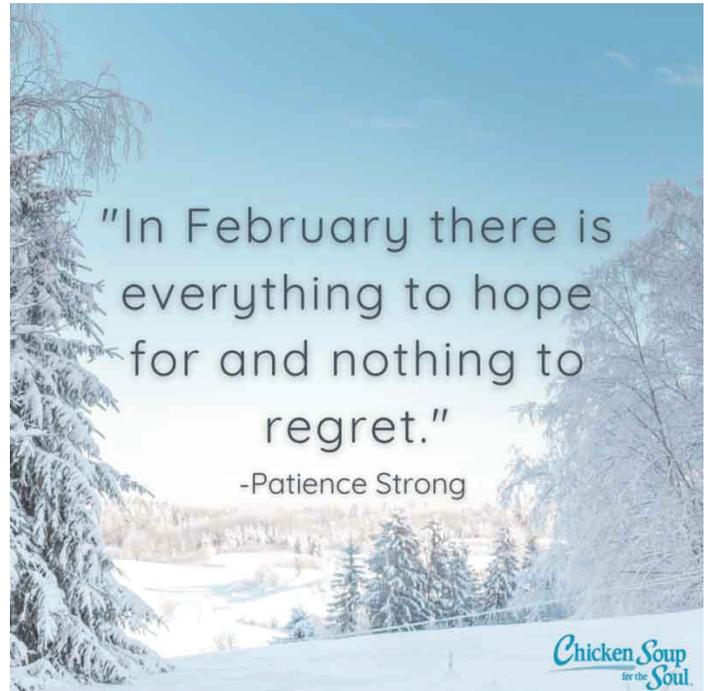
Girls Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then Varsity.

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.



### Wednesday, Feb. 9

LifeTouch picture re-take day at Elementary School

### 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

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

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

**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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## Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated January 31, 2022; 9:11 AM

**Decrease of four since  
last Friday**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														a	t
														f	a
														f	l
1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	5

Change

0 0 0 0 -1 0 -2 0 0 -1 +1 0 0 0 -1 -4

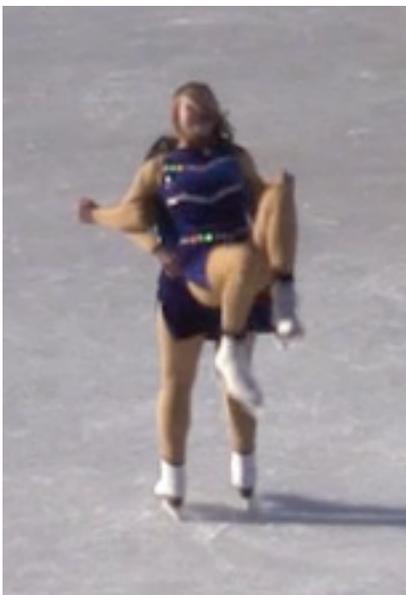
**GUN SHOW: Dakota Territory Gun Collectors Association  
ABERDEEN Show, Saturday, Feb. 5, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday,  
Feb. 6, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at THE DAKOTA EVENT CENTER.  
Laura Ennen 701-214-3388.**

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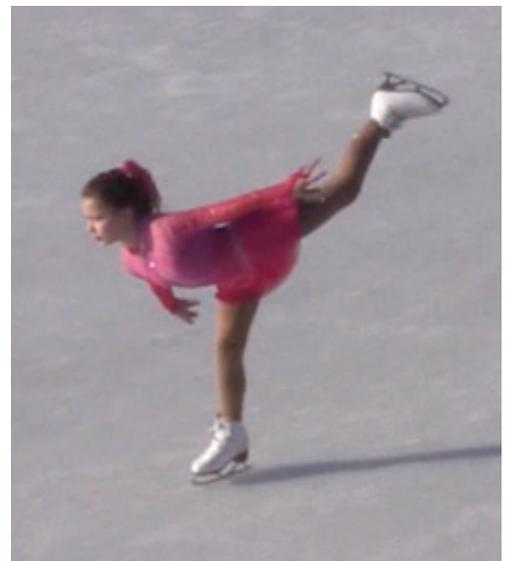


**Brooklyn Imrie gets a ride on the sleigh around the rink as the new Carnival of Silver Skates Queen.**



**Specialty Act:  
Avery Crank and  
Emerlee Jones  
"Unstoppable"**

**Guest Skater:  
Dasia Woertink,  
Watertown Fig-  
ure Skating Club  
"Blood, Sweat,  
and Tears"**



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**Specialty Act: 2021 Silver Skates Queen Alexis and  
"We Go Together"**



**12th grade  
"Good Riddance"  
Christina Zoellner, Julianna Kosel, Kennedy Anderson, Brooklyn Imrie**

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**Guest Skater: Kinslee Hruby, Watertown  
Figure Skating Club  
"New York, New York"**



**Kindergarten: Sophia Gilchrist, Laken  
Kurth, and Maryn Sombke  
"I Just Can't Wait to be King"  
Instructors: Julianna Kosel and Christina  
Zoellner**



**Joe Foertsch and Joel Guthmiller (far right), were recognized by the Carnival of Silver Skates committee for this work over the years in assisting in park the vehicles on the ice.**

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**7th grade: Avery Crank, Teagan Hanten, Addison Hoffman, Brenna Imrie, Emerlee Jones, McKenna Tietz, and Taryn Traphagen  
"These Boots are Made for Walking"**

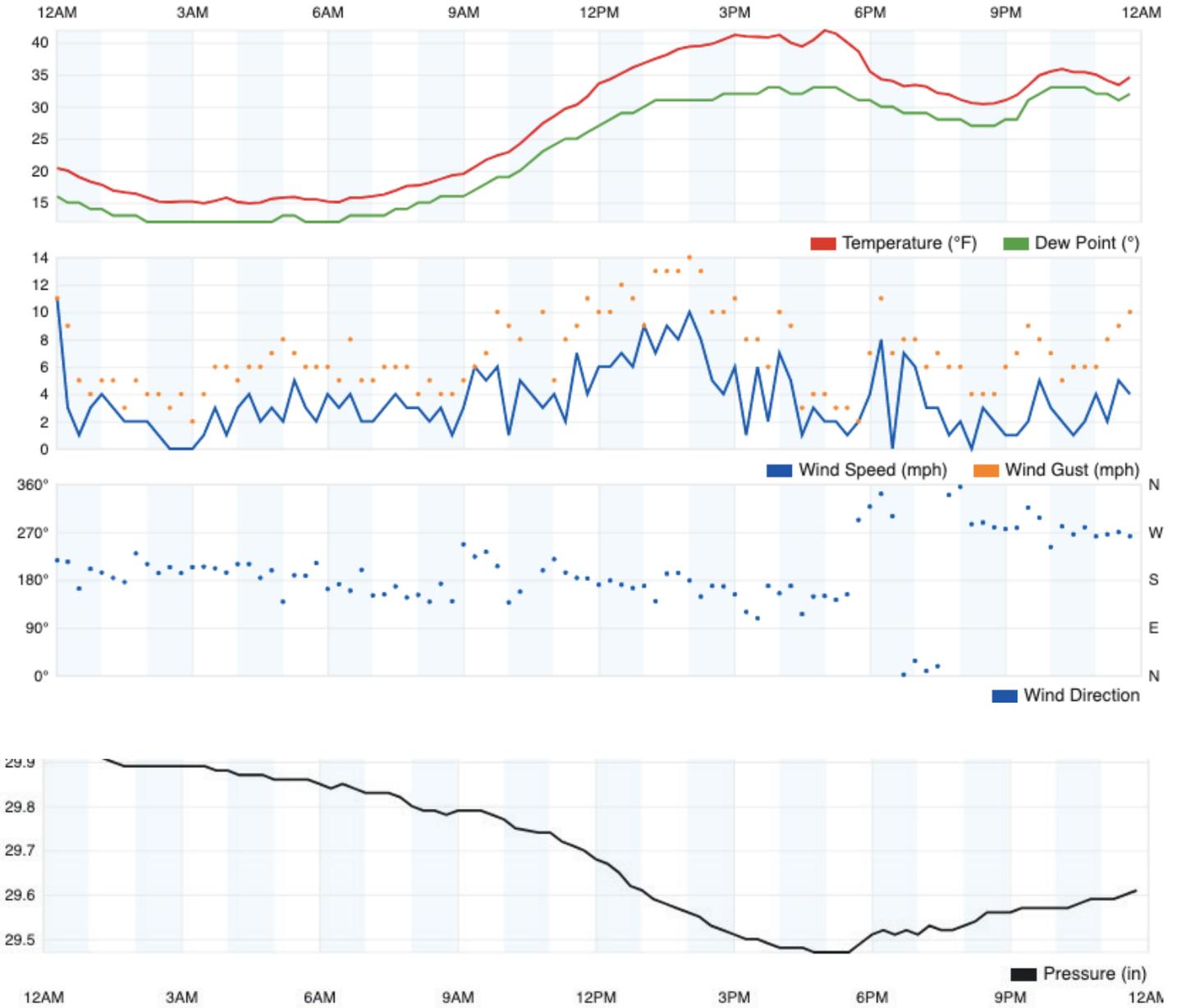


**8th and 9th grade: Mia Crank, Emma Davies, Rylee Dunker, and Emily Overacker  
Pontoon"**

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
Mostly Sunny and Blustery	Mostly Clear	Cold	Partly Cloudy	Cold
High: 15 °F ↓	Low: -11 °F	High: 2 °F	Low: -16 °F	High: 9 °F

## Wind Speeds will gradually fall...and so will Temps

### Max Wind Gust Forecast

### Temperature Forecast

	2/1 Tue						2/2 Wed				Maximum	2/1 Tue						2/2 Wed				Maximum
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am		6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	
<b>Aberdeen</b>	44	41	40	33	29	21	20	20	17	20	44	16	13	14	12	6	0	-5	-8	-11	-4	16
<b>Britton</b>	46	43	41	38	26	18	20	15	13	18	46	15	10	9	8	1	-5	-11	-15	-17	-10	15
<b>Eagle Butte</b>	44	37	31	30	22	21	20	20	20	21	44	13	14	18	18	16	9	4	1	-2	1	18
<b>Eureka</b>	47	40	40	35	25	21	20	20	17	21	47	13	10	11	11	5	-1	-4	-8	-10	-3	13
<b>Gettysburg</b>	45	37	36	31	22	21	18	18	16	21	45	13	12	17	18	15	6	2	-3	-5	0	18
<b>Kennebec</b>	38	35	33	26	23	21	21	17	15	17	38	20	20	25	25	19	12	8	4	1	6	25
<b>McIntosh</b>	46	40	36	31	24	21	18	20	20	23	46	9	8	12	13	10	4	0	-3	-3	-1	13
<b>Milbank</b>	43	40	39	32	25	21	17	16	13	14	43	21	14	13	11	5	0	-5	-9	-13	-6	21
<b>Miller</b>	39	37	35	29	22	18	18	17	15	17	39	18	18	23	23	15	7	3	-2	-5	1	23
<b>Mobridge</b>	45	36	32	29	22	20	16	18	17	21	45	15	13	19	19	13	6	1	-2	-4	0	19
<b>Murdo</b>	37	35	31	25	22	18	20	21	18	21	37	20	19	24	24	20	14	9	6	3	6	24
<b>Pierre</b>	38	31	31	26	22	16	16	15	14	16	38	20	20	25	25	21	14	8	4	1	6	25
<b>Redfield</b>	39	40	37	31	25	22	21	20	16	20	40	20	16	22	22	14	6	1	-4	-8	0	22
<b>Sisseton</b>	52	45	43	39	29	23	21	18	15	17	52	18	12	10	8	1	-2	-5	-9	-11	-6	18
<b>Watertown</b>	46	43	39	36	26	22	20	16	14	15	46	19	12	10	10	5	-1	-5	-9	-13	-6	19
<b>Wheaton</b>	44	43	39	36	26	22	17	17	13	16	44	16	11	9	6	0	-5	-9	-12	-16	-9	16

\*Table values in mph

\*Table values in °F

NWS Aberdeen, SD  
Updated: 2/1/2022 5:22 AM CST

Windy conditions will still be with some of us through the better part of today. We should begin to see a gradual improvement in the strong gusts through the afternoon hours. Another thing that will be falling will be the temperatures. Steady, if not slowly falling temperatures can be expected during the afternoon hours. Subzero overnight lows will be possible for most tonight with wind chill values falling to between 15 and 30 below zero by early Wednesday morning.

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## Today in Weather History

February 1, 1969: Across central and eastern South Dakota, February 1969 contained a variety of winter weather causing many difficulties. Glazing due to dense fog and drizzle periodically formed on utility lines creating numerous broken power lines. Strong winds caused widespread blowing and drifting snow resulting in many closed roads. Snowplows would open the streets, and often drifting snow would close the roads again. Frequent uses of pusher-type snowplows piled banks of snow 20 to 30 feet along the roads, and it became impractical to open routes with this type of snowplow. Several rotary snowplows were flown in from military airbases outside the state to open some of the roads in the eastern part of the state. Many school closings occurred during the month due to snow blocked roads.

February 1, 1989: Four to eight inches of snow fell across western and northern South Dakota. Winds of 25 mph and subzero temperature produced wind chills in the 50 to 80 below zero range. Several schools were closed across the area due to the dangerous wind chills. The storm continued into the 2nd.

1893 - Thunder and lightning accompanied sleet and snow at Saint Louis MO during the evening hours, even though the temperature was just 13 degrees above zero. (The Weather Channel)

1916: Seattle, Washington, was buried under 21.5 inches of snow, their most significant 24-hour snowfall. A total of 32.5 inches of wet snow accumulated over three days. The Seattle cathedral dome collapsed under the snow's weight.

1947: January 30th through February 8th, a great blizzard occurred in Saskatchewan, Canada. All highways into Regina were blocked. Railway officials declared the worst conditions in Canadian rail history. One train was buried in a snowdrift over a half-mile long and 36.7 feet deep.

1951: An ice and sleet storm began in late January and ended on February 1st rendered many roads impassable. Electricity and telephone service was disrupted.

1951 - The temperature at Taylor Park Dam plunged to 60 degrees below zero, a record for the state of Colorado. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1955: Seen first as a "well-defined cone-shaped funnel" over the Mississippi River, this F3 tornado cut a path from Commerce Landing to Clark in northeastern Mississippi. This tornado killed 20 and injured at least 141 individuals. Most of the deaths were in a plantation school. The following is from Thomas Grazulis, "Significant Tornadoes 1680-1991" book: "Despite the fact that a funnel was seen, that heavy objects were thrown long distances, and that the tornado was in a forecast box, the event was not officially called a tornado. A survey team state that since all debris was thrown in one direction, the event should not be listed as a tornado."

1985 - Snow, sleet and ice glazed southern Tennessee and northern sections of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The winter storm produced up to eleven inches of sleet and ice in Lauderdale County AL, one of the worst storms of record for the state. All streets in Florence AL were closed for the first time of record. (1st-2nd) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the Pacific Northwest produced wind gusts to 100 mph at Cape Blanco OR, and up to six inches of rain in the northern coastal mountain ranges. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thirty cities in the eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Richmond VA with a reading of 73 degrees. Thunderstorms in southern Louisiana deluged Basile with 12.34 inches of rain. Arctic cold gripped the north central U.S. Wolf Point MT reported a low of 32 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2011: One of the most significant events of the 2010-2011 winter season affected a widespread region from Texas to the Midwest and Northeast from February 1st to 3rd 2011. The system produced widespread heavy snow with blizzard conditions and significant freezing rain and sleet to other locations. Snowfall amounts of 10 to 20 inches were common from northeast Oklahoma to lower Michigan. The storm produced 20.2 inches at Chicago, the third heaviest snowfall in the city since their records began in 1886, along with a peak wind of 61 mph. Kansas City received just under 9 inches of snow. The high temp was 17 degrees.

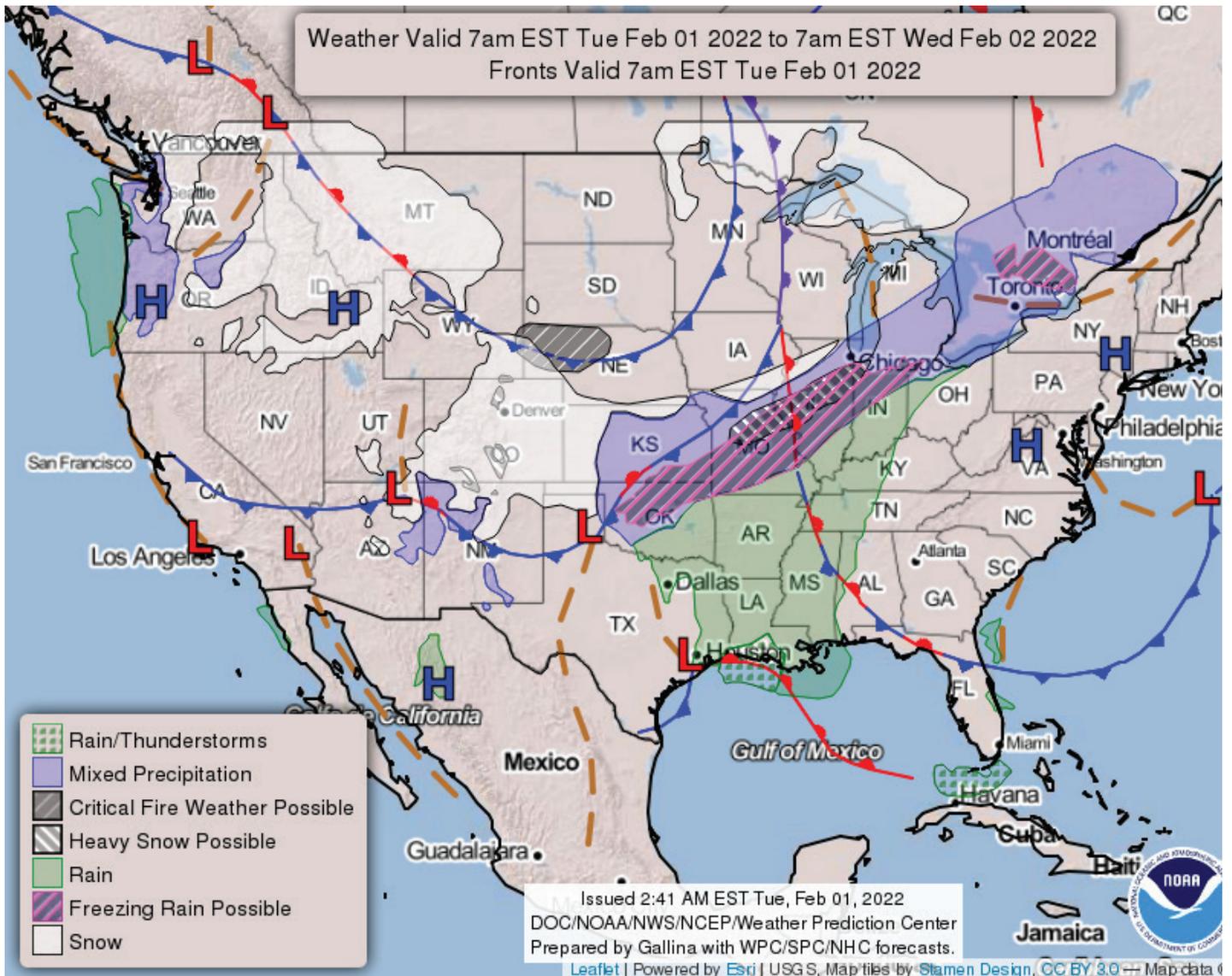
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 42 °F at 4:58 PM**  
**Low Temp: 15 °F at 4:13 AM**  
**Wind: 16 mph at 1:32 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 58 in 1931**  
**Record Low: -42 in 1893**  
**Average High: 25°F**  
**Average Low: 2°F**  
**Average Precip in Feb.: 0.02**  
**Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.57**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.59**  
**Sunset Tonight: 5:40:46 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:50:00 AM**



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## I DIDN'T REALLY MEAN IT

Marcie stood before her Dad looking at her favorite toy car. Suddenly she jumped up in his lap and said, "You know, Daddy, this is my favorite toy. But I want you to have it."

Surprised, he asked, "Why, I know that you love this little car. Why are you giving it to me?"

"Because I love you," was her reply.

A few moments later she climbed back into his lap and said, "Daddy, I want my car back. I guess I didn't love you as much as I thought I did," and took her car back.

Many Christians have the same attitude toward God. We give ourselves to Him and then realize that it's going to bring about changes in our lives that we did not realize. So, we take back our "gift."

In Psalm 118 we read of a "festal" procession with people going "up to the horns of the altar." The people in this procession are taking a sacrifice to God. This is not unusual because throughout the Bible people take many different sacrifices to God. In this verse, however, the people in the procession are required to take their "bough" in their hands - their sacrifice - and "bind" it to the altar. Once the sacrifice was bound to the altar, it could not be taken back!

Paul wrote, "Give your bodies to God and let them be a living sacrifice." The sacrifice he writes of in this verse is not for our sin but for our salvation. When we accept His salvation, He expects us to willingly "bind" ourselves to Him in loving service.

Prayer: Convict us, Lord, to become "willing" sacrifices and abandon ourselves in service to You forever. Only when we leave our ALL on the altar have we really given ourselves to you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: - With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. Psalm 118:27b

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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

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White ..... \$41.54/year
- Colored ..... \$74.55/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\* ..... \$21.30/year

\* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

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## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

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This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month ..... \$15.98
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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

10-15-51-61-69, Powerball: 14, Power Play: 3

(ten, fifteen, fifty-one, sixty-one, sixty-nine; Powerball: fourteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$113 million

### Scheierman lifts S. Dakota St. over North Dakota 70-64

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — Baylor Scheierman had 24 points as South Dakota State won its 11th consecutive game, beating North Dakota 70-64 on Monday night.

Charlie Easley had 13 points and eight rebounds for South Dakota State (20-4, 11-0 Summit League). Zeke Mayo added 12 points.

Reid Grant had 15 points for the Fighting Hawks (4-19, 0-10), whose losing streak stretched to 11 games. Bentiu Panoam added 13 points. Paul Bruns had 13 points and six rebounds.

The Jackrabbits improve to 2-0 against the Fighting Hawks for the season. South Dakota State defeated North Dakota 96-61 last Thursday.

### Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Chester 73, Colman-Egan 41

Corsica/Stickney 66, Bon Homme 37

DeSmet 62, Canistota 42

Gregory 69, Winner 60

Howard 72, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 23

Milbank 49, Ortonville, Minn. 23

Scotland 61, Freeman 44

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 65, Tiospa Zina Tribal 31

Baltic 39, Dell Rapids 35, OT

Centerville 52, Viborg-Hurley 49

Dupree 49, Bison 34

Howard 67, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 40

Langford 46, Waubay/Summit 36

Lyman 64, Colome 19

Milbank 67, Ortonville, Minn. 47

Mobridge-Pollock 50, Lemmon 37

Redfield 44, Britton-Hecla 37

Solen, N.D. 44, McLaughlin 38

Wilmot 32, Estelline/Hendricks 29

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

## SD impeachment committee subpoenas AG's staff, prosecutors

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee weighing impeachment charges against the state's attorney general moved Monday to answer lawmakers' remaining questions by issuing subpoenas for two key figures in the attorney general's office as well as the two prosecutors who charged him for his 2020 fatal car crash.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, the Republican leading the committee, said lawmakers would not meet again until late next month, but cast their latest actions as the last pieces to the House investigation. The committee has been tasked with recommending whether Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, a Republican first elected in 2018, should face impeachment charges for his conduct surrounding the crash. He struck and killed a man walking near the shoulder of a highway in September of 2020.

"We're basically just trying to wrap it up, touch all the bases and this is where we think that we still have questions," Gosch said.

After meeting in a closed-door meeting for over two hours, the House committee also moved to allow access to the crash investigation files to other House members and requested that law enforcement outside of South Dakota investigate a potentially-illegal telemarketing campaign that last week pressured them to bring impeachment charges.

The committee wants to hear testimony from Ravnsborg's chief of staff, Tim Bormann, who was with Ravnsborg the morning after the crash when he discovered the body of the man he killed. Ravnsborg first reported the night-time crash as a collision with an animal and has insisted he did not realize he killed 55-year-old Joseph Boever until discovering his body when he returned to the scene the next day.

The House committee also subpoenaed David Natvig, who directs the Division of Criminal Investigation under Ravnsborg, as well as the prosecutors who charged Ravnsborg with three misdemeanors, Hyde County deputy state's attorney Emily Sovell and Beadle County state's attorney Michael Moore.

Ravnsborg in August pleaded no contest to two of the misdemeanors in exchange for prosecutors dropping the third charge.

Gosch said the committee would publicly release unredacted parts of the crash investigation files before the committee issues its final report, but gave no timeline on when he would do that.

Meanwhile, lawmakers also want to find out who was behind a telemarketing campaign that last week tried to pressure them to move forward with impeachment, but they will hand that work off to criminal investigators. They asked that Ravnsborg recuse himself from the investigation and that it be handed to a law enforcement agency either run by the federal government or in another state.

"There's some serious implications," Gosch said, asserting that the calls lacked proper disclosures of who was funding them. "So state laws, federal laws that have been violated here. And if these are criminal charges, that's not really our purview."

Lawmakers' suspicions were piqued by a voicemail recording that Gosch said was left on a member of the committee's phone and picked up audio from a supervisor at the Ohio call center.

Angel Kane, who owns and operates the call center called Grand Solutions, Inc., can be heard on the recording saying, "The governor's actually involved in this so that's why it's more specific."

A spokesman for Kane, Jonathan Petrea, acknowledged that it was Kane's voice on the recording, but said that Gov. Kristi Noem did not hire the call center, adding that "No politician, no political party, no campaign was part of the funding of the operation."

He claimed Kane was using a motivational technique and pointed out that Kane had not used any pronouns in referring to the governor involved. But he declined to say who hired Kane's company, citing the privacy of his client.

Both Noem and her campaign manager have said they had no involvement in the telemarketing campaign.

Noem, a Republican, has followed the committee's work closely and sharply rebuked lawmakers who delved into questioning the work of the law enforcement agencies that investigated the crash.

She has said she is pushing for justice in the episode, which left criminal investigators doubting Ravensborg's account of the crash and Noem's Secretary of Public Safety publicly disagreeing with the prosecutors' decision not to file manslaughter charges. However, if Ravensborg leaves office, Noem would also get to name his replacement.

## Federal authorities confirm small plane crash in Black Hills

HOT SPRINGS, S.D. (AP) — Federal authorities said a small plane crashed Sunday evening in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The crash happened shortly after 6 p.m. east of the Hot Springs Municipal Airport. A Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman said the pilot was the only person aboard the single-engine plane, but no further details were provided.

Officials with the Fall River County Emergency Management Department did not immediately return a phone message seeking more information.

## US Rep. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota to seek 3rd term

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota announced Monday he is seeking reelection to a third term.

The 45-year-old Republican announced his run for the state's lone House seat in a statement that touted his conservative record and effectiveness on agriculture policy. He is facing a primary challenge from state lawmaker Rep. Taffy Howard, who is running to his political right. Democrats have not announced a candidate.

"I've kept my promises, and that's why I'm the right person to continue fighting for South Dakota in the U.S. House," Johnson said.

Johnson has over \$2 million in campaign funds at his disposal, while Howard has \$114,000 in cash on hand.

The congressman has frequently touted his work with a bipartisan group in the U.S. House known as the "Problem Solvers Caucus." At times, he's resisted former President Donald Trump's sway on the GOP, voting last year to certify the results of the 2020 election, as well as to keep Rep. Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, in GOP House leadership.

"I think my colleagues appreciate the fact that I'm a workhorse rather than a show horse," Johnson told The Associated Press, contrasting his political style with those he says have become partisan "bomb-throwers."

As his campaign rolled out, Johnson focused on issues that appeal to conservative voters, pointing out his opposition to Democratic proposals, votes to increase immigration enforcement at the U.S. border with Mexico and high ratings on conservative organizations' voting scorecards. He voted against President Biden's sweeping infrastructure bill that was signed into law in November.

Touting his record as a fiscal conservative, he said that he believes high levels of government spending have contributed to inflation.

But Johnson also made it clear that a primary challenge would not transform him into a flame-throwing politician on the campaign trail. Instead, he's aiming to engage young voters.

"They want elected officials to focus on solutions," he said. "They are tired of all the yelling and howling."

## SD House lawmakers advance ban on trans bathroom policies

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota bill that would ban transgender students from using school restrooms that match their gender identity cleared its first hurdle in the Legislature on Monday, receiving approval from a House committee.

The House State Affairs committee sent the bill to a vote on the House floor with support from seven

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GOP lawmakers and opposition from three Republicans and two Democrats. Bills that discriminate against transgender youth have in past years faced tougher opposition in the Senate, but that chamber already passed a separate bill this month that would keep trans women and girls from playing on school sports teams that align with their gender.

As the Republican-controlled Legislature has taken up a spate of bills aimed at transgender youth this year, LGBTQ advocates and organizations representing school districts have been trying to fend off proposals they say will only increase the bullying and alienation trans students face.

But many Republican lawmakers, especially in the House, have shown a refusal to accept trans students' gender identity, instead insisting that they should be assessed based on the biological sex on their birth certificate.

"Boys should use boys' bathroom and girls should use girls' bathrooms," said Republican Rep. Jon Hansen before voting to advance the bill. "This is obvious and should be non-controversial."

The hearing in the Legislature on trans students' access to bathrooms was a continuation of a school board debate in Vermillion after the district in November established a policy that allows students to use restrooms that correspond with their "consistently asserted gender."

For parents of trans students, such as Mike Phelan, the Vermillion policy came as a relief. He said it allowed his daughter to regularly use the bathroom at school. Under the previous arrangement, she had to find excuses to tell her friends why she was going to the school nurse's office, where she could use a single-occupancy restroom.

She tried to avoid using the restroom at all, eating and drinking little during the school day. By the time Phelan picked her up at school his daughter was angry, dehydrated and suffering from headaches, he told the committee.

"In early December our school board changed their policy and my daughter's school experience turned on a dime," Phelan said. "She is now excited to go to school in the morning. She eats and drinks normally and she is happy every day when I pick her up. In her words, 'It made me feel like I really belonged at school.'"

However, several students and parents from the Vermillion school district traveled to the Capitol to testify in support of the ban, saying they felt the new policy violated their privacy.

The Vermillion School District's final policy does not apply to locker rooms or overnight accommodations, but both lawmakers and students claimed they were worried about those situations. The bill would apply to locker rooms and sleeping accommodations.

"This is not an issue that affects their kids," Phelan said. "All of the actual data says that it is trans kids who suffer."

Organizations representing school boards also warned that the schools would run afoul of federal law if lawmakers enact the legislation. It would put them at risk of lawsuits and losing federal funds.

After former President Donald Trump scrapped a policy that allowed transgender students to choose their school bathrooms, President Joe Biden's administration has expanded its interpretation of federal sex protections to include transgender and gay students.

## Fertilizer plant fire prompts thousands of evacuations

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (AP) — An uncontrolled fire raging at a North Carolina fertilizer plant forced the evacuations of thousands of people as firefighters warned early Tuesday that chemicals at the site could cause a large explosion.

Authorities drove through neighborhoods and knocked on doors asking residents to leave within a one-mile radius (1.6 km) of the Weaver Fertilizer Plant on the northside of Winston-Salem, where the fire started Monday night.

Bright orange flames could be seen shooting into the sky along with thick plumes of smoke as lights from firetrucks and other first responder vehicles surrounded the fully engulfed building. The evacuation area included about 6,500 people in 2,500 homes, the Winston-Salem Fire Department said.

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"We want to make sure that right now we're evacuating everybody in this one-mile radius," Winston-Salem Battalion Chief Patrick Grubbs told reporters early Tuesday. "There is still a potential for explosion."

Firefighters had pulled back from the scene due to the danger of the uncontrolled fire, leaving behind an unmanned truck to pump water on part of the site, Grubbs said. Authorities were also flying drones over periodically to assess the fire.

About 90 firefighters and 150 responders from other agencies fire around 8:20 p.m. on Monday and fought it for about two hours, authorities said. But Winston-Salem Fire Chief Trey Mayo said fire crews were pulled back because of the large volume of ammonium nitrate on site. The fire department has said that firefighters could not flow enough volume of water to be reasonably certain that they could keep it cool enough to prevent a detonation.

Grubbs warned that there was going to be a lot of smoke and poor air quality. He said that it could take some time for the fire to come under control.

Wake Forest University released a statement asking some students in off-campus housing to voluntarily evacuate. The university also said it is working on long-term plans for those who do not have an alternative place to go.

The Forsyth Correctional Center, a minimum security prison with the capacity for about 250 inmates, also is in the evacuation area.

Winston-Salem officials said a shelter has been set up at the Winston-Salem Fairgrounds. People who have evacuated should plan to be away from their homes for up to 48 hours.

The fertilizer plant was closed when the fire started and no employees were inside, local media outlets reported.

Grubbs said officials from the Weaver Fertilizer Plant have made no comment about the fire. No injuries have been reported and the cause of the fire is still under investigation.

## On Lunar New Year, Chinese offer prayers at temples

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese people rang in the Lunar New Year on Tuesday despite pandemic restrictions, as small crowds gathered at temples to offer traditional prayers for the Year of the Tiger.

At the Lama Temple in Beijing, dozens of people bowed in prayer before the ornate west gate of the Tibetan Buddhist site that was shut because of pandemic restrictions.

Wang Ying, who works at an accounting firm, said praying outside the temple was better than burning incense at home.

"I think sincerity is more important than burning incense sticks," she said, after finishing her devotions.

Wang also said she is looking forward to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics on Friday. Marking the holiday, Beijing residents also took photos outside displays for the Games in the city's central Tiananmen Square.

China has doubled down on its pandemic restrictions ahead of the Olympics. The National Health Commission on Tuesday reported 27 new local cases in the latest 24-hour period, including two in Beijing and seven in neighboring Hebei province.

Participants in the Games are being isolated from the general public to try to prevent any cross-infection. They stay in walled-off hotels and can come and go only in special vehicles that take them to the venues and other Olympics facilities.

As of the end of Monday, 272 people had tested positive among more than 10,000 who had arrived for the Games, Beijing organizers said. Of the positive cases, 67 were athletes or team officials. Those who test positive are taken to a designated hotel or hospital.

Zhao Weidong, a spokesperson for the organizing committee, said that COVID-19 prevention remains a priority.

"Everything is under control," he said at a news conference. "Without a safe Games, there would be no Games."

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The Lunar New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, is the most important annual holiday in China. Each year is named after one of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac, with this year being the Year of the Tiger.

This year's holiday has seen fewer people return to their hometowns for traditional family gatherings. China's strict pandemic policies can lead to the swift lockdown of towns and cities, as well as suspension of travel wherever clusters of coronavirus cases are identified.

Liu Yuetong stayed in Beijing in case her hometown had a sudden outbreak and her return to work at an ad agency was delayed.

"This is the first time I celebrate the Spring Festival in Beijing alone," she said after her prayers outside the Lama Temple. "I feel a bit lonely. But thanks to technology, I had video calls with my family almost every day."

In Hong Kong, the city's largest Taoist temple, Wong Tai Sin Temple, was closed because of the pandemic, but people gathered to burn incense sticks and offer prayers at smaller temples that remained open.

"I hope that this year is like a tiger, very energetic," said Eric Lee, a visitor to the popular Man Mo Temple. "I hope the economy and everyone's career will be better in the Year of Tiger."

Hong Kong had a surge of coronavirus cases in January and city officials have urged the public to avoid large gatherings. Authorities have also closed schools and banned restaurant dining after 6 p.m.

The number of worshippers at the historic Longshan Temple in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan, was significantly lower as the pandemic enters its third year. Settlers from southern China built the temple in the eighteenth century to honor Buddha. It also has altars dedicated to Taoist deities.

## Whoopi Goldberg sorry for Holocaust not about race remark

ASSOCIATED PRESS undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — The actress Whoopi Goldberg has apologized for saying the Holocaust was not about race, comments that caused a backlash.

She made the initial comments on ABC's "The View" program on Monday morning. Her apology came in a tweet hours later.

"On today's show, I said the Holocaust 'is not about race, but about man's inhumanity to man.' I should have said it is about both. As Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League shared, 'The Holocaust was about the Nazi's systematic annihilation of the Jewish people — who they deemed to be an inferior race.' I stand corrected," Goldberg said.

"The Jewish people around the world have always had my support and that will never waiver. I'm sorry for the hurt I have caused. Written with my sincerest apologies, Whoopi Goldberg," she said.

The hosts on "The View" were discussing a Tennessee school board's banning of "Maus," a graphic novel about the Nazi death camps during World War Two. The board cited nudity and profanity as its reasons for banning the book, which has won several literary awards, including a Pulitzer Prize.

Goldberg said: "I'm surprised that's what made you uncomfortable, the fact that there was some nudity. I mean, it's about the Holocaust, the killing of six million people, but that didn't bother you? If you're going to do this, then let's be truthful about it. Because the Holocaust isn't about race. No, it's not about race."

Joy Behar said that the Nazis said Jews were a different race.

"But it's not about race. It's not. It's about man's inhumanity to other man," Goldberg replied.

Ana Navarro responded: "But it's about white supremacy. It's about going after Jews and Gypsies and Roma."

Goldberg said: "But these are two white groups of people."

Sara Haines pointed out that the Nazis didn't see Jewish people as white.

"But you're missing the point!" Goldberg said. "The minute you turn it into race, it goes down this alley. Let's talk about it for what it is. It's how people treat each other. It's a problem."

Greenblatt thanked Goldberg late Monday night.

"Thanks @WhoopiGoldberg for correcting your prior statement and acknowledging the #Holocaust for

what it was. As #antisemitism surges to historic levels, I hope we can work together to combat ignorance of that horrific crime and the hate that threatens all," he tweeted.

## Denmark scraps most COVID-19 restrictions

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Denmark on Tuesday became one of the first European Union countries to scrap most pandemic restrictions as the Scandinavian country no longer considers the COVID-19 outbreak "a socially critical disease."

The reason for that is that while the omicron variant is surging in Denmark, it's not placing a heavy burden on the health system and the country has a high vaccination rate, officials have said.

Denmark, a nation of 5.8 million, has in recent weeks seen more than 50,000 daily cases on average while the number of people in hospital intensive care units has dropped.

The head of the Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, told Danish broadcaster TV2 that his attention was on the number of people in ICUs, rather than on the number of infections. He said that number had "fallen and fallen and is incredibly low." He said 32 of the coronavirus patients are in ICUs. Several weeks ago, it was up at 80.

The most visible restriction disappearing is the wearing of face masks, which are no longer mandatory on public transportation, shops and for standing clients in restaurant indoor areas. Authorities only recommend mask use in hospitals, health care facilities and nursing homes.

Another restriction that no longer is required is the digital pass used to enter nightclubs, cafes, party buses and to be seated indoors in restaurants.

"I dare not say that it is a final goodbye to restrictions. We do not know what will happen to the fall. Whether there will be a new variant," Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told Danish radio.

Health authorities urged Danes to get tested regularly to keep an epidemic surveillance and if needed, "react quickly if necessary," as Health Minister Magnus Heunicke said last week.

The Danish government has warned that Denmark could see a rise in infections in the coming weeks and said that a fourth vaccination shot might be necessary.

The restrictions were originally introduced in July but were removed about 10 weeks later after a successful vaccination drive. They were reintroduced when infections soared.

In 2020, Denmark became one of the first European countries to close schools because of the pandemic and sent home all non-critical public employees. In neighboring Finland, COVID-19 restrictions will end this month with Prime Minister Sanna Marin saying her Social Democratic-led government would negotiate with the other parties in parliament the timetable for the removal of the measures.

On Monday, border controls at the internal borders between Finland and the other Schengen countries that form Europe's ID check-free travel area, ended. That restriction was introduced at the end of December to slow down the spread of the omicron variant. Travelers coming from outside the EU will continue to meet border controls at least until Feb. 14. February.

On Tuesday, Norwegian daily Dagbladet reported the first case of COVID-19 ever on the island of Utsira in the North Sea.

"We have avoided it for two years," mayor Marte Eide Klovning told Dagbladet, adding that the island's 188 inhabitants had been vaccinated. It was unclear how the virus had reached the island, sitting about 120 kilometers (75 miles) south of Bergen, Norway's second-largest city.

## Violence, protests mark anniversary of Myanmar army rule

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — A nationwide strike in Myanmar on Tuesday marked the one-year anniversary of the army's seizure of power, as sporadic protests and violence across the country raised further international concern over the ongoing struggle for power.

Photos and video on social media showed that a countrywide "silent strike" had emptied out streets in

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Myanmar's largest city of Yangon and other towns as people stayed home and businesses shut their doors in a show of opposition to army rule.

Clashes and violence were reported as well, as the country faces an insurgency that some U.N. experts now characterize as a civil war.

Local media said an explosion killed at least two people and injured dozens at a pro-military rally in a town on the eastern border with Thailand. The cause of the blast was not immediately clear.

The military's takeover on Feb. 1, 2021, ousted the elected government of Aung Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party was about to begin a second term in office after winning a landslide victory in the previous year's November election.

Widespread nonviolent demonstrations followed the army's takeover, but armed resistance arose after protests were put down with lethal force. About 1,500 civilians have been killed but the government has been unable to suppress the opposition.

The anniversary has also attracted international attention, especially from the United States and Western nations critical of the military takeover.

President Joe Biden in a statement called for the military to reverse its actions, free former leader San Suu Kyi and other detainees, and return Myanmar on a path to democracy.

The U.S. on Monday imposed new sanctions on Myanmar officials, adding to those already applied to top military officers. The measures freeze any assets the listed officials may have in U.S. jurisdictions and bar Americans from doing business with them. Britain and Canada announced similar measures.

A statement from the office of U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted "an intensification in violence, a deepening of the human rights and humanitarian crises and a rapid rise of poverty in Myanmar," which it said required an urgent response.

People in Myanmar rushed before the start of Tuesday's strike to buy essentials, and in Yangon appeared to have done their shopping on Monday.

Pro-democracy flash mob marches were held in several places before the start of the strike in the early morning hours, when clashes with police and soldiers are less likely.

Local media reported ongoing violence on Monday, with at least six bombings believed to have been carried out by resistance forces in Yangon.

Another bombing took place early Tuesday morning at a police station in Myitkyina in northern Kachin state, where a seven year-old boy living nearby was killed by a stray bullet when police shot at a car fleeing the scene, reported The 74 Media, a local online news outlet. Other accounts of the incident, with photos of the boy's simple wooden home and what appeared to be a blood-stained pillow, circulated on social media.

Opposition militants carry out daily guerrilla actions, while the military engages in larger-scale assaults in rural areas, including air strikes, which are blamed for many civilian casualties.

Despite tight security in cities including Yangon, Mandalay and Sagaing, young protesters including Buddhist monks held spirited but peaceful protests at dawn, carrying banners and chanting anti-military slogans.

Many also held up three fingers, the resistance salute adopted from "the Hunger Games" movie that has also been used by pro-democracy demonstrators in neighboring Thailand.

Authorities had threatened shopkeepers with arrest if they closed for the opposition's strike, but those that were open Tuesday appeared to have few if any customers.

Since last week, the government had issued official warnings in state-run media that anyone taking part in the strike could be prosecuted, and face imprisonment and the confiscation of their property.

Dozens of business owners who had announced they planned to be closed were arrested, according to reports in the state-run newspaper Myanma Alinn Daily.

The military-installed government initiated other measures to try to undercut the strike. In Yangon and Mandalay, city administrators scheduled special events, including a cycling contest, to try to draw crowds. City workers in Yangon were told to attend during strike hours, according to leaked documents posted on social media.

Several pro-military demonstrations, widely believed to have been organized by the authorities, were

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also held.

In Tachileik, a border town in Shan state in eastern Myanmar, an explosion at a pro-government rally killed 2 people and injured at least 37 others — including six critically wounded, according to a reporter with the online local Tachileik News Agency.

The reporter, who declined to give his name because of the political sensitivity of such news, told The Associated Press in a text message that most of the marchers were ex-soldiers or villagers brought in for the demonstration.

No one has claimed responsibility for the blast, which was also reported by other news outlets.

Leaders of the opposing sides earlier broadcast speeches to mark the anniversary of the army's takeover.

Duwa Lashi La, acting president of the opposition's National Unity Government, vowed that his group will carry on with the people's "revolution" against military rule. The NUG, established by elected lawmakers, considers itself the country's legitimate administrative body and has won the loyalty of many citizens. The military has branded it a "terrorist" organization.

Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, leader of the military-installed government, delivered an hourlong speech where he pledged a "genuine and disciplined multiparty democratic system," calling for cooperation "so as to achieve a better future for the country and people."

Myanmar's military said it seized power because there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 polls — an allegation that independent election observers have said they've seen no serious evidence for.

## Ukraine-Russia crisis: What to know about rising fear of war

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A series of high level talks are in the works on Tuesday to avert the threat of war as Russian troops mass by the tens of thousands on the borders of Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to make an appearance with the Hungarian prime minister, while British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is taking a break from his troubles at home for a meeting in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Kremlin also announced Putin's in-person meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron "in the foreseeable future."

### CROSSED DIPLOMATIC MESSAGING

Russia denies it has sent a response to the U.S. proposal aimed at deescalating the Ukraine crisis.

Multiple Biden administration officials said that the Russian government had provided a written response to the U.S. proposals, but Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko on Tuesday told Russia's state RIA Novosti news agency that this was "not true."

The agency also cited an unnamed senior diplomat in the Russian Foreign Ministry as saying that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent a message to his Western colleagues, including U.S. State Secretary Antony Blinken about "the principle of indivisibility of security," but it wasn't a response to Washington's proposals.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Tuesday that there has been "confusion" — Russia's response to the U.S. proposals is still in the works, and what was sent "were other considerations, on a somewhat different issue."

Lavrov and Blinken are scheduled to speak Tuesday.

— Daria Litvinova

### WHAT WOULD A UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE LOOK LIKE?

The eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv is divided between people who are enthusiastically volunteering to join a civil resistance to a potential Russian invasion and those who just want to live their lives.

Which side wins out in Kharkiv, which is Ukraine's second largest city and is just 40 kilometers (25 miles) from where Russian troops are massing, could well determine the fate of the country.

A guerrilla war fought by dentists, coaches and housewives defending a hometown of a thousand basement shelters would be a nightmare for Russian military planners, according to both analysts and U.S. intelligence officials. And that's exactly what many people in Kharkiv — and across Ukraine — say they're

planning.

"Both our generation and our children are ready to defend themselves. This will not be an easy war," said Maryna Tseluiko, a 40-year-old baker who signed up as a reservist with her 18-year-old daughter in Kyiv.

— Mystyslav Chernov and Lori Hinnant

## UKRAINE SECURITY CHIEF WARNS AGAINST INTERNAL UNREST

Ukraine's security chief said Russian forces massed on the border haven't made the kind of preparations that signal an imminent invasion, and he warned that sowing panic could lead to internal unrest that would benefit Moscow.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, told The Associated Press that about 120,000 Russian troops are concentrated near Ukraine and Moscow, but said an imminent invasion would require massive preparations that would be easily spotted.

"We can't allow panic in the country," Danilov told the AP. "It's very difficult for us to maintain control over the economic situation when all the media keep saying that the war will start tomorrow. Panic is a sister of defeat."

He said Russian President Vladimir Putin hopes to achieve his goal of destroying Ukraine through internal destabilization even without an invasion.

## Boris Johnson wins breathing space from 'partygate' woes

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Caught partying during a pandemic, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson bought himself some breathing space with an apology and a promise to change. But his troubles are far from over.

Johnson was battling to rally a rancorous Conservative Party on Tuesday after an inquiry slammed failures at the top that led to Downing Street staff holding boozy parties while the country was in lockdown.

He told lawmakers in Parliament "I get it, and I will fix it," promising to overhaul the way his office runs after senior civil servant Sue Gray found in her partial report that "failures of leadership and judgment" allowed events to occur that "should not have been allowed to take place."

Johnson addressed scores of Conservative legislators behind closed doors on Monday night, assuring them he took criticisms seriously and promising to get a tighter grip on a Downing Street operation that Gray found was marked by excessive drinking and dysfunctional dynamics.

Johnson was rallying his Cabinet at its weekly meeting on Tuesday before flying to Kyiv for talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy over the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab defended Johnson on Tuesday, saying: "He believes he acted in good faith on the advice he had at all times."

Johnson's grip on power has been shaken by revelations that his staff held "bring your own booze" office parties, birthday celebrations and "wine time Fridays" at Downing Street at times in 2020 and 2021 when Britons were barred from socializing to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

There could be worse to come. Gray only released her findings on four of 16 events being probed, because police are investigating the other dozen — including an alleged ABBA-themed party in the prime minister's private Downing Street apartment. Gray is expected to produce a full report once the police investigation is finished. The government initially declined to promise that report would be published in full, but agreed to do so late Monday after coming under intense pressure.

For now, many Conservatives are biding their time, sticking by the leader who won them an 80-seat parliamentary majority in 2019.

The party has a history of ousting leaders once they become liabilities, and Johnson could yet face a no-confidence vote from his own side if the police or Gray produce more damning evidence. Under party rules, such a vote is triggered if 15% of party lawmakers — currently 54 people — write letters calling for one.

Some Tories felt that, despite promising to change, Johnson had showed a lack of contrition and a failure to understand the anger many voters feel at the "partygate" revelations.

Former Conservative leader William Hague said Johnson had done "the minimum in responding to the

report rather than (going) further in his apology and his proposals.”

“Instead of reinforcing the momentum in his favour, he quite possibly stalled it,” Hague wrote in The Times of London. “If I were him, I would be very worried about the number of his own MPs who asked unhelpful questions at the end of his statement.”

In the House of Commons on Monday, one Conservative lawmaker, who said that he obeyed lockdown rules during the funeral of his grandmother, asked whether the prime minister “thinks I’m a fool.” Former Prime Minister Theresa May accused Johnson and his staff of thinking the rules didn’t apply to them.

Former Cabinet minister Andrew Mitchell, who withdrew his support from Johnson on Monday, said the crisis was corroding the party like “battery acid.”

“I think this is a crisis that is not going to go away and is doing very great damage to the party,” he told the BBC.

## Amnesty joins rights groups in accusing Israel of apartheid

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Amnesty International said Tuesday that Israel has maintained “a system of oppression and domination” over the Palestinians going all the way back to its establishment in 1948, one that meets the international definition of apartheid.

With the release of a 278-page report compiled over a period of four years, the London-based rights group joins Human Rights Watch and the Israeli rights group B’Tselem in accusing Israel of apartheid — both within its borders and in the occupied territories.

Their findings are part of a growing international movement to redefine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle for equal rights rather than a territorial dispute. Those efforts have gained strength in the decade since the peace process ground to a halt, as Israel has consolidated its control over the occupied territories and soured on the idea of a Palestinian state.

Israel rejects any allegation of apartheid, saying its own Arab citizens enjoy equal rights. It granted limited autonomy to the Palestinian Authority at the height of the peace process in the 1990s and withdrew its soldiers and settlers from Gaza in 2005.

But Amnesty and the other groups say the very fragmentation of the territories in which Palestinians live is part of an overall regime of control designed to maintain Jewish hegemony from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

They point to discriminatory policies within Israel and in annexed east Jerusalem, Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip, which has been ruled by the Hamas militant group since 2007, and its de facto annexation of the West Bank, where it exerts overall control and is actively building and expanding Jewish settlements that most of the international community considers illegal.

Palestinians have accused Israel of apartheid for decades. The Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank and cooperates with Israel on security, welcomed the report.

Amnesty traces such policies back to the establishment of Israel in 1948. Around 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled during the Arab-Israeli war surrounding Israel’s creation. They accounted for some 80% of the Palestinian population in what is now Israel. Israel barred the refugees from returning in order to maintain its Jewish majority.

The Palestinians remaining inside Israel lived under military rule until shortly before the 1967 Mideast war, when Israel captured east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, territories the Palestinians want for their future state.

Today, Palestinians inside Israel have citizenship, including the right to vote, and some have reached the upper echelons of business, law, medicine and entertainment. But overall, they face widespread discrimination in areas like the job and housing markets. Palestinians in the West Bank live under Israeli military rule, and those in Hamas-ruled Gaza also face a crippling Israeli and Egyptian blockade.

Palestinians make up about 20% of Israel’s 9.4 million population. But the Jewish and Arab populations are roughly equal when including the West Bank and Gaza.

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"Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has pursued a policy of establishing and maintaining a Jewish demographic hegemony and maximizing its control over land to benefit Jewish Israelis while restricting the rights of Palestinians and preventing Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes," Amnesty said. "Israel extended this policy to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which it has occupied ever since."

Israel dismissed the previous reports as biased, but has adopted a far more adversarial stance toward Amnesty, accusing it of antisemitism and of delegitimizing Israel's very existence even before the report was published.

"Its extremist language and distortion of historical context were designed to demonize Israel and pour fuel onto the fire of antisemitism," the Foreign Ministry said Monday.

Agnes Callamard, the secretary general of Amnesty, rejected those accusations as "baseless attacks" and "bare-faced lies." She said Amnesty recognizes the state of Israel and denounces antisemitism, and that accusations to the contrary are "nothing more than a desperate attempt to evade scrutiny (and) divert attention from our findings."

None of the reports compared Israel to apartheid South Africa, where a system based on white supremacy and racial segregation was in place from 1948 until 1994. Instead, they evaluated Israel's policies based on international conventions like the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. It defines apartheid as "an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group."

The ICC is already investigating potential war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants in recent years. After last year's Gaza war, the U.N. Human Rights Council set up a permanent commission of inquiry to investigate abuses against Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, including "systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identity."

Such a commission is the most intrusive type of investigative body that the council can create, and for the first time, this one was given an "ongoing" or permanent mandate.

Israel has accused both the ICC and the U.N. rights body of being biased against it and of singling it out while other countries commit far worse violations.

Yuval Shany, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and a member of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Faculty of Law, said it's "highly unlikely" the ICC would pursue apartheid allegations given the complexities involved.

He said the apartheid claim is "extreme and quite unfounded" within Israel, despite there being discrimination. The situation in the territories "is much more complicated."

"There you do have elements which could qualify as discrimination, segregation and oppression, given the length of the occupation," he said. But "it is difficult to distinguish between questions that have to do with security policy, with competing national claims, and what is a racist agenda."

Using the language of apartheid is "a bridge too far," he said.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid told reporters last month that he expects intensified efforts this year to brand Israel as an apartheid state that could lead to it being banned from sporting or cultural events. He said that reviving a political process with the Palestinians would help to combat those efforts.

The peace process ground to a halt more than a decade ago, and Israel's current prime minister, Naftali Bennett, is opposed to Palestinian statehood. He heads an unwieldy coalition that includes more moderate members like Lapid and even a small Arab party.

In part because of its internal divisions, the government has ruled out any major initiatives to resolve the conflict. But several top officials, including Lapid and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, have met with Palestinian leaders with the aim of boosting the Palestinian economy and laying the groundwork for negotiations in the future.

## Pressure on Biles, Summer Olympians resonated with Shiffrin

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

Alpine skiing superstar Mikaela Shiffrin was paying attention when gymnastics superstar Simone Biles

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opened up about being burdened by “the weight of the world” and sat out a string of finals at the Tokyo Olympics six months ago.

Shiffrin was listening, too, when swimming superstar Caeleb Dressel revealed, after finishing first in five races at the Summer Games, how “terrifying” it was to confront “so much pressure in one moment; your whole life boils down to a moment.”

Observed Shiffrin: “He won all of the gold medals that were in Tokyo and, like, STILL felt that way.”

Empathizing with other athletes’ frank conversations about mental health got the 26-year-old from Colorado thinking about what awaits her at the Beijing Olympics, where the first of what could be five individual races for Shiffrin is next Monday’s giant slalom, an event she won at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

There’s the physical aspect of what she’ll need to do on the slopes. What she’ll need to do before competing to prepare. What she’ll need to do afterward to recover. And then there’s the psychological side of it all, a lot of which comes down to absorbing or deflecting the anxiety and stress that derive from expectations emanating from everywhere for someone successful enough to own three Olympic medals, three World Cup overall titles and six world championship golds.

“Everybody expects, every time she steps in the start gate — no matter the event, no matter the preparation, no matter anything — that she’s going to win the race. And that’s an unreal expectation. She’s dealt with that her entire career, to a certain extent, but obviously, more recently, in the last few years that she has shown dominance,” said Mike Day, Shiffrin’s main coach with the U.S. ski team.

“It’s something, clearly, we need to be aware of. It’s a lot of pressure to bear, being the face of the Olympics or the face of a nation during an international event like this,” Day said. “We are trying, and have always tried, to provide a consistent atmosphere that’s comfortable for her and something that she knows everybody in that circle has her back and will take care of her when needed. And that’s, you know, more or less all the time.”

In a video interview with The Associated Press, Shiffrin discussed what she calls “pressure-adders.”

These can be situations or what she reads or hears via traditional media and social media. There are also the people she divides into two categories: One “bubble,” to use her word, is comprised of complete strangers (“Whether somebody is saying, ‘I hope you crash!’ or they’re saying, ‘Please win!’”), and the other includes Shiffrin herself, along with those closest to her: coaches, U.S. teammates, friends, family.

Those in the latter group “love to watch it when I ski well. It’s very exciting when I win. So you know that there’s going to be some level of disappointment if those things don’t play out in the ideal way,” Shiffrin told the AP. “And then you add, on top of that, (this is) the Olympics and this one moment in your athletic career that is ‘supposed’ to go right, because you’ve been working your whole life. ... And the chances of that happening are so low.”

Her mother, Eileen, who also serves as a coach, sees up-close what Mikaela goes through as they travel the ski circuit together.

“I have not been the perfect ‘role model-parent-coach,’ and I am still trying to find the balance. I could sometimes lose sight of the most important thing — Mikaela’s mental and physical well-being and happiness — in the middle of the chaos of a season, when it seemed that the most important thing was just getting the job done,” Eileen wrote in an email to the AP. “It has taken a blowup per season for us both to re-evaluate what we are doing. At those times, I do think it’s important that I am her mom, because that’s what makes me realize I have been pushing too hard and she is not thriving under it, so we need to reset and let her be happy.”

Awareness about, and concern for, mental health is still relatively new in elite sports.

The world is only just starting to learn about the sorts of concerns the people they cheer for, or against, deal with and how widespread such matters might be.

“What I always say is that we are athletes, not machines. So, it’s OK to make mistakes. We all have our weaknesses. We all get uncomfortable at times. Make errors. Have bad days,” said Marta Bassino, a 25-year-old from Italy who won the 2021 World Cup giant slalom title. “We’re not robots. We’re human beings, when you get right down to it. And so at major events, where the pressure and expectations are

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high, there's a lot of tension."

River Radamus, a ski racer from Colorado who turns 24 during these Olympics, described the phenomenon this way: "The pressure is always there, and you live with it, and you let it drive you. But also, you can't let it dominate you, can't let it take over your mentality."

This is how Shiffrin thinks some folks view certain participants at the Olympics: "It has to be gold or else that's a huge disappointment."

For Biles, Shiffrin realized, "It even went a step beyond that. It wouldn't have been a 'disappointment;' people just didn't even consider it a possibility. And what I know from that kind of pressure is: It is not easy to win. Ever."

Wrap all of it up, she continued, and the Games themselves are "not really an enjoyable process overall."

Yes, Shiffrin acknowledged, there are wonderful snippets. Memories to cherish for a lifetime. And, yes, those make everything "worth it."

"But it's not like rainbows and sunshine and butterflies and everything that people sort of say," Shiffrin said. "They're like, 'Wow, that looks like it was so much fun!' And you're like, 'Well, it was fun to cross through the finish line and, in the next five seconds, see the green light (signaling the fastest time) and comprehend that. That was a fun thing.' And the rest of the day — the whole rest of the day — was really, really pretty stressful and uncomfortable."

## Israel punishes officers in death of Palestinian-American

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military said Tuesday it would reprimand a senior officer and remove two others from leadership roles over the death of a 78-year-old Palestinian who was dragged from a car, bound and blindfolded after being stopped at a checkpoint.

It said the soldiers believed Omar Asaad, who has U.S. citizenship, was asleep when they cut his zip-ties and left him face-down in an abandoned building where he had been detained with three other Palestinians last month. The other detainees said they did not know he was there until after the army left.

It's unclear when exactly Asaad died. He was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead after the other detainees found him unconscious.

"The investigation concluded that the incident was a grave and unfortunate event, resulting from a moral failure and poor decision-making on the part of the soldiers," the military said in a statement. A separate criminal investigation by the military police is still underway.

Asaad had extended family living in the United States. The State Department had expressed concern over his death and called for an investigation. Two members of Wisconsin's congressional delegation called on the Biden administration to investigate.

The Israeli military says it thoroughly investigates such incidents. But rights groups say Israel rarely holds soldiers accountable for the deaths of Palestinians. Even in the most shocking cases — and those captured on video — soldiers often get relatively light sentences. Palestinians say they suffer systematic mistreatment living under military occupation.

A Palestinian autopsy said Asaad died of a heart attack "caused by psychological tension due to the external violence he was exposed to." It said he suffered from underlying health conditions but also found bruises on his head, redness on his wrists from being bound, and bleeding in his eyelids from being tightly blindfolded.

Asaad was stopped at around 3 a.m. on Jan. 12 at a temporary checkpoint in his home village of Jiljiliya, in the occupied West Bank. The military said he did not have any form of ID and "refused to cooperate with the security check." Its investigation found there was no use of violence "apart from when (Asaad) was apprehended after refusing to cooperate."

It said the soldiers "did not identify signs of distress" when they released the detainees a half-hour later. They "assumed that (Asaad) was asleep and did not try to wake him."

The military said the commander of the battalion will be reprimanded and that the platoon commander

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and company commander will both be removed from their positions and barred from commanding roles for two years.

A cousin of Asaad who lives in the West Bank said the army's response was "totally unacceptable" but that there was nothing the family could do unless Asaad's relatives in the U.S. take further action. The cousin asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

Israeli human rights group B'Tselem said the army's statement was "adorned with empty words" and that the soldiers involved received "the faintest of rebukes." It criticized senior Israeli commanders for "leading a regime of Jewish supremacy, one in which the human life of Palestinians has no value."

Asaad was born in Jiljilya but spent about 40 years in the United States. He became a U.S. citizen before he returned to his home village in 2009 to retire with his wife, Nazmia, his family in the U.S. told The Associated Press. They spoke before the military released its findings.

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinian Authority administers parts of the territory, but its 2.5 million residents live under Israeli military rule. Israeli soldiers often carry out nighttime raids, which they say are necessary for arresting Palestinian militants, and set up temporary checkpoints where Palestinians are stopped and searched.

Asaad's nephew, Assad Assad, said his uncle and aunt left Jiljilya for Chicago in 1969 in hopes of finding better work. They moved to Milwaukee in 1974 and prospered, opening convenience stores and a restaurant, he said. Their last name is spelled different ways in English.

They were among dozens of Jiljilya residents who have returned to the village over the years to build retirement homes, Assad Assad said.

"They built mini-castles to retire in," he said. "Very quiet, all you see is olive trees. At night, because we're high in the mountains, you smell the orchards of oranges."

Omar's nephew and his son, Hane Assad, both described him as a philanthropist who was the life of the party. Hane Assad told the AP his father would often hand out money to the poor.

"He just loved everybody, no matter what race you were, what culture you came from," he said. "He just saw you as a human being."

His favorite dish was maqluba, a mix of rice and meat — and he loved playing cards, Assad Assad said. He was coming home from playing cards with a cousin when the soldiers stopped him, he said.

Hane Assad said his mother and father were set to visit him at his home in Chesapeake, Virginia, before his father died. Assad said his father was too old and weak to fight anyone, let alone a group of soldiers.

"He was very weak," Hane Assad said. "He walked with a cane. It takes him five minutes to get to the car, the way he walks. He doesn't have the power of 30 soldiers ... The military said 'we left and he was fine.' It doesn't make sense."

Assad said he's always afraid when he returns to Jiljilya because the Israelis who operate the checkpoints are rude and disrespectful. He said he was once detained for four hours on the way to his grandmother's funeral. The troops laugh at his American citizenship, he said.

"Every time we got stopped Dad would say 'whatever they ask for, give it to them. Just be calm.' Plenty of times we got pulled over and I never saw him fight," Hane Assad said. "I can't believe they did that to my dad. Almost an 80-year-old man. All the soldiers there couldn't handle him? This is uncalled for. You don't treat no elderly person like that."

## Taliban raised on war bring a heavy hand to security role

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — As they headed home at night from a wedding, everyone in the car went quiet when they approached the checkpoint in Kabul manned by two Taliban with automatic rifles.

One of the fighters shone a light into the car. Fatima Abdullahi was in the backseat, her two children perched on her lap, squeezed between her younger sister Zainab and a work colleague. The fighter waved them through.

Seconds later, two shots rang out. Zainab slumped against her sister. Abdullahi screamed, pleading with

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her to wake up. Zainab, 25, was dead.

"I took her face in my hands but she didn't move. Then I saw behind her there was blood, and she had been shot," Abdullahi recounted to The Associated Press.

Taliban officials say the Jan. 13 shooting was a mix-up, with one guard not realizing the other had given the car the go ahead to leave. Both guards have been arrested, and the Taliban administration apologized for the killings, going to the home of Zainab's parents, promising them justice and giving them 600,000 afghanis (\$5,825).

But Zainab's death highlights one dilemma facing Afghanistan's new rulers as they move from waging an insurgency to governing. The Taliban are trying to keep discipline over thousands of young fighters who are bringing heavy-handed methods of war into their new roles as security forces. Those young men know only war, most have no schooling and cannot read or write. Their only skill is fighting; their weapons are as familiar to them as their mobile telephones.

In the urbanized capital of Kabul, many people are afraid of them. Five months after sweeping to power, Taliban can still be seen packed into the back of pickup trucks, their weapons protruding skyward, roaming the Kabul streets. The numbers are fewer than when they first took the city, but they are still highly visible.

Demobilizing the fighters is difficult since they have few alternatives. "Too many fighters lack the education and training to join civilian life, and even those that do have the skills can't find jobs, due to the economic crisis," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center.

At the family's home in the minority Shiite-dominated west Kabul, Zainab's mother Mariam says she cries most days and finds herself staring at the door, expecting Zainab to return.

Zainab was to be married in two months. Even as the Taliban restricted women working, she continued working as an auditor for a local charity, where her sister Fatima also worked.

"She was my last child, adorable. They could have killed me, not my Zainab," said Mariam, keeping warm by a coal burner in Kabul's winter cold. "If I was in the car and they fired, I would have covered her so that the bullet would have hit me." Zainab's father Nadir Ali sat nearby wrapped in a woolen blanket, his legs weak. Mariam says he can no longer work, and Zainab provided the only income.

It is not just individual Taliban fighters with a heavy hand, as their leadership deals with dissent. The Taliban have dispersed women protesters using pepper spray or firing in the air. They have beaten and arrested journalists. Particularly frightening in recent weeks have been night raids by intelligence officials on the homes of protesters to arrest them.

Obaidullah Baheer, a social activist and lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan, expressed fears the Taliban were adopting the tactics of past Afghan intelligence agencies.

The agencies have history of brutality dating back to the 1980s' pro-communist government, when hundreds were rounded up and killed, many dumped in mass graves. After the 2001 ouster of the Taliban, the intelligence agency known as the National Directorate of Security — which received U.S. support — detained thousands of Afghans alleged to be Taliban. Hundreds disappeared in so-called black sites where torture was carried out, according to rights groups.

The Taliban have formed their own General Directorate of Intelligence.

"We often times expect the victim to be the first to sympathize with pain and prevent it when in power, but often times they end up pushing it one notch further," said Baheer. "The Taliban must realize that this Deep State behavior will further alienate the population in the long run."

Skeptical world leaders have been watching how the Taliban transition to governing at a time when Afghanistan is facing a collapsing economy and widespread hunger. So far, the Taliban have been doing so firmly on their own terms — trying to adjust to realities that prevent them from ruling as they did in the past but also refusing to give others a role in governing.

There are signs that the interim Taliban Cabinet is trying to inject some order into their ranks.

Many fighters now wear the camouflage uniforms of the previous Afghan Defense and Security Forces. Latfullah Hakimi, head of the Taliban's so-called Purification Commission tasked with investigating complaints about its fighters, told The Associated Press that thousands of former Taliban have been jailed or

dismissed for a variety of offenses ranging from corruption to intimidation.

The leadership has sought to limit the harshest punishments for which the Taliban were notorious when they first ruled the country, over 20 years ago — such as public executions of murderers and hand amputations for thieves.

In their first months in power this time, low-level commanders often implemented impromptu punishments for alleged crimes, such as publicly humiliating thieves. Now, more suspects are brought to courts where judges make decisions. The judges are Taliban-approved figures with religious training, operating with little transparency, but their rulings do to some extent rein in vigilante acts by individual fighters.

The Taliban have been less successful in convincing former members of the military to return to service. Few have heeded the call, too afraid to admit their previous military positions amid some revenge killings of former officers.

Taliban leaders have publicly forbidden revenge attacks, and — with some exceptions — have been relatively successful in curbing them, “remarkably so, by the historical standards not only of Afghanistan, but of most civil wars,” said Anatol Lieven, a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute of Responsible Statecraft.

“I expected far more revenge killings,” said Lieven, who has followed Afghanistan through its four decades of war.

For many Afghans, the Taliban remain a frightening sight in the cities. Social media are ablaze with videos and photos of alleged Taliban excesses such as threatening people or detaining people from homes.

Some, however, are doctored, like a video that showed a Taliban fighter cutting a man’s hair and saying he was enforcing a new rule requiring all young men to keep their hair short. The original of the video, which the AP saw, was of a Taliban fighter catching a thief in the act and punishing him with public humiliation by cutting his hair. The Taliban, many of whom have shoulder length hair themselves, have not launched a campaign of cutting hair.

As the world watches the Taliban deal with ruling, Lieven cautioned that given its record in Afghanistan, the West may not have the answers.

“After the experience of Western-directed state-building in Afghanistan the past 20 years, is the West in any position to say what the right direction for Afghanistan is?” Lieven said.

## **Pregnant New Zealand journalist in Afghanistan can go home**

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A pregnant New Zealand journalist who was stranded in Afghanistan by her home country’s COVID-19 border policy said Tuesday she will return home after her government offered her a pathway back.

The government offer amounted to a backdown by New Zealand after officials had earlier insisted that Charlotte Bellis needed to reapply for a spot in the country’s bottlenecked quarantine hotels. Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson said Bellis had been offered a voucher for a room.

“I will be returning to my home country New Zealand at the beginning of March to give birth to our baby girl,” Bellis said in a statement. “We are so excited to return home and be surrounded by family and friends at such a special time.”

Her case had quickly becoming an embarrassment to New Zealand, which has thousands of citizens waiting abroad for space to open in the military-run border quarantine hotels.

Bellis said she wanted to thank fellow New Zealanders for their support and would continue to challenge the government to find a solution to its border controls. She added that she was disappointed the decision was a one-off and didn’t offer a pathway home for other pregnant New Zealanders.

She said on Sunday that each day was a battle. Now 25 weeks pregnant, she said she had tried without success to enter New Zealand via a lottery-style system and then applied for an emergency return, but was rejected.

Chris Bunny, the head of New Zealand’s quarantine system, said the new offer was made to Bellis because

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Afghanistan was extremely dangerous and there was a risk of terrorism. He said there was a limited ability to help people on the ground, especially after the withdrawal of U.S. forces last year.

"We do acknowledge that Ms Bellis considers herself to be safe and did not seek an allocation on that ground," Bunny said. "We have the residual discretion to grant allocations in rare and exceptional circumstances."

Bunny said the publicity surrounding the case was not a deciding factor and the sole consideration was Bellis's safety.

Bellis, 35, had worked as an Afghanistan correspondent for Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based news network. She resigned in November because it is illegal to be pregnant and unmarried in Qatar.

Bellis then flew to Belgium, trying to get residency in the home country of her partner, freelance photographer Jim Huylebroek, who has lived in Afghanistan for two years. But Bellis said the length of the process would have left her in Belgium with an expired visa.

Hopping from country to country on tourist visas while she waited to have her baby would have cost money and left her without health care, so she and Huylebroek returned to Afghanistan because they had a visa, felt welcome and from there could wage her battle to return to her home.

New Zealand officials said they would add Huylebroek to Bellis's voucher if he took the same flight with her.

New Zealand's COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said this week that while officials had needed to make some difficult choices, the quarantine system had worked well overall by saving lives and preventing the health system from getting swamped.

The Taliban have come under international criticism for repressive rules they imposed on women since sweeping to power in mid-August, including denying girls education beyond sixth grade. However, they have said that all girls and women will be allowed to attend school after the Afghan New Year at the end of March. While women have returned to work in the health and education ministries, thousands of female civil servants have not been allowed to return to their jobs.

## **Bomb shelters, guerrilla war: Building Ukraine's resistance**

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine (AP) — The table tennis coach, the chaplain's wife, the dentist and the firebrand nationalist have little in common except a desire to defend their hometown and a sometimes halting effort to speak Ukrainian instead of Russian.

The situation in Kharkiv, just 40 kilometers (25 miles) from some of the tens of thousands of Russian troops massed at the border of Ukraine, feels particularly perilous. Ukraine's second-largest city is one of its industrial centers and includes two factories that restore old Soviet-era tanks or build new ones.

It's also a city of fractures: between Ukrainian speakers and those who stick with the Russian that dominated until recently; between those who enthusiastically volunteer to resist a Russian offensive and those who just want to live their lives. Which side wins out in Kharkiv could well determine the fate of Ukraine.

If Russia invades, some of Kharkiv's 1 million plus people say they stand ready to abandon their civilian lives and wage a guerrilla campaign against one of the world's greatest military powers. They expect many Ukrainians will do the same.

"This city has to be protected," said Viktoria Balesina, who teaches table tennis to teenagers and dyes her cropped hair deep purple at the crown. "We need to do something, not to panic and fall on our knees. We do not want this."

Balesina recalls being pressured to attend pro-Russia rallies during the protest movement that swept Ukraine after Russia attacked in 2014 — a year that utterly changed her life. A lifelong Russian speaker born and raised in Kharkiv, she switched to Ukrainian. Then she joined a group of a dozen or so women who meet weekly in an office building for community defense instruction.

Now her Ukrainian is near-fluent, though she still periodically grasps at words, and she can reload a sub-machine gun almost comfortably.

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This wasn't the life she expected at age 55, but she's accepted it as necessary. Plenty of people in her social circle sympathize with Russia, but they're not what drives her today.

"I am going to protect the city not for those people but for the women I'm training with," she said.

Among her group is Svetlana Putilina, whose husband is a Muslim chaplain in the Ukrainian military. With grim determination and not a hint of panic, the 50-year-old has orchestrated emergency plans for her family and for her unit: Who will take the children to safety outside the city? Who will accompany elderly parents and grandparents to one of the hundreds of mapped bomb shelters? How will the resistance women deploy?

"If it is possible and our government gives out weapons, we will take them and defend our city," said the mother of three and grandmother of three more. If not, she at least has one of her husband's service weapons at home, and she now knows how to use it.

Elsewhere in Kharkiv, Dr. Oleksandr Dikalo dragged two creaky exam chairs into a labyrinthine basement and refilled yellow jerrycans with fresh water. The public dental clinic he runs is on the ground floor of a 16-story apartment building, and the warren of underground rooms is listed as an emergency shelter for the hundreds of residents.

Dikalo knows how to handle weapons as well, from his days as a soldier in the Soviet Army when he was stationed in East Germany. His wife works as a doctor at Kharkiv's emergency hospital and regularly tends to Ukrainian soldiers wounded at the front.

The conflict that began in Ukraine's Donbas region subsided into low-level trench warfare after agreements brokered by France and Germany. Most of the estimated 14,000 dead were killed in 2014 and 2015, but every month brings new casualties.

"If God forbid something happens, we must stand and protect our city. We must stand hand to hand against the aggressor," Dikalo said. At 60 he's too old to join the civil defense units forming across the country, but he's ready to act to keep Kharkiv from falling.

A guerrilla war fought by dentists, coaches and housewives defending a hometown of a thousand basement shelters would be a nightmare for Russian military planners, according to both analysts and U.S. intelligence officials.

"The Russians want to destroy Ukraine's combat forces. They don't want to be in a position where they have to occupy ground, where they have to deal with civilians, where they have to deal with an insurgency," said James Sherr, an analyst of Russian military strategy who testified last week before a British parliamentary committee.

There are growing calls in Washington for the CIA and the Pentagon to support a potential Ukrainian insurgency. While Russia's forces are larger and more powerful than Ukraine's, an insurgency supported by U.S.-funded arms and training could deter a full-scale invasion.

Polling of ordinary Ukrainians reviewed by intelligence agencies has strongly indicated there would be an active resistance in the event of an invasion, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information. A spokesperson for the intelligence community declined to comment.

Russia denies having plans for an offensive, but it demands promises from NATO to keep Ukraine out of the alliance, halt the deployment of NATO weapons near Russian borders and to roll back NATO forces from Eastern Europe. NATO and the U.S. call those demands impossible.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said recently that any escalation could hinge on Kharkiv. The city is also the base for Yevheniy Murayev, identified by British intelligence as the person Russia was considering installing as president.

"Kharkiv has over 1 million citizens," Zelenskyy told The Washington Post. "It's not going to be just an occupation; it's going to be the beginning of a large-scale war."

That is precisely what Anton Dotsenko fears. At 18, he was front and center in the wave of protests that brought down the pro-Russia government in 2014. Now he's a 24-year-old tech worker, and he's had enough upheaval.

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"When people are calm and prosperous, and everything is fine, they don't dance very well. But when everything's bad, that's when they party hard, like it's the last time," Dotsenko said during a smoke break outside a pulsing Kharkiv nightclub. "This is a stupid war, and I think this could all be resolved diplomatically. The last thing I would like to do is give my life, to give my valuable life, for something pointless."

The young people dancing inside would say the same, he declared in Russian: "If the war starts, everyone will run away."

This is what one nationalist youth group hopes to prevent. They meet weekly in an abandoned construction site, masked and clad in black as they practice maneuvers. The men who join that group or the government-run units have already shown themselves to be up for the challenge to come, said one of the trainers, who identified himself by the nom de guerre Pulsar.

"Kharkiv is my home and as a native the most important city for me to protect. Kharkiv is also a front-line city, which is economically and strategically important," he said, adding that many people in the city are "ready to protect their own until the end," as are many Ukrainians.

The same sentiment rings out among Ukrainians in the capital, Kyiv, and in the far west, in Lviv.

"Both our generation and our children are ready to defend themselves. This will not be an easy war," said Maryna Tseluiko, a 40-year-old baker who signed up as a reservist with her 18-year-old daughter in Kyiv. "Ukrainians have a rich tradition of guerrilla warfare. We don't want to fight Russians. It's the Russians who are fighting us."

## Jury questioning to begin in case related to Breonna Taylor

By PIPER HUDSPETH BLACKBURN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Questioning of potential jurors begins Tuesday for the trial of a former Kentucky police officer involved in a botched raid that killed Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Louisville emergency medical technician.

Brett Hankison is standing trial on three counts of wanton endangerment for allegedly firing wildly into Taylor's neighbors' apartments in March 2020. Taylor, a Black woman, was shot multiple times during the raid. No drugs were found, and the warrant was later found to be flawed.

No officers were charged for their role in causing Taylor's death, despite protests nationwide, with many demonstrators demanding that the officers involved stand trial for murder. That set the outcome apart from two other cases that put race relations in the national spotlight in 2020 with the killing of Black people at the hands of white people: the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in the custody of a police officer and the Georgia shooting of Ahmaud Arbery. The 25-year-old Black man was shot to death while being chased by three white men while out jogging through a neighborhood.

The three white men who pursued Arbery were convicted of murder in November and given life prison sentences in early January. Last year, former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder and manslaughter in state court in the videotaped killing of Floyd.

In the Taylor case, Kentucky's Republican Attorney General, Daniel Cameron determined that the officers fired into the woman's apartment in self-defense after her boyfriend, who was in the apartment with her, shot at them first. Cameron, who is Black, did not give a grand jury considering the case the option of charging those officers in connection with Taylor's death, though he acknowledged that her death was heartbreaking.

Hankison is the only officer facing any criminal charges from the incident. If convicted, he faces one to five years in prison for each of the wanton endangerment counts.

The process, which began last Friday, is expected to take weeks. Potential jurors will be asked questions to determine if they can serve as fair and impartial jurors. The pool, which consists of Jefferson County residents, will be whittled down to a group that consists of 12 jurors and alternates.

The trial is taking place in Louisville despite a request from Hankison's attorney, who had asked Jefferson Circuit Judge Ann Bailey Smith to move the trial out of the city because he felt the publicity surrounding the case would make it hard to seat an impartial jury. Smith denied the request.

Hankison has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

## **A Uyghur gets death sentence, as China bans once OK'd books**

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — As the Chinese government tightened its grip over its ethnic Uyghur population, it sentenced one man to death and three others to life in prison last year for textbooks drawn in part from historical resistance movements that had once been sanctioned by the ruling Communist Party.

An AP review of images and stories presented as problematic in a state media documentary, and interviews with people involved in editing the textbooks, found they were rooted in previously accepted narratives — two drawings are based on a 1940s movement praised by Mao Zedong, who founded the communist state in 1949. Now, as the party's imperatives have changed, it has partially reinterpreted them with devastating consequences for individuals, while also depriving students of ready access to a part of their heritage.

It is a less publicized chapter in a wide-ranging crackdown on Uyghurs and other largely Muslim groups, which has prompted the U.S. and others to stage a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics that open Friday. Foreign experts, governments and media have documented the detention of an estimated 1 million or more people, the demolition of mosques and forced sterilization and abortion. The Chinese government denies human rights violations and says it has taken steps to eliminate separatism and extremism in its western Xinjiang region.

The attack on textbooks and the officials responsible for them shows how far the Communist Party is going to control and reshape the Uyghur community. It comes as President Xi Jinping, in the name of ethnic unity, pushes a more assimilationist policy on Tibetans, Mongolians and other ethnic groups that scales back bilingual education. Scholars and activists fear the disappearance of Uyghur cultural history, handed down in stories of heroes and villains across generations.

"There's much more intense policing of Uyghur historic narratives now," said David Brophy, a historian of Uyghur nationalism at the University of Sydney. "The goalposts have shifted, and rather than this being seen as a site of negotiation and tension, now it's treated as separatist propaganda."

Sattar Sawut, a Uyghur official who headed the Xinjiang Education Department, was sentenced to death, a court announced last April, saying he led a separatist group to create textbooks filled with ethnic hatred, violence and religious extremism that caused people to carry out violent acts in ethnic clashes in 2009. He may not be executed, as such death sentences are often commuted to life in prison after two years with good behavior.

Details about the textbooks were then presented in a documentary by CGTN, the overseas arm of state broadcaster CCTV, on what it called hidden threats in Xinjiang in a 10-minute segment. It included what amounted to on-camera confessions by Sawut and another former education official, Alimjan Memtimin, who got a life sentence.

The Xinjiang government and CGTN did not respond to written questions about the material.

Drawings from the textbooks are presented as evidence Sawut led others to incite hatred between Uyghurs and China's majority Han population.

In one, a man points a pistol at another. The image is flashed over an on-camera statement by Memtimin, who says they wanted to "incite ethnic hatred and such thoughts."

But both men in the drawing are Uyghurs. One, named Gheni Batur, holds up a gun to a traitor who had been sent to assassinate him. Batur was seen as a "people's hero" in a 1940s uprising against China's then-ruling Nationalist Party over its repression and discrimination against ethnic groups, said Nabijan Tursun, a Uyghur American historian and a senior editor at Radio Free Asia.

The Communists toppled the Nationalists and took power in 1949. Mao invited then-Uyghur leader Ehmetjan Qasimi to the first meeting of a national advisory body and said, "Your years of struggle are a part of our entire Chinese nation's democratic revolution movement." However, Qasimi died in a plane crash en route to the meeting.

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Despite Mao's approval, this period of history has always been debated by Chinese academics, Brophy said, and the attitude has shifted more and more toward hostility.

Another element in the story came to the fore after a series of knifings and bombings in 2013-14 by Uyghur extremists, who were angered by harsh treatment by the authorities.

The Uyghur movement had briefly carved out a nominally independent state, the second East Turkestan Republic, in northern Xinjiang in 1944. It had the backing of the Soviet Union, which had real control.

A recently leaked 2017 document, one of a trove given to an unofficial Uyghur Tribunal in Britain last September, shows that a Communist Party working group dealing with Xinjiang criticized elements of the uprising.

"The Three District Revolution is a part of our people's democratic revolution, but there were serious mistakes made in the early stages," the notice said.

Blaming interference by the Soviet Union, it said that ethnic separatists infiltrated the revolutionary ranks and "stole the right to lead, established a splitting regime, ... and committed the grave mistake of ethnic division."

The document still said that Qasimi should be respected for his role in history.

The CGTN documentary, though, singles out a photo of Qasimi wearing a medal that was the symbol of the second East Turkestan Republic. "It shouldn't appear in this textbook at all," Shehide Yusup, an art editor at Xinjiang Education Publishing House, said in the documentary.

Another textbook illustration, drawn from the same period, shows what appears to be Nationalist soldier pointing a knife at a Uyghur rebel sprawled on the ground.

Both stories come from novels by Uyghur writers published by government publishing houses. One of the writers, Zordun Sabir, is a member of the state-backed Chinese Writer's Association. The textbooks themselves were published only after high-level approval, said Kündüz, a former editor at the Xinjiang University newspaper who uses only one name.

When the textbooks were reviewed in 2001, the Uyghur stories hardly got any attention, said Abduweli Ayup, a Uyghur linguist who as a then-graduate student translated some of the stories into Chinese for the review.

Stories that portrayed the Nationalists as the enemy were not considered controversial. Instead, the Uyghur editors worried about foreign stories, said Ayup, an activist who now lives in Norway, such as a line from a Tolstoy story and a Hungarian poem.

Another story cited by CGTN goes back to the Qing Dynasty, which ruled China until 1912. Yusup, the art editor tells CGTN: "This is the legend of seven heroic Uyghur girls. It's all fabricated. Han Chinese soldiers trapped them at a cliff and they jumped to their death to defend their homeland. It's meant to incite ethnic hatred."

But the soldiers were not Han, they were ethnic Manchu who founded the Qing Dynasty in 1644. The text of the story visible in the CGTN documentary says so, reading in part, "The Manchu soldiers started to climb Mount Möljer from all sides. Maysikhan (a leader of the Uyghur girls) saw the Manchus clambering up the mountain and told the girls to roll rocks down at them."

The story is based on a local rebellion against the Qing Dynasty. A shrine dedicated to the seven girls stands in the Xinjiang city of Uchturpan, which partially funded it. Epics, articles and dramas about the story are popular.

"For the Chinese government to praise the uprising and then criminalize the inclusion of the story in textbooks is shocking," Tursun, the historian said.

From even earlier, officials have been increasing the amount of instruction in Chinese in Xinjiang, especially after ethnic clashes in 2009 in Urumqi, the regional capital, said Minglang Zhou, an expert on China's bilingual education policies at the University of Maryland.

Xi, as China's leader, has stressed the consolidation of the nation, a move away from the "one unified nation with diversity" promoted by his predecessors, Zhou said. "He sees diversity as a threat to a unified nation."

Kündüz lamented that her son, growing up in Urumqi, studied more in Chinese than in Uyghur. "They

want to assimilate us, they want us to erase us," she said from Sweden, where she now lives. To this day, her son speaks Chinese better than Uyghur.

## Medical examiner on stand at officers' trial in Floyd death

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — The chief medical examiner who ruled George Floyd's death a homicide will return to the stand Tuesday at the trial of three former Minneapolis police officers charged with violating Floyd's civil rights.

Federal prosecutors say former Officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao violated their training by failing to act to save Floyd's life on May 25, 2020, when fellow Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the Black man's neck for 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd was handcuffed, facedown and gasping for air. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back, Lane held his legs and Thao kept bystanders back.

But defense attorneys have sought to show that the Minneapolis Police Department's training was inadequate.

Dr. Andrew Baker, the Hennepin County medical examiner, testified Monday that Floyd died after police "subdual, restraint and neck compression" caused his heart to stop. Baker said heart disease and drug use were factors but not the "top line" cause.

His testimony came after the former head of training for the Minneapolis Police Department, Inspector Katie Blackwell, testified for a third day. She has said that Kueng, Lane and Thao acted in a way that was "inconsistent" with department policies, including by failing to intervene to stop Chauvin, not rolling Floyd onto his side when he stopped resisting and not providing medical aid when he stopped breathing.

Floyd struggled with officers when they tried to put him in a police vehicle and after they put him on the ground. He repeatedly said he couldn't breathe before going motionless. The videotaped killing triggered worldwide protests and a reexamination of racism and policing.

Blackwell testified that officers are told that if they use a knee to handcuff someone, they must put the person on their side and call emergency medical services because of the danger that their airway will be blocked.

Thao's attorney, Robert Paule, challenged Blackwell on whether the officers received adequate training, including on the use of neck restraints. He also presented department training materials from in-service training that Thao would have received on how to handle someone experiencing "excited delirium" — a disputed condition in which someone in an agitated state is said to sometimes have extraordinary strength that could trigger a more forceful restraint.

In videos, people were not stopped by Tasers and sometimes got away from police restraint. Also, officers sometimes used a knee to restrain people. But the training materials had just one sentence in a slide that said officers should put a person in the side recovery position.

Some medical examiners have attributed in-custody deaths to excited delirium, often in cases where the person became extremely agitated after taking drugs or while having a mental health episode or other health problem. But there is no universally accepted definition and researchers have said it's not well understood.

Lane's attorney, Earl Gray, suggested that his client did what he was trained to do, including trying to de-escalate the situation, stopping his restraint when Floyd stopped moving, checking for a pulse and asking whether he should be rolled on his side. Lane also tried to help revive Floyd in the ambulance that eventually arrived.

But Blackwell said Lane didn't do enough when Floyd was in police custody, including checking to see if Floyd was breathing after he went unconscious and taking action to "physically stop the inappropriate force that was being used when no force was necessary."

Kueng, who is Black, Lane, who is white, and Thao, who is Hmong American, are charged with willfully depriving Floyd of his constitutional rights while acting under government authority. One count against all three officers alleges that they saw that Floyd needed medical care and failed to help. A count against

Thao and Kueng contends that they didn't intervene to stop Chauvin. Both counts allege that the officers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

Prosecutors have argued that the "willful" standard can be met by showing "blatantly wrongful conduct" that deprived Floyd, 46, of his rights.

Chauvin was convicted of murder and manslaughter in state court last year and pleaded guilty to a federal civil rights charge. Lane, Kueng and Thao also face a separate state trial in June on charges alleging that they aided and abetted murder and manslaughter.

## **EXPLAINER: The Winter Games, a different kind of Olympics**

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The first so-called modern Olympics took place in 1896 in Athens. But the inaugural Winter Olympics were not held until 1924 in Chamonix, France.

Calvin Coolidge was the American president at the time, and Vladimir Lenin died that year in the newly established Soviet Union. A new car in the United States cost as little as \$300.

From 1924 through 1992, the Winter and Summer Olympics were the same year. In '92 the Winter Games were celebrated in Albertville, France, followed by the Summer Games in Barcelona.

Then change came.

Since 1994, an Olympics has been held every two years. The '94 Winter Olympics took place in Lillehammer, Norway, followed by the Summer Games in 1996 in Atlanta. Nagano, Japan, was next in 1998 with the Winter Games. That pattern was broken by the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Games until 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Beijing Winter Games open on Friday, just six months after Tokyo closed. They'll be followed by the Summer Olympics in 2024 in Paris. Here's a breakdown of why things have unfolded as they have.

**WHY WERE THE GAMES MOVED TO EVERY TWO YEARS?**

Olympic historian Bill Mallon suggests the International Olympic Committee was looking for more revenue. The IOC, he says, "thought they could get more sponsorship money by spreading the Games out more."

Every two years also kept the Olympics in the public eye, and the move dovetailed with the increasing commercialization and professionalization of the Games. The trend was underlined when, for the first time, professional basketball players from the NBA — the American Dream Team — were the marquee stars in Barcelona.

**BEIJING: FIRST FOR BOTH WINTER AND SUMMER**

Beijing is the most unlikely city to be the first to host both Summer and Winter Olympics. Of all the Winter Olympic hosts, it has the least tradition in winter sports.

Beijing was a longshot for 2022 until six European countries — including favorites Norway and Sweden — dropped out for cost or political reasons. Germany and Switzerland said "no" in referendums. The IOC was left to choose between Beijing and Almaty, Kazakhstan.

According to Mallon, writing to The Associated Press, the Canadian city of Montreal — the host for the 1976 Summer Olympics — tried but failed several times to land the Winter Olympics.

Montreal put in bids for the Winter Olympics in 1932, 1936, 1944, and 1956. Montreal finished second in 1936, 1944, and 1956. It also tried for both Games in 1944 and 1956. And Quebec City, not far from Montreal, made a bid for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

**A MUCH SMALLER GAMES**

The Beijing Winter Olympics are expected to draw about 2,900 athletes from about 90 national Olympic committees. The Tokyo Olympics six months ago attracted 11,000 from just over 200 national bodies.

As with Tokyo, organizers say there will be no fans from abroad and only a smattering of "selected" local fans.

Both the Winter and Summer Olympics run over 17 days, which means there are many fewer events daily at the Winter Olympics.

As recently as 1980 in Lake Placid, New York — the "Miracle on Ice" year — the Winter Games lasted only 12 days.

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Three venues have held the Winter Olympics twice: St. Moritz, Switzerland (1928, 1948), Innsbruck, Austria (1964, 1976), and Lake Placid (1932, 1980). The Italian ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo will get its second in 2026 after holding the Winter Olympics in 1956.

Sapporo, Japan, which held the 1972 Winter Olympics, is a top contender for 2030. The IOC has not said when it will announce its choice.

## Russia, US exchange accusations over Ukraine at UN

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Russia accused the West on Monday of “whipping up tensions” over Ukraine and said the U.S. had brought “pure Nazis” to power in Kyiv as the U.N. Security Council held a stormy and bellicose debate on Moscow’s troop buildup near its southern neighbor.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield shot back that Russia’s growing military force of more than 100,000 troops along Ukraine’s borders was “the largest mobilization” in Europe in decades, adding that there has been a spike in cyberattacks and Russian disinformation.

“And they are attempting, without any factual basis, to paint Ukraine and Western countries as the aggressors to fabricate a pretext for attack,” she said.

The harsh exchanges in the Security Council came as Moscow lost an attempt to block the meeting and reflected the gulf between the two nuclear powers. It was the first open session where all protagonists in the Ukraine crisis spoke publicly, even though the U.N.’s most powerful body took no action.

Hours later, the Russian government sent a written response to a U.S. proposal aimed at deescalating the crisis, according to three Biden administration officials. The officials all spoke on the condition of anonymity. A State Department official declined to offer details of the response, saying it “would be unproductive to negotiate in public” and that they would leave it up to Russia to discuss the counterproposal.

Although more high-level diplomacy is expected this week, talks between the U.S. and Russia have so far failed to ease tensions in the crisis, with the West saying Moscow is preparing for an invasion. Russia denies it is planning to attack. It demands pledges that Ukraine will never join NATO, a halt to the deployment of NATO weapons near Russian borders and a rollback of the alliance’s forces from Eastern Europe. NATO and the U.S. call those nonstarters.

Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the U.S. of interfering in his country’s internal affairs and seeking “a classic example of megaphone diplomacy.”

Thomas-Greenfield countered that the U.S. has held over 100 private meetings in the past few weeks with Russian officials and European and Ukrainian colleagues and “it’s now time” for a discussion in public.

To Russia’s assertion that the U.S. called the meeting to make all council members feel uncomfortable, she retorted, “Imagine how uncomfortable you would be if you had 100,000 troops sitting on your border.”

After the council gave a green light for the meeting, Nebenzia accused the Biden administration of “whipping up tensions and rhetoric and provoking escalation.”

“You are almost pulling for this,” he said in his speech to the council, looking at Thomas-Greenfield. “You want it to happen. You’re waiting for it to happen, as if you want to make your words become a reality.”

He blamed the U.S. for the 2014 ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, saying it brought to power “nationalists, radicals, Russophobes and pure Nazis” and created the antagonism that exists between Ukraine and Russia.

Nebenzia pointedly left the council chamber as the Ukrainian Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya started to speak. “How long Russia will pressure, will pursue a clear attempt to push Ukraine and its partners into a Kafka trap?” Kyslytsya asked.

The vote on holding an open meeting passed 10-2, with Russia and China opposed, and India, Gabon and Kenya abstaining. Nine “yes” votes were needed for the meeting to go ahead.

The U.S. and its allies had pressed to hold the meeting Monday, the last day of Norway’s rotating presidency of the council, before Russia takes over Tuesday for the month of February.

Any statement or resolution by the Security Council is extremely unlikely, given Russia’s veto power and its ties with others on the council, including China.

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After all 15 council members spoke, the U.S. and Russia sparred again, with Thomas-Greenfield saying she was "disappointed" in Nebenzia's comments, stressing that Russian threats of aggression are "provocative."

U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement that the meeting was "a critical step in rallying the world to speak out in one voice" to reject the use of force and seek military de-escalation.

At the start of a White House meeting with the ruling emir of Qatar, Biden said the U.S. continues to engage in "nonstop diplomacy," but "we are ready no matter what happens."

The State Department on Monday ordered the departure of families of American diplomats in Belarus, where Russia is deploying troops, tanks and other materiel in what Moscow says is a military exercise.

Western officials fear Russia's troop buildup could use Belarus as a jumping-off point to invade neighboring Ukraine, especially its capital, Kyiv, from the north. Tens of thousands of other Russian troops already are staged elsewhere along Ukraine's borders.

Belarus officials already have pushed most U.S. Embassy staff out of the country, leaving fewer family members to be affected by Monday's order. The U.S. has also drawn down its diplomatic presence in Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken are expected to speak by phone Tuesday, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. A senior State Department official confirmed the Russian account.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will visit Ukraine on Tuesday for talks with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and will also speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin to urge him to "step back," Johnson's office said. Johnson says he is considering sending hundreds of British troops to NATO countries in the Baltic region as a show of strength.

Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress said Monday they were still divided over some of the timing in draft sanctions legislation against Russia. A Republican push to impose sanctions on a Russian natural gas pipeline to Germany, Nord Stream 2, even before any new Russian push into Ukraine was a main sticking point, lawmakers said. The Biden administration argues for waiting after any invasion, saying sanctioning Nord Stream now could alienate an ally, Germany, and remove the deterrence power of that sanctions threat.

On Sunday, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Bob Menendez, said that in the event of an attack, lawmakers want Russia to face "the mother of all sanctions." That includes actions against Russian banks that could severely undermine the Russian economy and increased lethal aid to Ukraine's military.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday the administration was encouraged by the bipartisan effort in Congress "to hold Russia accountable." The administration has previously expressed concern that preemptive sanctions could diminish their leverage on Russia, but the White House sounded warmer to the prospect as the Foreign Relations Committee moves to act.

"Our view is that sanctions can be an effective tool of deterrence, and the deepening sell-off in Russian markets reflects our message to Russia," Psaki said

## **EXPLAINER: What will Neil Young's protest mean for Spotify?**

By DAVID BAUDER and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Neil Young vs Joe Rogan seems like the strangest of cultural clashes.

Yet the 76-year-old rock star's protest over coronavirus-related content on Rogan's popular Spotify podcast has ignited a hot debate over misinformation and free speech, bruising a streaming service that has become the central way that millions of people around the world experience music.

"Rockin' in the Free World"? Not on Spotify. Not anymore. Here's what's going on.

**WHY IS YOUNG UPSET?**

His protest came after dozens of doctors and scientists wrote an open letter to Spotify, complaining about Rogan's decision to have a podcast discussion with Dr. Robert Malone, an infectious disease specialist who has been banned from Twitter for spreading misinformation on COVID-19. Malone has become a hero in

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the anti-vaccination community.

Saying Spotify was complicit in spreading misinformation, Young told the company that it could have his music or Rogan's podcast — "not both." Spotify agreed to remove his music from the service.

## IS THE PROTEST SPREADING?

Slowly, Joni Mitchell said she was standing in solidarity and also asked for her music to be removed. So did Nils Lofgren, a guitarist who plays in one of Young's backing bands, Crazy Horse, and also with Bruce Springsteen. Podcaster Brene Brown also said she was halting new podcasts without saying exactly why.

The rock band Belly put the message "Delete Spotify" in the background of its Spotify page, but you could still stream their music. Pulling music off Spotify isn't necessarily easy — often it's the record company, not the artist, who controls that.

Spotify dominates the marketplace. It had 31 percent of the 524 million worldwide music stream subscriptions in the second quarter of 2021, more than double that of second-place Apple Music, according to Midia Research. Spotify is not always popular with musicians, many of whom complain that it doesn't pay them enough for their work.

"Spotify has a huge amount of cultural capital that is itself power," says Midia Research's Mark Mulligan. "And that is what at risk if more artists essentially tried to push their fans to other places."

While losing Young and Mitchell may be a psychic blow, what would really matter is if a more current artist takes up the cause. Everyone in Spotify's top 10 list of most-streamed artists, led by Drake's 44 billion, are from past the turn of the century, with the possible exception of Eminem, who first became popular in 1999.

For those artists, and for Spotify, taking a stand like Young's would have much more serious financial consequences.

## WHY CHOOSE ROGAN OVER YOUNG?

Music accounts for the vast majority of Spotify's revenue, but Rogan represents its future.

Spotify reportedly paid more than \$100 million to license Rogan's podcast, its most popular. He's the centerpiece of the company's strategy to become an audio company rather than just a music company. In the long term, Spotify has more control over potential revenue from podcasts than it does for music, Mulligan says.

The Swedish company is gunning to be the premiere podcasting platform, investing hundreds of millions of dollars since 2019 to buy podcast companies like Gimlet and Anchor, and sign top hosts like Rogan and Dax Shepard.

Spotify was set to overtake Apple last year as the biggest podcast platform in the United States, the world's largest market, by number of listeners, according to the research firm eMarketer.

Popular podcasters, particularly the outspoken ones, are likely to be watching this protest very closely to see if Spotify will stick up for the right to speak freely.

## WHAT IS SPOTIFY DOING TO QUIET THE PROTESTS?

The company announced that it would add a warning before all podcasts that discuss COVID-19, directing listeners to factual information on the pandemic from scientists and public health experts. It did not discuss Rogan specifically.

Spotify has shown more transparency in the past few days than it ever has about how it deals with questionable content, and the new policy is a good first step, says John Wihbey, a Northeastern University professor and specialist in emerging technologies.

Yet it's not clear that anyone has effectively dealt with the issue of misinformation spread through podcasts, Wihbey says. Will Rogan's audience actually listen to an advisory and then hunt down other COVID information?

"This could be just window-dressing," he says.

Rogan spoke publicly for the first time late Sunday, saying he's sorry his critics feel the way they do, and it wasn't his intention to upset anyone or spread misinformation. He said he likes to have conversations with people who offer different perspectives, and said that some things once considered misinformation

— that cloth masks were not good at protecting against COVID, for example — are now accepted.

But he said he could do a better job having people who dispute controversial opinions like Malone's on faster so his listeners will hear the different perspective.

The calculus for Spotify can change if the protest snowballs, says Colin Stutz, news director at Billboard magazine. "I think they just ride this out and hope that it goes away," he said.

DOES ROGAN NEED TO LISTEN TO MORE MUSIC?

Probably. He talked in a video posted on Instagram about how he loved Mitchell's music. "Chuck E's in Love' is a great song," he said.

Whoops. That was Rickie Lee Jones.

To Rogan's credit, he quickly corrected himself on Twitter.

## La. GOP leader weighs action over gov's 'gross misconduct'

By JIM MUSTIAN and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

Louisiana's top GOP lawmaker weighed taking legislative action Monday against Gov. John Bel Edwards for "gross misconduct and the highest level of deceit" in his response to the deadly 2019 arrest of Ronald Greene.

House Speaker Rep. Clay Schexnayder's comments followed an Associated Press report that showed the Democratic governor was informed within hours that troopers arresting Greene engaged in a "violent, lengthy struggle," yet he stayed silent for two years as state police told a much different story to the victim's family and in official reports: that Greene died from a crash after a high-speed chase.

The revelations have united an unusual coalition of Black activists and Republican officials in demanding answers from the governor.

"This would demonstrate gross misconduct and the highest level of deceit on behalf of the governor and others," Schexnayder said in a statement. "What happened to Ronald Greene is inexcusable and should never happen to anyone. His family and the citizens of the state deserve to know the truth."

Schexnayder, who said he met over the weekend with the state's Republican senate president and attorney general, did not elaborate on the options he was considering but noted "we are fully prepared to use the authority granted to us in the constitution of this state."

Edwards, who was in the midst of a tight reelection campaign at the time of Greene's death, remained publicly tight-lipped about the contradictory accounts and possible cover-up until last May when the AP obtained and published long-withheld body-camera footage showing what really happened on a dark road-side outside Monroe: white troopers jolting Greene with stun guns, punching him in the face and dragging him by his ankle shackles as he pleaded for mercy and wailed, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!"

Edwards' spokesperson said Monday that it is standard practice for the state police to notify the governor of incidents where a person dies in custody and that he was not aware of the body-camera video of Greene's arrest until much later, in October 2020.

"From the moment the Governor learned of the allegations and saw the videos, he has consistently said that the actions of the officers in the videos were disturbing and unacceptable and that the matter should be fully investigated," spokesperson Christina Stephens said. She added that Edwards plans to discuss the matter with the Legislative Black Caucus on Tuesday and take questions from the media afterward.

The public release of the graphic video of Greene's arrest indeed prompted Edwards to finally speak out to condemn the troopers and he later called their actions "criminal." But the governor, who comes from a long family line of law enforcement officers, also repeated the crash theory and downplayed the actions of the troopers. In one case detailed by the AP, he allegedly argued privately last June against Schexnayder's proposal for a legislative inquiry into the Greene arrest, telling him there was no need because he "died in a wreck."

The Republican lawmakers are considering action amid an ongoing federal civil rights investigation of the deadly encounter and whether police brass obstructed justice to protect the troopers who arrested Greene.

AP reported that the FBI has questioned people in recent months about Edwards' awareness of various

aspects of the Greene case, according to law enforcement officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the probe.

U.S. Attorney Brandon Brown, the top federal prosecutor in Shreveport, and FBI Special Agent in Charge Douglas Williams Jr. in New Orleans issued a statement Monday saying "recent reporting citing sources suggesting that the FBI has questioned people about the awareness of certain facts by Governor John Bel Edwards is inaccurate."

AP stands by the accuracy of its reporting and has documentation to show such questioning took place.

Sen. Katrina Jackson, a Monroe Democrat, said the state police message to Edwards about Greene's death was a "standard" heads-up and at that time the governor was not "aware that there was a cover-up in any way."

"It's a procedural text and that's a procedure that goes out on every police-involved fatality," said Jackson, who is Black. "I think that we can chase something that's not relevant and miss those who were actually involved."

Greene's mother, Mona Hardin, called on Edwards to resign, saying he chose political expedience over justice in a man's death.

"He needs to go," Hardin told AP. "He was able to stand aside as all this unfolded and just remain mute. That's shameful. ... I hate that I've been lied to."

Louisiana NAACP officials issued a statement calling the AP revelations "deeply disturbing."

"The NAACP finds this severely demonstrates a need for our governor to be fully transparent with our great state. We feel that our governor has seemingly missed the mark so far," the statement said. "When did you learn the truth, governor?"

## Judge rejects plea deal for man who killed Ahmaud Arbery

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — A federal judge rejected a plea agreement Monday that would have averted a hate crimes trial for the white man convicted of murder for fatally shooting Ahmaud Arbery, whose parents angrily objected to the deal as unfair and unjust.

The decision by U.S. District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood came just hours after prosecutors gave notice that son and father Travis and Greg McMichael had agreed to plead guilty to hate crime charges that they chased, threatened and killed 25-year-old Arbery because he was Black.

But Travis McMichael's sentencing hearing Monday afternoon turned emotional and contentious as federal prosecutors urged the judge to approve the deal even after Arbery's parents pleaded passionately for her to deny it.

Travis McMichael would have received 30 years in federal prison to be served alongside the penalty of life in prison without parole imposed by a state court judge for the murder conviction. By pleading guilty, he would have given up the chance to appeal his federal sentence.

But Arbery's family objected to a provision that sought to transfer Travis McMichael immediately to federal custody from state prison. Arbery's parents argued that conditions in federal prison wouldn't be as tough for the McMichaels.

Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, said she felt strongly that Travis McMichael should serve his entire sentence in a Georgia state prison.

"Please listen to me," Cooper-Jones told the judge. "Granting these men their preferred choice of confinement would defeat me. It gives them one last chance to spit in my face."

Wood said she was rejecting the deal because its terms would have locked her into a specific sentence. She said the Arbery family should have a say at sentencing in whatever punishment is ultimately given.

Now the question is whether Travis McMichael will withdraw the guilty plea he entered Monday, and whether Greg McMichael, who had been offered the same deal the judge denied, will still plead guilty as planned. The judge gave them both until Friday to return to the federal courthouse in Brunswick and give their answer.

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The plea deals would likely have forced the McMichaels to spend decades in prison, even if they won appeals to their state convictions

The McMichaels armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after they spotted him running in their neighborhood outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the chase in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael blasting Arbery with a shotgun.

A national outcry erupted when the graphic video leaked online two months later. Georgia was one of just four U.S. states without a hate crimes law at the time. Legislators quickly approved one, but it came too late for state hate crime charges in Arbery's killing.

Despite being convicted of murder in a Georgia state court trial last November, the McMichaels and Bryan still face federal hate crimes charges that accuse them of violating Arbery's civil rights and targeting him because he was Black.

Travis McMichael told the judge in a loud, clear voice Monday that he was willing to plead guilty to killing Arbery out of racial animosity.

Prosecutor Tara Lyons asked the judge to set aside the Arbery family's misgivings about the deal, saying Travis McMichael's admission would send a powerful message.

"He is pleading guilty to a federal hate crime and publicly confessing to the world that this crime would not have happened had Ahmaud Arbery not been Black," Lyons said.

Lyons said she understood the Arbery family's anger and distrust of the criminal justice system. But federal prosecutors said they had consulted with attorneys for Arbery's parents before signing off on any deals.

"The Justice Department entered the plea agreement only after the victims' attorneys informed me that the family was not opposed to it," Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke said in a statement.

Lee Merritt, an attorney for Arbery's mother, said that was misleading. He told reporters outside the courthouse that the family had previously rejected an identical plea deal proposed by prosecutors.

"The family no longer wanted to engage them concerning that point," Merritt said. "They had had their answer. They (federal prosecutors) took that as a deferral."

No notices have been filed in court of a plea deal for Bryan. For now, he appears to be headed to trial next week — with or without the McMichaels, depending on whether they choose to follow through with their guilty pleas.

Wood continued preparations for trial proceedings, saying she planned to summon the first 50 potential jurors to the courthouse on Feb. 7 for questioning on whether they can serve as fair, unbiased jurors in such a highly publicized case.

During the state trial in Glynn County Superior Court, the defense argued that the white men had authority to chase Arbery because they reasonably suspected he had been committing crimes in their neighborhood. Travis McMichael testified he opened fire only after Arbery attacked him with fists and tried to grab his shotgun.

The federal judge ordered that a jury pool be chosen from throughout the Southern District of Georgia, which covers 43 counties, to improve odds of seating a fair and unbiased jury.

## Georgia DA investigating Trump asks FBI for security help

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The prosecutor who's investigating whether Donald Trump and others broke the law by trying to pressure Georgia officials to overturn Joe Biden's presidential election victory is asking the FBI for security help after the former president railed against prosecutors investigating him.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis on Sunday wrote a letter to the FBI office in Atlanta asking for a risk assessment of the county courthouse, where her office is located, and government center. She also asked the FBI to provide protective resources, "to include intelligence and federal agents."

At his rally Saturday night outside Houston, Trump lashed out against the ongoing investigations in New York, Georgia and Washington and called on his supporters to stage mass protests if he is mistreated by

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them. In her letter, Willis quoted comments Trump made at the rally.

"If these radical, vicious, racist prosecutors do anything wrong or illegal, I hope we are going to have in this country the biggest protest we have ever had in Washington, D.C, in New York, in Atlanta and elsewhere, because our country and our elections are corrupt," Trump said.

The comments were particularly notable given Trump's role in inciting the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol building. Trump also suggested he might pardon those charged for their role in the riot if he runs for president again and wins reelection.

Willis last year opened an investigation into any potential attempts to improperly influence the 2020 general election in Georgia by Trump and his associates. A special grand jury is set to be seated May 2 to aid in that investigation and Willis asked the FBI to take the steps she requested well in advance of that date.

"My staff and I will not be influenced or intimidated by anyone as this investigation moves forward," Willis wrote.

She added that her office has already taken steps to address security concerns "considering the communications we have received from persons unhappy with our commitment to fulfill our duties." She said she's also working with county officials on the need for extra security measures as the investigation progresses.

But she said security concerns were "escalated" over the weekend as Trump focused on the prosecutors looking into his actions, calling them "vicious, horrible people" and "racists." The rhetoric is especially alarming, Willis wrote, in light of Trump's suggestion that if he returns to the White House, he could give pardons to people who stormed the U.S. Capitol last year in an effort to block the certification of Biden's win.

"We must work together to keep the public safe and ensure that we do not have a tragedy in Atlanta similar to what happened at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021," Willis wrote in the letter to the FBI.

Jenna Sellitto, a spokesperson for the FBI in Atlanta, confirmed receipt of the letter and said the agency supports local, state and federal and local law enforcement agencies to maintain public safety.

"Our efforts are focused on identifying, investigating, and disrupting individuals that are inciting violence and engaging in criminal activity," she wrote in an email. "As we do in the normal course of business, we are gathering information to identify any potential threats and are sharing that information with our partners."

In his pushback against the various investigations centered on him, Trump has taken particular aim at New York Attorney General Letitia James, who recently said her office has uncovered evidence that Trump's company used "fraudulent or misleading" valuations of his properties to secure loans and tax benefits. That includes playing a video at a previous rally that features footage of her vowing to take on Trump as she ran for election.

Trump did not mention James, Willis, or any of the others by name Saturday.

Willis has declined to speak about the specifics of her investigation, but in a recent interview with The Associated Press, she confirmed that its scope includes — but is not limited to — a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a November 2020 phone call between U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and Raffensperger, the abrupt resignation of the U.S. attorney in Atlanta on Jan. 4, 2021, and comments made during December 2020 Georgia legislative committee hearings on the election.

In a statement earlier this month, Trump said his call to Raffensperger was "perfect" and said he did not say anything wrong. Graham has also denied any wrongdoing.

## All-out effort to keep Biden COVID-free; no 'normal' yet

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When President Joe Biden met with U.S. governors at the White House on Monday, he was the only one given a glass of water — lest anyone else remove their mask to take a drink.

The president was seated more than 10 feet from everyone, including Vice President Kamala Harris and members of his Cabinet.

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A White House staffer who was wearing a surgical mask when Biden entered the room was quickly handed an N95 version.

These are just some of the extraordinary efforts on the part of the White House to keep the president from getting COVID-19, even though he's gotten both of his regular vaccinations and his booster.

It's no surprise that unusual steps are taken to protect any president. But the strict precautions could also threaten to undercut the Biden administration's own efforts to tell Americans — especially those who are vaccinated and boosted — that they can get on with something closer to their normal lives in the face of the omicron wave.

And it's emblematic of the messaging challenges surrounding the administration's approach to COVID-19 as the virus becomes endemic, familiar and somewhat controlled but still menacing, with hard-to-follow guidelines often unevenly implemented.

For months, Biden aides have fretted that the people who are most protected against COVID-19 remain the most cautious, a dynamic they view as a drag on the nation's economic and psychological recovery.

When the highly transmissible omicron variant hit, Biden said it was a "cause for concern, not cause for panic."

In recent weeks, his aides and science advisers have highlighted study after study showing the strong protection offered by the COVID vaccines against the variant and reassuring vaccinated people they can go about their daily lives. At a Jan. 19 press conference, Biden declared: "We have the tools — vaccines, boosters, masks, tests, pills — to save lives and keep businesses and schools open" and rejected the notion that still-widespread restrictions reflect a "new normal."

"It will get better," he promised.

Since even before Biden was elected, his aides have gone all-out to protect the now-79-year-old president from potential infection. He spent much of the 2020 campaign season holding remote events from a studio in the basement of his home, venturing out for travel in a bubble of frequently tested aides subject to an array of restrictions.

That caution continued well after he was fully vaccinated and living at the White House. The president has held up his administration's fidelity to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines as a virtue, after they were regularly flouted by former President Donald Trump, who became seriously ill after contracting the virus.

As the nation's virus response and vaccination campaign has become increasingly politicized, White House officials have expressed both political and policy concerns over a possible Biden infection. Though the vaccines are highly effective, a breakthrough case could erode public confidence in the shots and be used as a political cudgel against a president who was elected to bring an end to the pandemic.

Biden himself has at times taken a more relaxed approach to restrictions.

When the CDC last May surprised the White House by easing its guidelines on indoor mask-wearing by fully vaccinated individuals, Biden sought to publicly model the policy for the rest of the nation. He was meeting with vaccinated Republican lawmakers when the change was announced and led the group in removing their masks.

But that CDC guidance proved to be premature and was reversed over the summer, because vaccinated people could still transmit the virus, potentially endangering the tens of millions of Americans who are still unvaccinated.

When the delta strain surged last fall, the White House strengthened its testing protocols for everyone close to Biden — restrictions that had been lessened once aides were fully vaccinated and case counts began to fall nationally. In-person meetings were once again curtailed. Aides began increasing the distance between Biden and even vaccinated-and-tested individuals as a precaution, reminiscent of his earliest days in office.

In early January, as the nation's capital led the country in per capita COVID-19 cases, White House press secretary Jen Psaki highlighted the "very strict precautions" taken to keep Biden and Harris safe, including mandatory mask-wearing and daily testing for those coming in contact with them.

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She also said the White House had taken to limiting gatherings "to under 30 people." But there were nearly 40 participants named by the administration — as well as two dozen members of the press — at Biden's Monday meeting with the governors.

Psaki said the administration takes extra precautions any time the president removes his mask to speak to a group. She noted that the nation continues to set records in reported cases and hospital admissions.

"The president's view is that right now we still need to keep our heads down and stay at it to fight what is still surging in parts of the country," she said. "But we do have the tools to get to a point where it does not disrupt our daily lives."

Biden, aides say, has relished opportunities outside the White House when he can engage in the sort of political glad-handing that has been suppressed by the pandemic. And in public, he's chafed at some of the precautions, saying that the first thing he aims to do differently in his second year in the White House is "I'm going to get out of this place more often."

He's hardly alone in his impatience.

On Monday, seated across a large gap from Biden in the East Room, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, the chair of the governors' association, appealed for the government to more clearly define a pathway out of the pandemic.

"We need the CDC to help us to have the right standards to end this pandemic and move to more endemic status," he said. "We want to go from today to more normal."

The night before, the president and first lady Jill Biden did attend the black-tie National Governors Association dinner at Mount Vernon. Biden spoke, but he didn't stay for dinner.

## **Boris Johnson says sorry after report slams lockdown parties**

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson apologized Monday after an inquiry found that Downing Street parties while Britain was in lockdown represented a "serious failure" to observe the standards expected of government or to heed the sacrifices made by millions of people during the pandemic.

Johnson brushed off calls to quit over the "partygate" scandal, promising to reform the way his office is run and insisting that he and his government can be trusted. But he faced criticism from some of his own Conservative colleagues, who have the power to oust a leader some fear has become damaged goods. One Conservative lawmaker accused the prime minister of taking him for "a fool."

"I get it, and I will fix it," Johnson said in Parliament after senior civil servant Sue Gray published interim findings on several gatherings in 2020 and 2021 while the U.K. was under government-imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Gray found that "failures of leadership and judgment" allowed events to occur that "should not have been allowed to take place."

"The hardship under which citizens across the country worked, lived and sadly even died while observing the government's regulations and guidance rigorously are known only too well," Gray wrote.

"Against the backdrop of the pandemic, when the government was asking citizens to accept far-reaching restrictions on their lives, some of the behavior surrounding these gatherings is difficult to justify," she added.

Gray's glimpse inside a 10 Downing St. marked by excessive alcohol consumption and staff afraid to speak out about workplace problems are a blow to Johnson, despite the fact that Gray's conclusions relate to just four of the 16 events she investigated.

Her findings on 12 others have been withheld at the request of the Metropolitan Police force, to avoid "any prejudice" to a criminal investigation launched last week into the most serious alleged breaches of coronavirus rules.

The force said Monday that it would be interviewing party attendees and looking at more than 300 photos and over 500 pages of documents it had received from Gray's team. Anyone found guilty, including the prime minister, could face a fine.

Among the events under police investigation are a June 2020 birthday party for Johnson in Downing

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Street and two gatherings held on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral in April 2021 — a service at which the widowed Queen Elizabeth II had to sit alone.

The allegations that the prime minister and his staff flouted restrictions imposed on the country — holding "bring your own booze" office parties, birthday celebrations and "wine time Fridays" — have caused public anger, led some Conservative lawmakers to call for Johnson's resignation and triggered intense infighting inside the governing party.

Opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said the British public had made "heart-wrenching sacrifices" and endured "a collective trauma" during the pandemic.

He said the prime minister "held people's sacrifice in contempt. He showed himself unfit for office."

Johnson can ignore opposition criticism, because the Conservatives have a large majority in Parliament. His fate rests on how Conservative lawmakers respond to his apology. Some previously said they would push for a no-confidence vote if Gray found Johnson was at serious fault or had misled Parliament with his previous insistence that no rules had been broken. If Johnson lost such a vote, he would be replaced as party leader and prime minister.

Johnson urged his critics to wait for the conclusions of the police investigation.

But one Conservative legislator, Andrew Mitchell, said in the House of Commons that Johnson "no longer has my support."

Another, Aaron Bell, recalled attending his grandmother's small, socially distanced funeral in May 2020 and asked: "Does the prime minister think I'm a fool?"

Former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May said that either Johnson and those around him "had not read the rules, or didn't understand what they meant. ... Or they didn't think the rules applied to No. 10. Which was it?"

Gray did not criticize the prime minister directly, but said "there is significant learning to be drawn from these events which must be addressed immediately across government."

That is unlikely to satisfy many of Johnson's critics, some of whom accused the government of an attempted cover-up.

"This whole thing is a whitewash, there is no intent for anyone to tell the truth or be held accountable," said David Garfinkel, a member of the group COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. "We have a prime minister who lies, who lies about lies and he is utterly insincere and incapable of leading."

The government initially refused to promise that it would publish Gray's full findings once the police investigation is finished. But after pressure from Conservative lawmakers, Johnson's office committed to publishing her updated report.

Johnson, meanwhile, sought to change the subject from his personal woes, marking the second anniversary of Brexit on Monday by touting economic opportunities outside the European Union.

The U.K. officially left the now 27-nation bloc on Jan. 31, 2020, though it remained part of the EU's economic structures for another 11 months.

Johnson announced a "Brexit Freedoms" Bill that the government says will slash red tape for British businesses by amending laws that were carried over from the U.K.'s years as an EU member.

Johnson also plans a diplomatic push to try to ease tensions between Russia and Ukraine. He is expected to speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin by phone later Monday or Tuesday and to visit Ukraine on Tuesday as part of efforts to deter Russia from invading its neighbor.

Some political observers said Gray's circumscribed and partial report may give Johnson at least a temporary reprieve from calls for his ouster.

"It's too soon to tell," said Alex Thomas, program director at the Institute for Government think-tank.

"It avoided some of the most damaging outcomes that we might have expected. ... But in a way the more you read it, the more you look at the descriptions of the culture and the failings of leadership, the more damaging it was."

**White House: No 'gaming the system' on Supreme Court pick**

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By COLLEEN LONG and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will meet with Senate Judiciary Committee leaders on Tuesday to discuss the upcoming U.S. Supreme Court vacancy and the president's promise to nominate a Black woman to the high court. Aides said Biden's list of potential candidates is longer than three.

The White House also pushed back Monday on the idea that the president would be open to "gaming the system" by choosing a nominee solely based on her likelihood of garnering bipartisan support.

Judiciary Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and ranking minority member Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, will meet with Biden at the White House to go over potential nominees to replace Justice Stephen Breyer, who announced his retirement last week. Biden himself served as head of the Judiciary Committee when he was a senator and presided over the confirmations of six high court picks, including Breyer.

"He's steeped in this process," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Monday, "and looks forward to advice from members of both parties on the Hill as well as top legal experts and scholars across the country. I think you will see those consultations start this week."

Biden has said since his campaign that he would nominate a Black woman to the nation's highest court and he personally interviewed a few of the nominees when they were under consideration for appointment to the federal bench. Some Republicans have already voiced support for U.S. District Court Judge J. Michelle Childs, who is a favorite of key Democratic ally South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn. But the White House pushed back on the idea of choosing a candidate just to get bipartisan support, saying Biden would choose the best woman for the job, period.

"The president is going to select a woman, a Black woman, who is qualified, who is prepared, who has impeccable experience to serve on the court. He's going to do that based on her credentials, of course having a discussion with her and not through gaming out the system," Psaki said.

The White House has yet to designate an official to shepherd the process. But White House officials expect top lawyers in the White House Counsel's office plus White House chief of staff Ron Klain, who has decades of experience working on nominees, to help in the selection process. Biden has pledged a pick by the end of February.

On Monday, Durbin said he wanted a speedy confirmation but did not want to arbitrarily rush the process. He said he does not want to put his "thumb on the scale" in talks with Biden, but having a nominee who is a sitting judge "makes the argument more credible" as he is reaching out to Republicans.

Durbin, who is serving his fifth term in the Senate, has been having conversations with GOP senators who he thinks could potentially vote for a Biden nominee. He said his list is "longer than you would imagine," partly because of his longstanding relationships with Republicans on the Judiciary panel and elsewhere.

A bipartisan vote, he said, "is not only good for the Supreme Court, but it's good for the Senate."

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., reiterated that "the Senate will have a fair process that moves quickly so we can confirm President Biden's nominee to fill Justice Breyer's seat as soon as possible."

Among the nominees under consideration are Ketanji Brown Jackson, who serves on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, U.S. District Court Judge Wilhelmina Wright from Minnesota and Melissa Murray, a New York University law professor who is an expert in family law and reproductive rights justice.

Childs, who has been nominated to the same appeals circuit where Jackson presides, is Clyburn's choice. Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott, both of South Carolina, have both expressed support for Childs.

"I can't think of a better person for President Biden to consider for the Supreme Court than Michelle Childs," Graham said Sunday on CBS. "She has wide support in our state."

Breyer, 83, will retire at the end of the term. Any nominee by Biden won't affect the balance of the Supreme Court, which tips 6-3 in favor of conservatives after President Donald Trump put three justices on the court.

**California moves to dismantle nation's largest death row**

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By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who three years ago placed a moratorium on executions, now is moving to dismantle the United States' largest death row by moving all condemned inmates to other prisons within two years.

The goal is to turn the section at San Quentin State Prison into a "positive, healing environment." Newsom said Monday it's an outgrowth of his opposition to what he believes is a deeply flawed system, one that "gets my blood boiling."

"The prospect of your ending up on death row has more to do with your wealth and race than it does your guilt or innocence," he said. "We talk about justice, we preach justice, but as a nation, we don't practice it on death row."

California, which last carried out an execution in 2006, is one of 28 states that maintain death rows, along with the U.S. government, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. While other states like Illinois have abolished executions, California is merging its condemned inmates into the general prison population with no expectation that any will face execution anytime in the near future.

"We are starting the process of closing death row to repurpose and transform the current housing units into something innovative and anchored in rehabilitation," California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokeswoman Vicky Waters told The Associated Press.

Oregon similarly transferred its much smaller condemned population to other inmate housing two years ago.

Newsom, a Democrat, imposed a moratorium on executions in 2019 and shut down the state's execution chamber at San Quentin, north of San Francisco. Now his administration is turning on its head a 2016 voter-approved initiative intended to expedite executions by capitalizing on one provision that allowed inmates to be moved off death row.

"The underlying motive of the administration is to mainstream as many of these condemned murderers as possible," said Michael Rushford, president of the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation, which backed the initiative. "Our objective was to speed up the process."

He added he doesn't think victims are happy with the administration's decision.

"They're moving condemned murderers into facilities that are going to make their lives better and offer them more amenities, while the victims still mourn the death of their family member," Rushford said.

Newsom said voters approved the move, though he doubts many understood the provision.

"When they affirmed the death penalty, they also affirmed a responsibility ... to actually move that population on death row out and to get them working," Newsom said.

Newsom is "pouring more salt on the wounds of the victims," countered Crime Victims United of California president Nina Salarno. "He's usurping the law."

Actor Mike Farrell, president of the group Death Penalty Focus, which opposes the death penalty, said he is thrilled with the idea but concerned by transfers he said could turn condemned inmates into "very ripe targets" for other prisoners.

"We're talking about people who have been in a specific kind of isolation for decades," living with the prospect of execution, Farrell said. "To simply move them without very serious consideration of their needs, their personal issues, their psychological state and their safety would be a hideous mistake."

Corrections officials began a voluntary two-year pilot program in January 2020 that as of Friday had moved 116 of the state's 673 condemned male inmates to one of seven other prisons that have maximum security facilities and are surrounded by lethal electrified fences.

They intend to submit permanent proposed regulations within weeks that would make the transfers mandatory and "allow for the repurposing of all death row housing units," Waters said.

The ballot measure approved six years ago also required condemned inmates to participate in prison jobs, with 70% of the money going for restitution to their victims, and corrections officials said that's their goal with the transfers. By the end of last year, more than \$49,000 in restitution had been collected under the pilot program.

Newsom's proposed budget for the fiscal year starting July 1 seeks \$1.5 million to find new uses for the

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vacant condemned housing.

It notes that death row and its supporting activities are in the same area as facilities used for rehabilitation programs for medium-security San Quentin inmates. The money would be used to hire a consultant to "develop options for (the) space focused on creating a positive, healing environment to provide increased rehabilitative, educational and health care opportunities."

San Quentin's never-used \$853,000 execution chamber is in a separate area of the prison, and there are no plans to "repurpose" that area, Waters said.

California voters supported the death penalty in 2012 and 2016. An advisory panel to Newsom and lawmakers, the Committee on Revision of the Penal Code, in November became the latest to recommend repealing the death penalty, calling it "beyond repair."

Under the state's transfer program, condemned inmates moved to other prisons can be housed in solitary or disciplinary confinement if officials decide they cannot be safely housed with others, although they are supposed to be interspersed with other inmates. Inmates on death row are housed one to a cell, but the transferred inmates can be housed with others if it's deemed safe.

"There have been no safety concerns, and no major disciplinary issues have occurred," Waters said.

When it comes to jobs and other rehabilitation activities, condemned inmates outside death row are treated similarly to inmates serving sentences of life without parole. That includes a variety of jobs such as maintenance and administrative duties, according to prison officials.

The condemned inmates are counted more often and are constantly supervised during activities, officials said.

Before they are moved, they are "carefully screened to determine whether they can safely participate in the program," according to the department. That includes things like each inmate's security level, medical, psychiatric and other needs, their behavior, safety concerns and notoriety.

Female condemned inmates are housed at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla. They can transfer to less restrictive housing within the same prison, and eight of the 21 have done so.

## **Sony's PlayStation buys Bungie, game studio with Xbox ties**

BELLEVUE, Wash. (AP) — PlayStation-maker Sony is escalating its competition with Xbox-maker Microsoft by buying the video game studio behind one of Xbox's hit games.

Sony Interactive Entertainment said Monday it would spend \$3.6 billion to buy Bungie Inc., an independent game publisher based in Bellevue, Washington. Bungie makes the popular game franchise Destiny and was the original developer of Xbox-owned Halo.

Microsoft bought Bungie in 2000, but later spun off the game studio in 2007 while retaining intellectual property rights to the Halo franchise.

Sony is one of the world's biggest video game companies, but Microsoft has been ramping up its gaming ambitions, most recently by announcing plans to buy high-profile game publisher Activision Blizzard for \$68.7 billion. Acquiring the owner of titles like Call of Duty and Candy Crush would immediately put Microsoft ahead of Nintendo as the third-biggest gaming company in global sales, behind Japan's Sony and Chinese tech giant Tencent.

Xbox's top executive, Phil Spencer, told news site Axios last year that "we've learned a lot" since letting go of Bungie. Spencer on Monday tweeted his congratulations to PlayStation for "adding a talented team" to its game studios.

Bungie started in Chicago in 1991 and made its early hits, such as Myth and Marathon, for personal computers. It now employs about 900 people and is based not far from Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Washington. Sony's video game division is centered in San Mateo, California.

## **Mandate to vaccinate New Orleans schoolchildren kicking in**

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — As school systems across the U.S. struggle to keep classrooms open amid the pandemic, New Orleans is set to become the nation's first major district to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations

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for children 5 and up, though state regulations will allow parents to opt out easily.

Ahead of Tuesday's deadline, many schools in the city have been holding vaccination events, including one at KIPP Believe school.

One by one, dozens of children presented their signed permission slips, pushed up the sleeves of their pale yellow school uniform shirts and — often wincing, but rarely with tears — received a shot. Then they got candy.

Some said they had loved ones who had gotten the coronavirus and wanted to do what they could to protect their families. Others said their parents decided. Eight-year-old Nyla Carey had talked to her mother.

"She said that the COVID shot was to protect you. And so now I want to be brave," the third-grader said before going back to class.

Schools Superintendent Henderson Lewis said the requirement, announced in December in the district of nearly 46,000 students, won't lead to youngsters being kicked out of school come Tuesday.

Waivers for those opposed to vaccination are easy to obtain under state regulations, and schools will work with students who aren't inoculated, he said. But eventually everyone will have to be vaccinated or have a waiver.

New Orleans is a Democratic enclave in a red state, and the city and the district are outliers in the South, where many parents and elected officials have balked at measures to control the coronavirus.

In fact, Louisiana Health Department guidelines say parents can obtain waivers from any immunization simply by citing medical, religious or philosophical objections.

Tulane University epidemiologist Susan Hassig said that even with the waiver option, the mandate is a good way to get students vaccinated. She said parents who were a little unsure or hadn't gotten around to it will have a stronger motivation to get their kids' shots.

The New Orleans public school system consists entirely of charter schools, which are taxpayer-supported but independently operated. It has a mask mandate in place, and thousands of students are tested weekly. There's been little of the public controversy seen in other districts, where parents have berated school boards.

Henderson said the mandate was a bottom-up decision, with charter school operators across the district submitting letters of support, as opposed to district officials imposing the policy on their own.

About one-quarter of the district's schools were closed to in-person learning in mid-January as the omicron wave hit staff members and students, according to Henderson.

Christine Pitts of the Center on Reinventing Public Education suggested that the charter schools' habit of operating independently might have played a role in their support for the vaccine requirement.

The measure is also in step with others taken by the city at large to curb the virus, including a recently reinstated mask mandate and vaccination requirements for everyone 5 and older to enter certain places, such as restaurants.

A few other school districts around the country have taken similar measures. Students in Washington, D.C., will be required to be vaccinated by March 1. The Los Angeles school system delayed a requirement that students 12 and up be vaccinated after it became clear that thousands of unvaccinated students who didn't meet the requirement would have to do online learning.

But many states have gone the other direction, in some cases banning schools from mandating the vaccine.

About 55% of all 5- to 17-year-olds in New Orleans have had at least one dose of the vaccine, according to city figures. Statewide the number is about 26%. That compares with 66% of 12- to 17-year-olds and 30% of 5- to 11-year-olds nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tulane's Cowen Institute, which studies education issues, surveyed New Orleans parents in October and found that vaccine mandates for students were opposed by 48% and supported by 44%. Black parents and parents in lower-income brackets were more strongly opposed.

About 60% of the city is Black and 24% of the city is in poverty, according to census figures.

But the report's author, Vincent Rossmeier, noted that in the rapidly changing pandemic, a few months

can make a big difference. Since the poll was taken, vaccines have become available for 5- to 11-year-olds, and the omicron variant has caused widespread school disruptions.

Outside Bricolage Academy, Renee Price waited to pick up her 10-year-old son. He was vaccinated about a month ago, and she was glad. She doesn't want him missing any more school or having to go to Zoom classes again.

"They get vaccines for other things to go to school. So I don't see there's that much difference," she said.

At Warren Easton High School, Likithe McNeil was ready to lay down the law to get her 16-year-old vaccinated but didn't have to after they talked about how it would make it easier for the girl to get back to school and see her friends. McNeil said she does not have a problem with the mandate.

"We'll never get back to normal if we don't do what we need to do," she said.

But some parents are more concerned. Michel Palmer, who waited in a long line of cars at Lake Forest Charter to pick up her 8- and 10-year-olds, said she is a little hesitant about the vaccine and hasn't gotten herself or her kids vaccinated. She applied for and received a waiver.

"It's up to the parents to decide whether they want to get their kids vaccinated," she said.

## Measuring climate change: It's not just heat, it's humidity

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

When it comes to measuring global warming, humidity, not just heat, matters in generating dangerous climate extremes, a new study finds.

Researchers say temperature by itself isn't the best way to measure climate change's weird weather and downplays impacts in the tropics. But factoring in air moisture along with heat shows that climate change since 1980 is nearly twice as bad as previously calculated, according to their study in Monday's Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The energy generated in extreme weather, such as storms, floods and rainfall is related to the amount of water in the air. So a team of scientists in the U.S. and China decided to use an obscure weather measurement called equivalent potential temperature — or theta-e — that reflects "the moisture energy of the atmosphere," said study co-author V. "Ram" Ramanathan, a climate scientist at the University of California San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Cornell University. It's expressed in degrees, like temperature.

"There are two drivers of climate change: temperature and humidity," Ramanathan said. "And so far we measured global warming just in terms of temperature."

But by adding the energy from humidity, "the extremes — heat waves, rainfall and other measures of extremes — correlate much better," he said.

That's because as the world warms, the air holds more moisture, nearly 4% for every degree Fahrenheit (7% for every degree Celsius). When that moisture condenses, it releases heat or energy, "that's why when it rains, now it pours," Ramanathan said.

In addition, water vapor is a potent heat-trapping gas in the atmosphere that increases climate change, he said.

From 1980 to 2019, the world warmed about 1.42 degrees (0.79 degrees Celsius). But taking energy from humidity into account, the world has warmed and moistened 2.66 degrees (1.48 degrees Celsius), the study said. And in the tropics, the warming was as much as 7.2 degrees (4 degrees Celsius).

When judging by temperature alone, it looks like warming is most pronounced in North America, mid-latitudes and especially the poles — and less so in the tropics, Ramanathan said.

But that's not the case, he said, because the high humidity in the tropics juices up storm activity, from regular storms to tropical cyclones and monsoons.

"This increase in latent energy is released in the air which leads to weather extremes: floods, storms and droughts," Ramanathan said.

University of Illinois climate scientist Donald Wuebbles, who wasn't part of the study, said it makes sense because water vapor is key in extreme rainfall. "Both heat and humidity are important," Wuebbles said.

Environmental scientist Katharine Mach of the University of Miami, who wasn't part of the study, said "humidity is key in shaping the impacts of heat on human health and well-being, at present and into the future."

## US gives full approval to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health regulators on Monday granted full approval to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, a shot that's already been given to tens of millions of Americans since its emergency authorization over a year ago.

The action by the Food and Drug Administration means the agency has completed the same rigorous, time-consuming review of Moderna's shot as dozens of other long-established vaccines.

The decision was bolstered by real-world evidence from the more than 200 million doses administered in the U.S. since the FDA cleared the shot in December 2020. The FDA granted full approval of Pfizer's vaccine last August.

Public health advocates initially hoped the regulatory distinction would boost public confidence in the shots. But there was no discernable bump in vaccinations after the Pfizer approval, which was heavily promoted by President Joe Biden and other federal officials. Still, regulators said Monday they hoped the extra endorsement would encourage more people to get vaccinated.

More than 211 million Americans, or 63% of the total population, are fully vaccinated. About 86 million people have gotten a booster dose. Vaccinations peaked last spring at more than 3 million per day, and now average less than 750,000 per day. The pace of vaccinations briefly spiked following news of the omicron variant in December but has since slowed again.

The FDA reviewed months of additional follow-up data submitted by Moderna to confirm the vaccine's effectiveness against COVID-19. The FDA also analyzed and kept watch for serious side effects that have proved to be very rare. The vaccine includes a warning about a rare type of heart inflammation that mostly occurs in young men following the second dose. Most cases are mild and resolve quickly.

Additionally, FDA reviewed the company's manufacturing process and facilities.

"The public can be assured that this vaccine was approved in keeping with the FDA's rigorous scientific standards," said Dr. Peter Marks, FDA's top vaccine regulator, in a statement.

With full approval, Moderna will now market the vaccine under the brand name, Spikevax. It is the first FDA-approved product for the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based company.

In the U.S., Moderna is used only by adults, for initial vaccination and as a half-dose booster. The company said last fall that FDA had delayed deciding whether to clear the shots for 12- to 17-year-olds as it examined the heart inflammation risk.

Johnson & Johnson has not yet applied for full approval of its COVID-19 vaccine.

Also Monday, Novavax Inc. formally requested FDA authorization of a different type of COVID-19 vaccine, in hopes of becoming the fourth U.S. option.

## Kentucky jumps to No. 5 in AP Top 25; Auburn, Gonzaga 1-2

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Auburn keeps winning, Kentucky is rising and that has the Southeastern Conference putting its imprint atop this week's The Associated Press men's college basketball poll.

Bruce Pearl's Tigers earned 49 of 61 first-place votes in Monday's new poll to extend the program's first stay at No. 1 for a second straight week, while John Calipari's Wildcats jumped to No. 5 for the program's highest ranking in the AP Top 25 in more than two years. The SEC has a pair of top-five teams for the first time in nearly three years.

Auburn (20-1) has won 17 straight games since losing a double-overtime game to Connecticut in November. The Tigers earned a narrow win at Missouri in their first game at No. 1 then followed with Saturday's home win against Oklahoma, not to mention the school reaching a deal with Pearl for an eight-year contract.

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"It's been a good week," Pearl said with a chuckle after the Sooners win.

Kentucky (17-4) had the week's biggest jump, rising seven spots after winning by 18 at Kansas on Saturday. This marks the highest ranking for Kentucky since the 2019-20 season, when the Wildcats spent one week at No. 1 in the first regular-season poll and sat at No. 6 in early March.

"Every time we play like a team ... I don't think anybody can stop us," Wildcats big man Oscar Tshiebwe said after the Kansas win.

This marks the first time the SEC had two top-five teams since February 2019, when Kentucky was fourth and Tennessee was fifth.

## THE TOP TIER

Gonzaga remained at No. 2 and earned the other 12 first-place votes. UCLA climbed to No. 3, followed by Purdue — which claimed its first No. 1 ranking earlier this season. The Bruins opened the year at No. 2 and have now spent 11 weeks inside the top five, the Boilermakers nine.

## CHAMPS' STUMBLE

Houston and Arizona were next after Kentucky, followed by reigning national champion Baylor, which has stumbled after a 15-0 start and a 21-game winning streak that began with last year's title run.

Baylor spent five weeks at No. 1 but has split its last six games after Saturday's loss at Alabama. And the Bears' four-spot slide marked the first time the Big 12 hasn't had at least one team in the top five since the final poll of the 2018-19 season.

Baylor remains the only team in the country to rank in the top 10 of KenPom's adjusted offensive efficiency (118.8 points per 100 possessions) and adjusted defensive efficiency (89.1).

## RISING

While Kentucky had the biggest jump, No. 18 Illinois also had a notable move by climbing six spots following last week's win against Michigan State. In all, nine teams rose in Monday's poll.

## SLIDING

Kansas fell five spots to No. 10 after its loss to Kentucky, but it was No. 25 LSU that took the week's biggest tumble. The Tigers fell six spots after losing at TCU.

No. 19 Southern California and No. 22 Tennessee joined Arizona and Baylor in falling four spots. In all, nine teams fell from last week's rankings.

## STATUS QUO

Six teams remained locked in place for a second straight week, including No. 9 Duke, No. 11 Wisconsin, No. 16 Ohio State and No. 21 Xavier.

## WELCOME BACK

Texas re-joined the poll at No. 23 as the lone new addition following a one-week absence in a season that saw the Longhorns open at No. 5.

## FAREWELL (FOR NOW)

Davidson fell out of the poll from No. 25 after earning the program's first AP Top 25 ranking since March 2015.

## CONFERENCE WATCH

The Big 12, Big East and Big Ten tied for the national lead with five ranked teams each in Monday's poll. The SEC has four, followed by the Pac-12's three. The Atlantic Coast, West Coast and American Athletic conferences each had one ranked team.

## Ukraine security chief: Minsk peace deal may create chaos

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's security chief warned the West on Monday against forcing the country to fulfill a peace deal for eastern Ukraine brokered by France and Germany, charging that an attempt to implement it could trigger internal unrest that would benefit Moscow.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, told The Associated Press that Ukraine has the capability to call up to 2.5 million people if Russia invades.

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He said that about 120,000 Russian troops are concentrated near Ukraine and Moscow may stage provocations "at any moment," but argued that launching a full-fledged invasion would require massive preparations that would be easily spotted.

"The preparatory period that will be noticed by the entire world could take from three to seven days," Danilov said. "We aren't seeing it yet. We clearly understand what's going on and we are calmly preparing for it."

He deplored the decision by the U.S., Britain, Australia, Germany and Canada to withdraw some of their diplomats and dependents from the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, saying the move "wasn't pleasant for us" and emphasizing that "we don't think that there is a threat right now."

U.S. President Joe Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a call Thursday that there is a "distinct possibility" that Russia could invade the country in February. But the Ukrainian leader played down the war fears, arguing Friday that the Russian troop buildup could be part of Moscow's attempts to exert "psychological pressure" and sow panic.

"We can't allow panic in the country," Danilov told the AP. "It's very difficult for us to maintain control over the economic situation when all the media keep saying that the war will start tomorrow. Panic is a sister of defeat."

Danilov said that Ukraine has the potential to quickly and dramatically beef up its 250,000-strong military in case of a Russian offensive.

"They will face a response from our society, our citizens, our military," Danilov told the AP. "We can put 2 (million) to 2.5 million people under arms."

He noted that up to 420,000 Ukrainians have gained combat experience in fighting with Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and up to 1 million in the nation of 41 million people have hunting licenses.

Danilov pointed at the Ukrainian Interior Ministry's announcement Monday that it had thwarted a plot to stage riots in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin hopes to achieve his goal of destroying Ukraine through internal destabilization even without an invasion.

"Regrettably, we have many agents of influence of the Russian Federation here, who are behind the plans of destabilizing our country from within," he said pointing at a pro-Russian party that has a sizeable presence in Ukraine's parliament.

After the 2014 ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed an 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 there have stalled.

Since the start of the separatist conflict in Ukraine, Russia has been accused of sending troops and weapons to the separatists, something it has denied. It has given out over 700,000 Russian passports to people living in rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine.

"I have a question: Why the West is not reacting to that?" Danilov said.

He argued that Ukraine needs to revise the 2015 peace deal signed in Minsk that requires Ukraine to provide a broad autonomy to the rebel-held east and a sweeping amnesty to the rebels.

"The fulfillment of the Minsk agreement means the country's destruction," Danilov said. "When they were signed under the Russian gun barrel — and the German and the French watched — it was already clear for all rational people that it's impossible to implement those documents."

The agreement, which was brokered by France and Germany after a string of Ukrainian military defeats, was widely abhorred by the Ukrainian public as a betrayal of their national interests. Zelenskyy and his officials have made repeated calls for its modification.

Moscow has staunchly refused to amend the Minsk agreement and criticized Ukraine's Western allies for failing to encourage Ukraine to fulfill its obligations.

Envoys from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met Wednesday for more than eight hours in Paris to discuss ways to implement the Minsk agreement. They made no visible progress but agreed to meet again in two weeks in Berlin.

Danilov warned the West against pressuring Ukraine into fulfilling the Minsk deal, saying it would provoke

dangerous instability.

"If they insist on the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements as they are it will be very dangerous for our country," he said. "If the society doesn't accept those agreements, it could lead to a very difficult internal situation and Russia counts on that."

He also argued that if Ukraine honors the deal it, that will allow Russia to demand the lifting of Western sanctions that were contingent on progress in implementing the Minsk agreement.

Danilov called for negotiating a new document that could be realistically implemented, adding that it should force "Putin to simply pull his troops and tanks back."

He denounced the Russian demands for NATO to bar Ukraine from ever joining the alliance, saying that the country, a former Soviet republic, has made a choice to seek to integrate into NATO and the European Union, which is reflected in its constitution. It is not a member of either bloc at this time.

"No one has the right to dictate to us whether we should or shouldn't join alliances," Danilov said. "It's our people's sovereign right."

He also noted that Ukraine needs more Western weapons, saying "it's our only request to our partners — give us more weapons to defend ourselves."

He criticized Germany for refusing to provide Ukraine with weapons, charging that Berlin has also failed to properly apologize to Ukrainians for Nazi crimes during World War II when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union.

"Regrettably, they haven't apologized for killing millions of our citizens," he said. "They apologize to the Russians as if we were one country. They shouldn't talk about democracy then and say that they support authoritarian regimes and partner with them."

## **Faith in the metaverse: A VR quest for community, fellowship**

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

Under quarantine for COVID-19 exposure, Garret Bernal and his family missed a recent Sunday church service. So he strapped on a virtual reality headset and explored what it would be like to worship in the metaverse.

Without leaving his home in Richmond, Virginia, he was soon floating in a 3D outer-space wonderland of pastures, rocky cliffs and rivers, as the avatar of a pastor guided him and others through computer-generated illustrations of Biblical passages that seemed to come to life as they prayed.

"I couldn't have had such an immersive church experience sitting in my pew. I was able to see the scriptures in a new way," said Bernal, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known as the Mormon church.

He's among many Americans — some traditionally religious, some religiously unaffiliated — who are increasingly communing spiritually through virtual reality, one of the many evolving spaces in the metaverse that have grown in popularity during the coronavirus pandemic.

Ranging from spiritual meditations in fantasy worlds to traditional Christian worship services with virtual sacraments in hyperrealistic, churchlike environments, their devotees say the experience offers a version of fellowship that's just as genuine as what can be found at a brick-and-mortar temple.

"The most important aspect to me, which was very real, was the closer connection with God that I felt in my short time here," Bernal said.

The service he attended was hosted by VR Church, which was founded in 2016 by D.J. Soto, a former high school teacher and pastor at a nonvirtual church. VR Church bills itself as a spiritual community existing "entirely in the metaverse to celebrate God's love for the world."

Soto had previously felt called to church planting, or starting new physical churches. But after discovering the VR social platform AltSpaceVR, he was awakened to the possibilities of connecting in virtual reality. He set out to create an inclusive Christian church in the metaverse, an immersive virtual world that has been gaining buzz since Facebook said last October that it would invest billions in building it out.

Attendance was scant for the first year as Soto often found himself preaching to just a handful of people

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at a time, most of them atheists and agnostics who were more interested in debating about faith. His congregation has since grown to about 200 people, and he has ordained other ministers remotely from his Virginia home and baptized believers who are unable to leave their houses because of illnesses.

"The future of the church is the metaverse," Soto said. "It's not an anti-physical thing. I don't think the physical gatherings should go away. But in the church of 2030, the main focus is going to be your meta-verse campus."

The Rev. Jeremy Nickel, an ordained Unitarian Universalist who is based in Colorado and calls himself a VR evangelist, also saw the potential to build community and "get away from the brick and mortar" when he founded SacredVR in 2017.

Inspired by time spent in Nepal with Tibetan Buddhists and his alternative practices studies at seminary, Nickel began with secular meditations with the aim of being inclusive for all comers. But some religiously unaffiliated members of the community were put off by the name, he noticed, so he changed it to EvolVR and more people joined.

It wasn't until the pandemic, however, that attendance soared from a few dozen to the hundreds who now attend dharma talks and meditation sessions via their chosen avatars, at times meeting at a virtual incarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist temple high in the mountains or floating weightlessly looking down at the Earth.

"One of the reasons we've become so popular is you get the meditation that you need, but you get the community also," Nickel said. "We have deep relationships, hundreds of people from around the world who know each other and wonder, 'Is your dog, OK? How's your wife?'"

The anonymity of virtual reality can help people feel more confident about sharing deeply personal issues, said Bill Willenbrock, who leads a Christian fellowship on the social platform VRChat with worship and counseling services for a flock of mostly teens and early 20-somethings.

"I can't even count the number of times that I've heard, 'I'm considering suicide. ... It's helpful that we're in VR,'" said Willenbrock, a hospital chaplain and longtime Lutheran pastor who recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy and calls himself a "digital missionary."

On a recent Sunday, he preached at a cavernous virtual cathedral, its long halls illuminated by light from stained-glass windows. A colorful assembly of avatars listened to the sermon: A giant banana sitting in the first pew next to another of a man in a shirt and tie, plus a mushroom, a fox, armored knights.

At the end they took turns sharing why they came to the virtual community. Some saw it as something to complement, not replace, in-person gatherings.

A person with the username Biff Tannen, said it was convenient: "For example here in Scotland it's cold, it's wet, it's not very nice outside, but here I am sitting in this beautiful church with my heating on."

Another, represented by a robotlike avatar and the username UncleTuskle, said that "as a person with social phobia, it's easier for me to be here" than in a physical church.

Virtual reality can allow people to meet without judgement regardless of physical ability or appearance, said Paul Raushenbush, who is senior advisor for public affairs and innovation at the nonprofit Interfaith Youth Core and who hosted a VR talk show last month with religious leaders who use the technology.

"What I love about it is that it's taking ... whatever technological opportunities are being offered and they're leveraging it to gather people together for positive encounters," Raushenbush said. "And they're changing lives."

Alina Delp can attest to that.

A former flight attendant who traveled across the country for years and loved to skydive, since 2010 she has been mostly confined to her home in Olympia, Washington, due to a rare neurovascular condition called erythromelalgia.

She wept the first time she attended a VR Church service, knowing immediately that she had found a home. Delp was taken by the community's judgment-free ethos and focus on "God's love rather than fear." She began to volunteer with small groups, and eventually became a pastor.

"I was given a life. ... It's the difference between endless time of sleep and television versus my ability to be productive," she said.

Soto baptized her in a metaverse ceremony in 2018, submerging her purple robot avatar in a pool as relatives and friends cheered her on virtually. While even many VR proponents believe such sacraments should be offered only in a physical space, to Delp it felt like a real blessing.

"Jesus is who baptized me. Jesus is who changes me," she said. "The water, or lack thereof ... doesn't have the power to change me."

## **Burkina Faso suspends trial on killing of ex-leader Sankara**

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso (AP) — The long-awaited trial on the killing of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's influential leftist leader killed more than three decades ago, has been suspended as a result of the West African country's recent coup.

The trial has been paused until the constitution is reestablished, a lawyer for the prosecution said Monday.

The suspension comes one week after a military junta overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kabore, suspended the constitution and dissolved the national assembly.

Prosper Farama, one of the lawyers for the Sankara family called the suspension a good thing that would respect everyone's rights. "We have to be patient until the constitution is reestablished for things to be legal," he said.

The president of the military tribunal said the trial would resume 24 hours after the constitution was established. On Monday, the junta released a seven-page document declaring junta leader, Lt. Col. Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, as president and detailing laws for the country. The trial might resume within a few days, according to Farama, the Sankara family lawyer.

Lauded as a major step for justice in the country, the trial began in Oct. in a military court in the capital, Ouagadougou. Closing arguments were expected to begin last week before mutinous soldiers seized control of the country.

Fourteen people are being charged for Sankara's killing, including former President Blaise Compaore, who ousted Sankara in a 1987 coup. Compaore is charged with complicity, undermining state security and concealing corpses, according to military documents seen by The Associated Press. He's being tried in absentia, as he has been in exile in Ivory Coast since he was toppled in 2014.

Immediate reactions to the suspension of the Sankara trial were mixed with supporters of the junta saying the trial was politically motivated by former president Kabore.

"We want a Sankara trial without political manipulation, we want the truth, but for the moment we want peace," said Mamadou Drabo, an activist leader of the Save Burkina Faso movement. Drabo led protests for months ahead of the coup demanding Kabore's resignation over his inability to stem jihadi violence across the country.

However, those who thought they'd get justice for Sankara's killing say they're concerned.

"As young Sankarists, we are very worried about the suspension of the trial," said Passamde Ocean Sawadogo a singer and activist. "We remain vigilant so that nothing can jeopardize the trial," he said.

## **Rwanda reopens Uganda border to trucks; others still barred**

By IGNATIUS SSUUNA Associated Press

KIGALI, Rwanda (AP) — Rwandan authorities on Monday opened the Uganda border to truckers after nearly three years of a tense standoff, but other travelers were held back by immigration officials.

In deciding to reopen the border, Rwanda warned in a statement Friday that "pending issues" must be resolved before relations can be normalized with Uganda.

Now Rwandan authorities say travel to Uganda via the land border is restricted to essential travelers until COVID-19 prevention measures are put in place. The decision has disappointed traders in Rwanda and Uganda who had hoped for a return to normal business.

Only truckers and Rwandan citizens or returning residents are permitted to cross from Uganda into Rwanda, Rwandan government spokeswoman Yolande Makolo said on Twitter.

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"You cannot say that you have opened for the trucks alone and then you say you have opened the border. Some of us are even fully vaccinated, then why do you bar us?" said Rwandan trader Charles Mugabo.

Rwanda first closed the busy Gatuna border crossing in Feb. 2019, accusing Ugandan authorities of backing rebels opposed to Rwandan President Paul Kagame and demanding the expulsion from Uganda of the business interests of a Rwandan tycoon who is critical of Kagame.

Subsequent talks mediated by Angola and Congo appeared to fail to resolve the dispute, compelling Uganda to negotiate privately with Rwanda, which had ordered its citizens not to travel to Uganda.

But Ugandan officials made a counter-charge accusing Rwandan state agents of operating unlawfully in Uganda, including in the alleged abductions of Rwandan citizens wanted back home.

Friday's announcement of plans to reopen the border came after a period of quiet diplomacy during which Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni dispatched envoys including his son to negotiate with Kagame.

## Olympic athletes have 1 more thing to stress about: Weather

By HOWARD FENDRICH and PAT GRAHAM AP Sports Writers

Mikaela Shiffrin describes herself as "super controlling over everything that's happening in my life," so the two-time Olympic gold medalist is not all that fond of one particular can't-do-a-thing-about-it aspect of her chosen sport, Alpine skiing.

"The weather," she said, "can literally change everything."

The 26-year-old from Colorado is scheduled to open her Beijing Olympics on Feb. 7 as the defending champion in the giant slalom. A key word there is "scheduled," because, as Shiffrin experienced at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games, nothing is certain when it comes to the vagaries of various elements such as temperature, wind, sunlight or precipitation.

In outdoor events, all of those factors can, and quite often do, alter the competition and the competitors themselves.

"On a more macro level, it takes a lot of mental effort to be ready to go out and compete in an Olympic event and when ... it doesn't happen ... it's, for sure, stressful and takes energy away from that level. It's unlike any other sport, in that sense, right?"

"There's just not that many sports that are that affected, and that exposed, by weather, both to affect the outcome of a race and to affect the outcome of an event," said Mike Day, Shiffrin's main coach with the U.S. ski team. "It will have a big impact and has had a big impact in the past."

Olympians say the weather might change their preparation and mindset before a contest. Once the contest begins, it might harm — or, it's also true, help — their result. All of which turns this into just another source of stress at a one-day-every-four-years spectacle already filled with them.

"That's like, probably, 90% of what we're thinking about," said Keely Cashman, a 22-year-old Alpine skier from California heading to her first Olympics.

Snowfall is not in the forecast for the Yanqing mountain area during these Olympics. Strong wind is expected.

Something else to contend with: the way light, and therefore visibility, switches as the sun moves across the sky over the course of a day, creating shadows that appear and recede. In an event like the downhill, where speeds can top 80 mph (130 kph), it's vital to be able to pick up on nuances along the course.

"You need to see everything on the slope," said Vincent Kriechmayr, a 30-year-old from Austria who won two golds at the 2021 Alpine world championships. "When we have bad light, you have to react: 'What's coming (toward) my skis?' ... When we see the slope, we can push."

As it is, the quality of the snow tends to deteriorate as more racers head down a hill.

It generally is considered better to go earlier to avoid ruts and bumps that develop. But if a headwind gives way to a tailwind, say, or if a cloudy day turns clear and the crystals of the snow shift, then advantages can, too.

"It's rare to have days where it's consistent. You do have them, but they're few and far between," said U.S. ski team member Bryce Bennett, who won a World Cup downhill at Val Gardena, Italy, in December.

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"The variables make it interesting. When you're on the good side of variables, you're psyched. When you're on the bad side, you're (angry)."

In action sports — think X Games — weather can almost singularly dictate the outcome.

A slate sky can dull the contrast between the background and the halfpipe for vaulting snowboarders, making it tough for riders to pick out landing spots. Wind can slow down athletes as they try to gain speed to execute tricks with 1440 degrees — or more — of spin. Shifting winds are most dangerous on the slopestyle course, where jumps are as high as 80 feet, because riders can't properly calibrate the speed needed to execute tricks.

"I feel like you'd be crazy if you weren't worried about that kind of thing," said freestyle halfpipe skier Carly Margulies, a 24-year-old from California. "But at the end of the day, you kind of just have to push that out (of mind)."

That's a common sentiment.

"I'm not God, so I can't do anything about it. You have to (accept) the situation and just focus on yourself, focus on the skiing that you can do, focus on the technique and on the energy," said Alexis Pinturault, the reigning Alpine World Cup overall champion and a three-time Olympic medalist for France. "Of course it makes a difference — and we know it."

What sort of difference can the weather make on the clock in Alpine skiing?

As much as a second, Pinturault estimates.

That's significant. The margin between gold and silver was no more than 13 hundredths of a second in half of the 10 women's or men's races at the 2018 Games.

Four years ago, Shiffrin wanted to enter five individual events in South Korea.

Fierce winds led to postponements, prompting her to drop two races.

"You only have so many weather days built into the schedule," said Shiffrin, who once again plans to participate in slalom, giant slalom, downhill, super-G and Alpine combined. "At the end of the day, you can make every move right. You can be rested and ready to go strong. And it still can be totally messed up for, essentially, reasons that are completely out of your control. I don't really love that idea."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 1, the 32nd day of 2022. There are 333 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 1, 1960, four Black college students began a sit-in protest at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, where they'd been refused service.

On this date:

In 1790, the U.S. Supreme Court convened for the first time in New York. (However, since only three of the six justices were present, the court recessed until the next day.)

In 1862, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a poem by Julia Ward Howe, was published in the Atlantic Monthly.

In 1865, abolitionist John S. Rock became the first Black lawyer admitted to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1943, during World War II, one of America's most highly decorated military units, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up almost exclusively of Japanese-Americans, was authorized.

In 1959, men in Switzerland rejected giving women the right to vote by a more than 2-1 referendum margin. (Swiss women gained the right to vote in 1971.)

In 1979, Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (hoh-MAY'-nee) received a tumultuous welcome in Tehran as he ended nearly 15 years of exile.

In 1991, 34 people were killed when an arriving USAir jetliner crashed atop a commuter plane on a runway at Los Angeles International Airport.

In 1994, Jeff Gillooly, Tonya Harding's ex-husband, pleaded guilty in Portland, Oregon, to racketeering

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for his part in the attack on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan in exchange for a 24-month sentence (he ended up serving six months) and a \$100,000 fine.

In 2003, the space shuttle Columbia broke up during re-entry, killing all seven of its crew members: commander Rick Husband; pilot William McCool; payload commander Michael Anderson; mission specialists Kalpana Chawla, David Brown and Laurel Clark; and payload specialist Ilan Ramon (ee-LAHN' rah-MOHN'), the first Israeli in space.

In 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced he would not run for a new term in September elections but rejected protesters' demands he step down immediately and leave the country, after a dramatic day in which a quarter-million Egyptians staged their biggest protest to date calling on him to go.

In 2016, the World Health Organization declared a global emergency over the explosive spread of the Zika virus, which was linked to birth defects in the Americas, calling it an "extraordinary event" that posed a public health threat to other parts of the world.

In 2020, as China's death toll from the new coronavirus rose to 259, Beijing criticized Washington's order barring entry to most foreigners who had visited China in the past two weeks. A World Health Organization official said governments needed to prepare for "domestic outbreak control."

Ten years ago: Facebook, the Internet social network, announced plans to go public with a stock offering. Don Cornelius, 74, creator of "Soul Train," died in Los Angeles of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound. Boxing trainer Angelo Dundee died in Tampa, Florida, at age 90.

Five years ago: The Republican-controlled Senate confirmed Rex Tillerson, 56-43, to be U.S. secretary of state. A nearly 20-hour prison hostage standoff began in Delaware as inmates at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center seized four staff members; one guard was killed, two hostages released before authorities put down the uprising and rescued the remaining captive. Violence and rioting at the University of California, Berkeley, forced the cancellation of a talk by right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos.

One year ago: Myanmar's military staged a coup and arrested the civilian leaders of its government, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. A sprawling, lumbering winter storm walloped the Eastern U.S., shutting down coronavirus vaccination sites, closing schools and halting transit. The U.S. government said it would not conduct immigration enforcement arrests at coronavirus vaccination sites around the country. Former AFL-CIO President John Sweeney died at age 86 at his Washington-area home. Actor Dustin Diamond, best known as "Screech" on the '90s sitcom "Saved by the Bell," died after a three-week fight with cancer.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Garrett Morris is 85. Bluegrass singer Del McCoury is 83. TV personality-singer Joy Philbin is 81. Political commentator Fred Barnes is 79. Rock musician Mike Campbell (Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers) is 72. Blues singer-musician Sonny Landreth is 71. Actor-writer-producer Bill Mummy (MOO'-mee) is 68. Rock singer Exene Cervenka is 66. Actor Linus Roache is 58. Princess Stephanie of Monaco is 57. Actor Sherilyn Fenn is 57. Lisa Marie Presley is 54. Comedian-actor Pauly Shore is 54. Actor Brian Krause is 53. Jazz musician Joshua Redman is 53. Rock musician Patrick Wilson (Weezer) is 53. Actor Michael C. Hall is 51. Rock musician Ron Welty is 51. Rapper Big Boi (Outkast) is 47. Roots rocker Jason Isbell is 43. Country singer Julie Roberts is 43. Rock singer-musician Andrew VanWyngarden is 39. TV personality Lauren Conrad is 36. Actor-singer Heather Morris is 35. Actor and mixed martial artist Ronda Rousey is 35. Rock singer Harry Styles (One Direction) is 28.