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UpComing Events

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 (Groton Area vs. Tea Area at 12:30 p.m. in the main gym)

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).

Sunday, Feb. 6

Show Choir Preview, 3 p.m., GHS Gym

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 February 2, 2022; 11:13 AM

**Decrease of 1 since
 Tuesday**

J K	K G	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1 0	1 1	1 2	S t a t e	T o t a l
1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	5
Change	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	+1	-1	0	-1

**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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Groton Area Second Quarter Honor Roll

Seniors

4.0 GPA: Allyssa Locke, Madeline Flihs, Trista Keith, Travis Townsend, Kansas Kroll, Alyssa Thaler, Jordan Bjerke, Seth Johnson, Julianna Kosel

3.99-3.50: Jackson Cogley, Megan Flihs, Kaden Kurtz, Pierce Kettering, Emilie Thurston, Landon Kokaes, Jace Kroll, Kody Lehr, Madisen Bjerke, Wyatt Hearnen, Hannah Gustafson, Ryder Daly, Lane Krueger, Michal Tabke, Kelsie Frost, Christian Zoellner

3.49-3.00: Favian Sanchez-Gonzalez, Kennedy Anderson, Evin Nehls, Brooklyn Imrie, Cassandra Schultz, Brayden Hansen

Juniors

4.0 GPA: Jackson Dinger, Jacob Lewandowski, Ethan Clark, Caleb Hanten, Elliana Weismantel, Andrew Marzahn, Cole Simon, Aspen Johnson

3.99-3.50: Brooke Gengerke, Cadance Tullis, Cole Bisbee, Kaleb Antonsen, Cade Larson, Tate Larson, Gracie Traphagen, Shaylee Peterson

3.49-3.00: Carter Barse, Porter Johnson, KayLynn Overacker, Shallyn Foertsch, Sierra Ehresmann, Cameron Johnson

Sophomores

4.0 GPA: Emily Clark, Claire Heinrich, Camryn Kurtz, Lydia Meier, Hannah Monson, Ashlyn Sperry

3.99-3.50: Kyleigh Englund, Abigail Jensen, Jaycie Lier, Lexi Osterman, Cadence Feist, Holden Sippel, Jackson Garstecki, Sara Menzia, Bradin Althoff, Faith Flihs, Sydney Leicht

3.49-3.00: Shea Jandel, Bryson Wambach, Dillon Abeln, Anna Fjeldheim, Emma Schinkel, Lane Tietz, Colby Dunker, Ava Wienk

Freshmen

4.0 GPA: Gretchen Dinger, Elizabeth Flihs, Payton Mitchell, Faith Traphagen, Axel Warrington

3.99-3.50: Blake Pauli, Jeslyn Kosel, Corbin Weismantel, Kayla Lehr, Laila Roberts, Brooklyn Hansen, Karah-Jo Johnson, Kellen Antonsen, Kennedy Hansen, Emily Overacker, Emma Kutter, Kianna Sander

3.49-3.00: Aiden Heathcote, Kaden Kampa, Blake Dennert, Diego Eduardo Nava Remigio, Savannah Bible, Carter Simon, Brevin Flihs, Rebecca Poor, Korbin Kucker, Easten Ekern, Turner Thompson, Emma Bahr, Ashley Johnson

Eighth Graders

4.0 GPA: Carly Gilbert, Nathan Unzen

3.99-3.50: Jaedyn Penning, Talli Wright, Mia Crank, Benjamin Hoeft, Jerica Locke, Gage Sippel, Logan Warrington, Nathalia Warrington, De Eh Tha Say, Lucas Carda, London Bahr

3.49-3.00: Raelee Lilly, Karter Moddy, Ryder Johnson, Paisley Mitchell, Keegen Tracy, Rylee Dunker, Karsten Flihs, Olivia Stiegelmeier, Lincoln Krause, Jayden Schwan, Coli Tollifson, Hannah Sandness, Cambria Bonn, Tristin McGannon, Breslyn Jeschke

Seventh Graders

4.0 GPA: Teagan Hanten, Carlee Johnson, Ashlynn Warrington

3.99-3.50: Liby Althoff, Emerlee Jones, Aiden Strom, Colt Williamson, Halee Harder, Brody Lord, Kira Clocksene, Avery Crank, Walker Zoellner, Claire Schuelke, McKenna Tietz

3.49-3.00: Gavin Kroll, Leah Jones, Blake Lord, Dylan McGannon, Hayden Zoellner, Zander Harry, Taryn Traphagen, Jackson Hopfinger, Addison Hoffman Wipf, Dylan Alexander Lopez Marin, Maggie Cleveland, Brenna Imrie, Hailey Pauli

Sixth Graders

4.0 GPA: Makenna Krause, Sydney Locke, Thomas Schuster

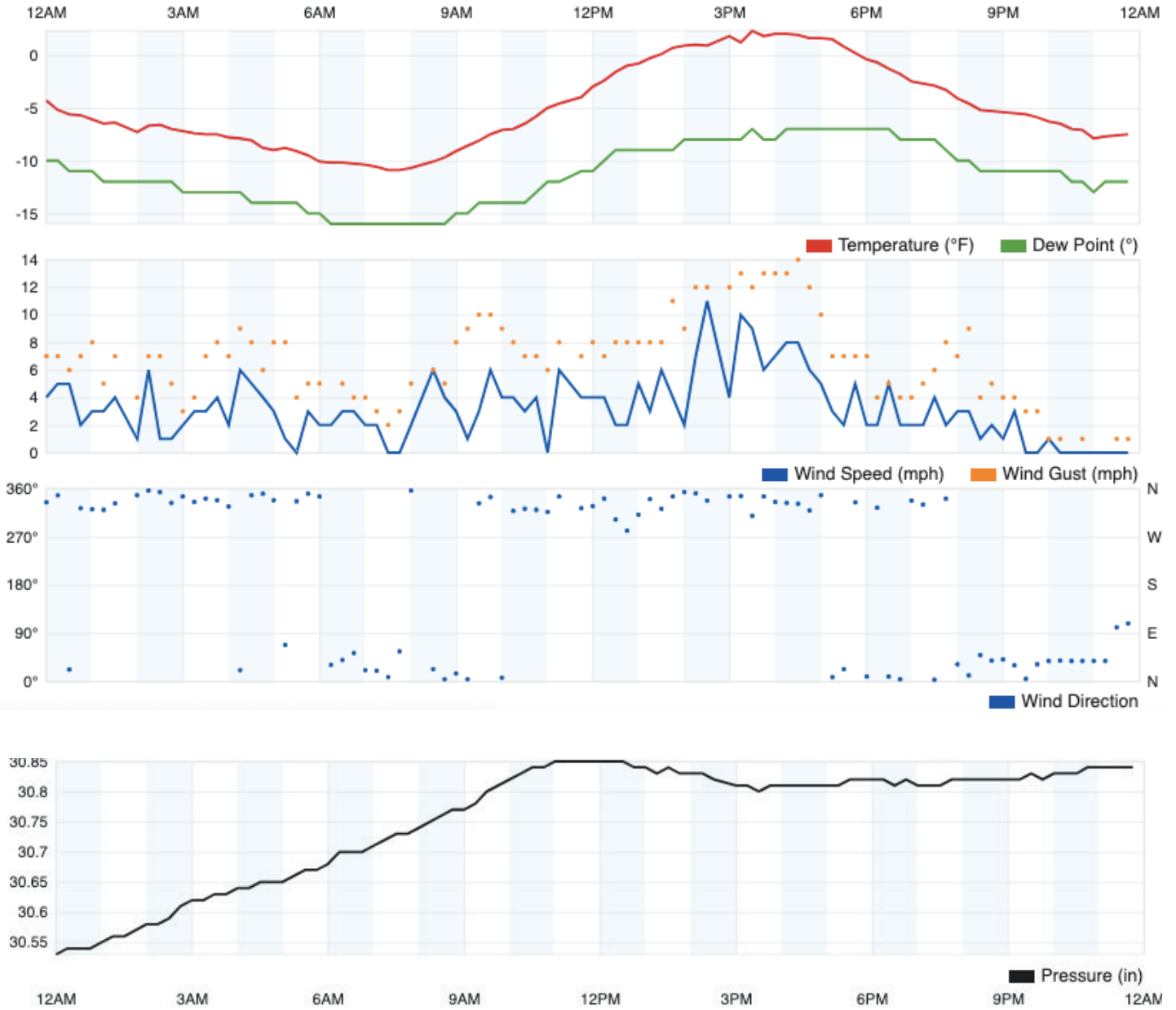
3.99-3.50: Elizabeth Cole, Chesney Weber, Addison Hoeft, Kyleigh Kroll, Layne Johnson, Taryn Thompson, Easton Weber, Rylene Gilbert, Wyatt Wambach, Jace Johnson, Ethan Kroll, Ryder Schelle, John Bisbee

3.49-3.00: Rylie Rose, Rylan Ekern, Mya Feser, Dee Eh June Say, Kason Oswald, Karson Zak, Alex Abeln, Destin Pardick, Shaydon Wood, Journey Zieroth

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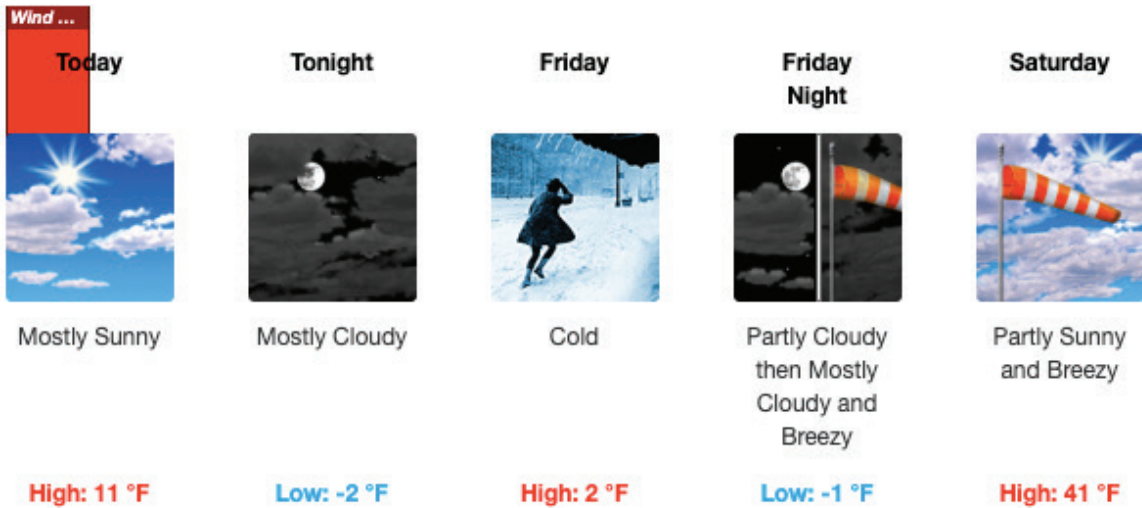
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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 **Today** **-1 to 28°**
Morning Wind Chills: 25-40 below zero
More breezy across Central SD

 **Tonight** **-8 to 10°**
A few light snow showers possible
Coldest Wind Chills North & East

 **Friday** **2 to 27°**
Wind Chills: 15-25 below zero

A Look Ahead...
Much warmer air moves in for the beginning of the weekend with highs in the 30s-40s on Saturday. Another shot of arctic air returns for the end of the weekend.

Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 2/3/2022 4:42 AM CT

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

The temperature roller-coaster will continue through the next few days as a couple of clipper-type low pressure systems move through the region followed by areas of high pressure. Conditions will remain dry for the most part, although a few light snow showers will be possible late Thursday into Friday as a cold front sweeps through. The coldest winds chills will be found across northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota not only during the morning hours today but again tonight through Friday morning. The warmest day of the next several will be on Saturday when highs in the 30s and 40s are expected.

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Today in Weather History

February 3, 1997: A winter storm dropped from 6 to 15 inches of snow across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, deepening the already expansive snowpack. The wind came up from the north at 20 to 30 mph during the morning of the 4th, causing blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads, and making travel hazardous if not impossible. Several vehicles got stuck or went off the road. Due to the massive snowfall, a roof collapsed in Aberdeen, damaging a car. Many schools started late or were canceled, adding to the number of days missed for the season. Some snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Wheaton, 6 inches at Britton, Summit, Webster, Browns Valley, Artichoke Lake, and Ortonville, 7 inches at Aberdeen, 6 SE McIntosh, Pollock, Timber Lake, 8 inches at Leola, Ipswich, Eagle Butte, and Gettysburg, 9 inches at Miller and Mellette, 10 inches at Mobridge, Watertown, Clear Lake, Pierre, Kennebec, and Onida, and 11 inches at Clark and Blunt. Snowfall amounts of a foot or more included 12 inches at Highmore, Bryant, and Gann Valley, 13 inches at Faulkton, 14 inches at 23 N Highmore and Murdo, and 15 inches at 1 SE Stephan.

1844: Boston Harbor was so thick with ice on this date that a channel had to be cut through the ice for the "Britannia" ship to leave with 30,000 letters for England.

1947: The record-low temperature for continental North America was recorded in Snag in the Yukon Territory, Canada. The temperature was 81.4 degrees below zero.

1959: At 12:55 am Central Time, a plane took off from runway 17 at the Mason City, Iowa airport, carrying the lives of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. At the time of departure, the weather was reported as light snow, a ceiling of 3,000 feet with sky obscured, visibility 6 miles, and winds from 20 to 30 mph. At around 9:35 am, Hubert Jerry Dwyer spotted the wreckage less than 6 miles northwest of the airport. The three musicians and the pilot died from this crash.

1988: Arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. The temperature at Midland, Texas, plunged from a record high of 80 degrees to 37 degrees in just three hours. Morning lows in the higher elevations of Wyoming were as cold as 38 degrees below zero. Heavy snow blanketed southwestern Colorado, with 16 inches reported at Steamboat Springs.

1917 - Downtown Miami, FL, reported an all-time record low of 27 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1947 - The temperature at Tanacross, AK, plunged to a record 75 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Wintry weather was confined to freezing drizzle and light snow in the northeastern U.S., and light rain and snow in the western U.S. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. The temperature at Midland TX plunged from a record high of 80 degrees to 37 degrees in just three hours. Morning lows in the higher elevations of Wyoming were as cold as 38 degrees below zero. Heavy snow blanketed southwestern Colorado, with 16 inches reported at Steamboat Springs. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm brought heavy snow and high winds to the western U.S. Up to three feet of snow blanketed the Sierra Nevada of California, and buried parts of northeastern Washington State under three feet of snow in five days. High winds across Washington State reached 75 mph, with gusts to 105 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Severe cold gripped the north central U.S. The morning low of 29 degrees below zero at Casper WY was a record for the month of February. Wisdom MT hit 53 degrees below zero. Missoula MT reported a wind chill reading of 85 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather over the central Gulf coast states during the afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes in Alabama, including one which touched down north of Birmingham injuring fifteen people and causing nearly three million dollars damage. A tornado at Margaret injured eleven persons and caused a million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

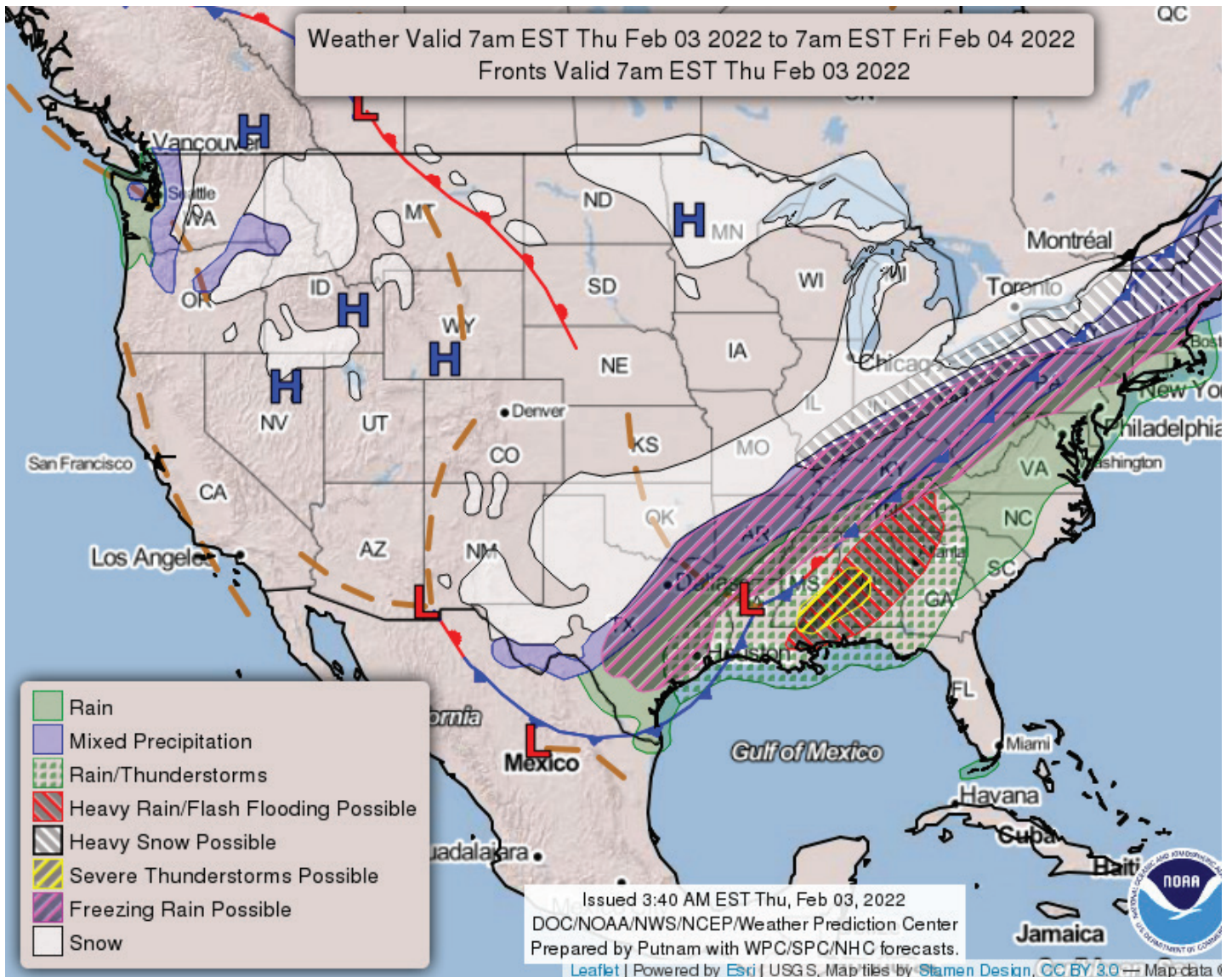
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 2 °F at 3:29 PM
Low Temp: -11 °F at 7:35 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 3:31 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 58 in 1991
Record Low: -38 in 1893
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 3°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.06
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.61
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:43:40 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:47:30 AM



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GOING IN CIRCLES?

A big black lab was watching a little poodle chase its tail around and around. When it finally stopped to catch its breath, the lab asked, "Why are you chasing your tail?"

After a brief pause, the poodle replied, "I have been told that happiness is in my tail. So, as soon as I catch my tail, I'll be happy."

After a moment's thought the big lab scratched its ear, looked at the poor poodle that was still panting and said, "I, too, know that happiness is in my tail. And, when I chase it, it also keeps running away from me. But when I go about my business, it comes along with me."

Psalm 119:2 contains a description of the "business" of the Christian: "Blessed are those who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart."

This brief statement provides a "job description" for Christians who want God's blessings. If we want God's blessings, we must be obedient - or "comply" - to His laws. If we are serious about knowing these "laws," we will study His Word and seek His truth and follow the teachings we find throughout Scripture. Perhaps the biggest issue for Christians is not the laws or requirements of God that we do not know, but the laws or requirements of God that we know but do not follow or keep.

The Psalmist then addressed the issue of motivation. We are to seek Him "with all of our hearts." Here we find the Psalmist addressing our attitude - or, what motivates us. If our "heart" is right, our lives will be right. More than anything else, our heart is responsible for the way we live.

Prayer: We ask, Father, that Your Spirit trouble our hearts until we fill them with and live by Your laws. Give us the desire to seek You with our whole hearts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: - Blessed are those who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart. Psalm 119:2

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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

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- Colored \$42.60/6 months
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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 Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

02-12-13-18-35

(two, twelve, thirteen, eighteen, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

02-08-18-25-31, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 5

(two, eight, eighteen, twenty-five, thirty-one; Star Ball: two; ASB: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$7.04 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

18-29-33-62-63, Powerball: 15, Power Play: 3

(eighteen, twenty-nine, thirty-three, sixty-two, sixty-three; Powerball: fifteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$123 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakota. February 1, 2022.

Editorial: AG Impeachment: Twists And Turns

The ongoing impeachment investigation into South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg's 2020 traffic accident, in which a pedestrian was killed, has turned into something even more unpredictable than was probably thought possible.

Ravnsborg ultimately faced only misdemeanor charges tied solely to how he operated his vehicle on that fateful September night. The charges had nothing to do with the death of the pedestrian, Joe Boever, along a dark highway in Hyde County.

Lawmakers have been tasked with determining whether impeachment proceedings are in order for this incident.

For the record, the Press & Dakotan called for Ravensborg's resignation last year, as did Gov. Kristi Noem. While we left it at that, Noem certainly hasn't. She has been pressuring lawmakers to publicly release investigative files regarding the case, even while the select committee's inquiry remains ongoing. She's taken an aggressive stand regarding Ravensborg practically since the 2020 incident, controversially releasing videos early last year of his interviews with investigators and making clear her belief that the AG should be removed.

She is also demanding more openness in the proceedings. And to be fair, promises by lawmakers that this investigation process would be transparent have fallen far short, with much of the work happening behind closed doors.

Despite that, lawmakers have committed to a path and do have to be allowed to conduct their investigation and sift through their findings. Should this process be more open? Yes. But it should be done without pressure from the executive branch, which doesn't help matters at all.

Meanwhile, another twist in this saga came to light last week when it was reported that a telemarketing campaign has been launched to put pressure on the members of the select committee to impeach Ravensborg. The calls originated in Ohio, and a representative of the company doing the telemarketing said the firm was not hired by a South Dakota politician. However, the Argus Leader reported the firm, Grand

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Solutions, Inc., refused to identify who was sponsoring the calls. Also, a recording, apparently from the Ohio company, that was inadvertently left on the voicemails of select-committee members included a voice in the background stating that an unnamed "governor" with plans on a presidential run is involved. (The female voice also said she doesn't know if that governor is Democrat or Republican.) Noem's reelection campaign has denied any involvement with the telemarketing and, according to the Argus, has reportedly implied that a primary opponent might be behind it.

People can draw their own conclusions from this mess. But it is, for the lack of a better word, an intriguing hand grenade lobbed into this situation, and it creates a LOT of questions about who is behind it and why, whether it was motivated from within the state or outside of it. (Honestly, the latter might prove to be even more intriguing in the scheme of this mystery.)

South Dakota House Speaker Spencer Gosch of Glenham charged that the calls were an effort to "impede, influence or taint the ongoing investigation of this committee."

This tragic affair has never been a seamless process, beginning literally with the actions of the attorney general on the night of the incident. It has evolved from a fatal accident into something convoluted and, now, with possible political overtones.

This serves no one well, whether it's the people of this state, the victim's family, Ravensborg himself or the lawmakers assigned to sort out this matter.

We must have resolution in this matter, but this process demands something better than what we're seeing. The longer this goes on, the more twisting and turning seems to occur. And none of us need that.

END

Gov. Noem's abortion ban stifled by Republican lawmakers

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Republican-controlled South Dakota House committee declined Wednesday to consider a proposal from Gov. Kristi Noem aimed at banning nearly all abortions, stifling a top item on the governor's agenda.

The Republican governor loudly trumpeted her proposal this year, which would have mimicked the private enforcement of a Texas law and prohibited abortions once medical professionals can detect fetal cardiac activity.

But it quickly met resistance when groups opposed to abortion access raised issues over her bill draft and Republican lawmakers on the House State Affairs committee declined to give it a hearing — a move rarely seen in the Legislature that signaled defiance of the governor.

"They showed up late to the game last minute, even last hour type stuff and it didn't pass," said House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican. "Simple as that."

Gosch said he shared Noem's goal of banning all abortions but that the language she proposed would "jeopardize" the state's involvement in a separate legal battle with Planned Parenthood, which operates the state's only clinic that regularly provides abortions.

Noem has touted support for the proposal from several national groups opposed to abortion access, but in-state groups flagged what they saw as problems with the bill.

"We were not in support of the governor's original draft language," said Dale Bartscher, the director of South Dakota Right to Life.

He added that he too was worried it would endanger the state's standing in the case against Planned Parenthood, but that he hoped the governor would make revisions and bring it back.

Noem unveiled the proposal last month. It would have all but outlawed abortions in the state by prohibiting abortions once fetal cardiac activity is detected, which is usually around the sixth week and is before some women even know they're pregnant. It would also leave enforcement up to private citizens through lawsuits instead of through prosecutors and criminal charges.

The House committee's move gave the governor's office just hours to find a legislator or committee willing to carry the bill, though it could also be brought before lawmakers later in the session through other

maneuvers.

Noem told reporters she was caught off-guard by the committee's decision not to hear the bill.

"They're not listening to national leaders in the pro-life movement on the momentum we have in front of the Supreme Court and what this legislation means to South Dakota," she said, adding that she didn't believe her proposal "takes any credibility away from the case in front of the Supreme Court."

Noem, who has positioned herself for a 2024 White House bid, later blasted lawmakers on Twitter, posting: "Every single life is precious and deserving of our protection – but apparently South Dakota legislators think otherwise."

The majority-conservative Supreme Court last month refused to speed up the ongoing court case over Texas' ban on most abortions, declining to order a federal appeals court to return the case to a federal judge who had temporarily blocked the law's enforcement.

Kristin Hayward, the advocacy manager of Planned Parenthood South Dakota Action Fund, said in a statement that the governor's setback doesn't change the fact that she is trying to wipe out abortion access in the state.

"Don't be fooled by the political games because the fact remains that Governor Noem is pushing a Texas-style abortion ban and fully supports decimating reproductive rights in our state," Hayward said.

Noem testifies to senators on \$30M DSU cybersecurity program

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday added the force of her presence to a legislative committee weighing her proposal to send \$30 million to expand a Dakota State University cybersecurity program.

The Republican governor made a rare appearance in a legislative committee to pitch lawmakers directly on the proposal, which would include the construction of a cybersecurity lab in Sioux Falls, double the enrollment size of the program and expand a cybersecurity skills training program for high school students.

"I believe that we're building towards cybersecurity and technology being the next big industry in the state of South Dakota, which is very exciting for us because that's the exact kind of careers that our kids want," she told reporters.

Dakota State's expansion will be funded by a mix of donations and state funds. Philanthropist T. Denny Sanford is contributing \$50 million, while Noem has proposed a \$30 million allotment from the state budget. The city of Sioux Falls is also donating \$10 million for the lab.

Lawmakers on the Senate State Affairs committee approved Noem's request for \$30 million. It will next proceed to a vote in the Senate.

Students evacuated following explosion, fire at high school

MILLER, S.D. (AP) — A fire that caused students to evacuate the high school in Miller Wednesday has been extinguished, according to officials.

The Hand County Sheriff's Office says an explosion and fire occurred in the agriculture workshop at the school.

School board chairwoman Natalie Bertsch said no injuries were reported.

Emergency Management Director Arlen Gortmaker says an investigation is now beginning into what triggered that incident, KELO-TV reported.

People living several blocks from the school said they heard the explosion and saw smoke coming from the roof of the school.

Winter storm spreads heavy snow, ice further across US

By KATHLEEN FOODY and JILL BLEED Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A major winter storm with millions of Americans in its path spread rain, freezing rain

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and heavy snow further across the country on Thursday, disrupting travel as roads in many states were left icy by the wintry mix and airlines canceled thousands of flights due to the weather.

A long stretch of states from New Mexico to Maine remained under winter storm warnings and watches and the path of the storm stretched further from the central U.S. into more of the South and Northeast. Heavy snow was expected from the southern Rockies to northern New England, while forecasters said heavy ice buildup was likely from Texas to Pennsylvania.

"We have a lot of real estate covered by winter weather impacts this morning," Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland, said early Thursday. "We do have an expansive area of heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain occurring."

Parts of Ohio, New York and northern New England were expected to see heavy snowfall as the storm moves to the east with 12 to 18 inches (30 to 45 centimeters) of snow possible in some places through Friday, Orrison said.

Along the warmer side of the storm, strong thunderstorms capable of damaging wind gusts and tornadoes were possible Thursday in parts of Mississippi and Alabama, the Storm Prediction Center said.

More than 20 inches (51 centimeters) of snow was reported in the southern Rockies, while more than a foot of snow fell in areas of Illinois, Indiana and Michigan.

Sleet and freezing rain were occurring early Thursday in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and in parts of Oklahoma and Arkansas. Tens of thousands of homes and businesses were without power, mostly in Texas and Arkansas, according to the website poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports.

"Unfortunately we are looking at enough ice accumulations that we will be looking at significant travel impacts," Orrison said.

In Chicago, Elisha Waldman and his sons welcomed the opportunity to hit a sledding hill Wednesday, even as snow continued to fall.

"Cold and wet and wonderful, and getting cold and wet is part of the fun with the guys, and we get to go inside and have hot cocoa and warm up," Waldman said.

In Detroit's western suburbs, Tony Haley also found an advantage to the weather. He owns a landscaping and irrigation company that offers snow removal and salting services, but the early winter weeks offered few opportunities for business.

"This one here, we're looking for a good two, three days of work," Haley said after clearing snow away from several businesses in Canton.

But for those on the roads, the heavy snow created hazardous conditions. In central Missouri, officials shut down part of Interstate 70 midday Wednesday after a crash made the roadway impassable.

The disruptive storm began Tuesday and moved across the central U.S. on Wednesday's Groundhog Day, the same day the famed groundhog Punxsutawney Phil predicted six more weeks of winter. The storm came on the heels of a nor'easter last weekend that brought blizzard conditions to many parts of the East Coast.

The storm's path extended as far south as Texas, nearly a year after a catastrophic freeze buckled the state's power grid in one of the worst blackouts in U.S. history. The forecast did not call for the same prolonged and frigid temperatures as the February 2021 storm, and the National Weather Service said the system would, generally, not be as bad this time for Texas.

Airlines canceled nearly 8,000 flights in the U.S. scheduled for Wednesday or Thursday, the flight-tracking service FlightAware.com showed. Airports in St. Louis, Chicago, Kansas City and Detroit canceled more flights than usual. Almost 700 flights were canceled Thursday alone at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, and more than 300 were canceled at nearby Dallas Love Field.

COVID inequity: In Africa, at-home tests are scarce, costly

By MARIA CHENG and FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — After learning that a friend tested positive for COVID-19, Thembi Ndlovu went to a health clinic in Zimbabwe's capital in search of a free coronavirus test. But there were none left

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that day, leaving the 34-year-old hairdresser unsure if she needed to take precautions to protect clients.

"I wish we could just walk into a pharmacy and buy a cheap self-testing kit like we do with pregnancy or HIV," she said as she left the clinic in a working-class township of Harare. "It would be much easier."

For millions of people in rich countries, COVID-19 self-tests are abundant and free, including in Britain, Canada, France and Germany. But most people across Africa have limited access to them.

Zimbabwe introduced free walk-in testing centers in November 2020, but supplies are tight and the country still has no national program to distribute at-home tests.

Although self-tests are available in some Zimbabwean pharmacies, they cost up to \$15 each, a fortune in a country where more than 70% of the population lives in extreme poverty made worse by the pandemic. The situation is similar elsewhere across the continent — and in parts of Asia and Latin America — with few, if any, opportunities for people to easily test themselves.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to making inexpensive, self-tests widely available in the developing world is that the World Health Organization has yet to issue guidance on their use. Without the resources of wealthy countries to buy tests or evaluate their safety, poor countries must wait for WHO approval before aid groups and international agencies are willing to donate them in large numbers.

"Donors cannot deploy the tests until WHO say it's OK to deploy, and countries themselves don't want to use the tests until they get that guidance," said Brook Baker, a professor at Northeastern University who advises the WHO and others on equitable access to COVID-19 medicines and tests.

Some health officials say the discrepancy between rich and poor countries is discriminatory and has denied poor countries a chance to stem the spread of the coronavirus in the absence of vaccines. And unlike the massive global effort to share vaccines, little has been done to roll out more tests of any kind across much of Africa.

The omicron surge appears to have peaked across Africa, as it has in other parts of the world. In the last week, the WHO says Africa recorded at least 125,000 COVID cases and 1,600 deaths, although that is likely an undercount due to the lack of testing.

Baker and other experts have estimated the self-testing kits might not be widely available in the developing world until sometime next year.

In a statement, WHO said that setting guidelines is a "rigorous process that takes time" and that it expects to finalize advice for the use of COVID-19 self-tests in March. The agency said it has supplied more than 31 million rapid tests to health professionals in developing countries.

In an open letter to WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, more than 100 organizations last week called on the U.N. agency to speed its release of the self-testing guidelines, saying that 85% of infections are likely going unnoticed in Africa.

"We cannot tolerate a situation in which access to widespread testing, along with linkage to care and treatment, becomes the norm in the populations of wealthier countries while diagnostic access ... is missing in (poor) countries," wrote the authors, whose signatories included Amnesty International and Oxfam. They called it "part of the same 'medical apartheid' that has plagued the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines."

Groups that work closely with WHO say there is enough evidence that the self-tests help slow transmission based on rich countries' experience and that the guidelines should have been issued long ago.

"There's no reason to think that people swabbing their noses in the U.K. are going to do it any differently than people in Malawi," said Bill Rodriguez, CEO of FIND, a Geneva-based global alliance for diagnostics.

With the extra-contagious omicron variant driving global transmission, Rodriguez and others say the rapid self-tests are sorely needed everywhere.

"Without high levels of vaccination in developing countries, we need to give people every tool possible to reduce their risk," Rodriguez said.

John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, said people would be more empowered to take action if at-home tests were available.

"We have learned from HIV that self-testing is so critical because when people know their status, they do the right thing," he said.

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Others pointed out that with generic versions of COVID-19 pills made by Merck and Pfizer on the way — after the companies agreed to let dozens of manufacturers make versions for poor countries — the tests will be even more crucial in the coming months.

“It seems kind of puzzling that we could have the treatments before we have the testing that tells us which people should get the treatments,” said Northeastern’s Baker.

Dr. Mamunur Rahman Malik, WHO’s representative in Somalia, said a pilot study in that country found that health workers using the tests led to a 40% increase of cases being detected.

“Without these tests, we do not have a full picture of how the epidemic is evolving,” Malik said, adding that the project showed the tests’ use are also possible in difficult, conflict-ridden environments like Somalia.

Rodriguez said WHO self-testing guidelines are also needed so authorities can address other potential issues, including ramping up the production of inexpensive testing kits. Some of the same problems that complicated COVID-19 vaccine production exist for test manufacturing, namely a shortage of raw materials and competent producers, but they are not as acute, he said.

He said that inexpensive self-tests were being made in countries such as Brazil, India, Morocco, Senegal and South Africa.

Still, even wealthy countries have struggled to maintain adequate supplies of the at-home tests, with demand far outpacing supply at times in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere.

Back in Harare, public health specialist Dr. Johannes Marisa despaired that people were not keen to get tested unless they were sick or needed a negative result to work, compromising efforts to stop the pandemic.

“It becomes deadly because many people only present themselves at health facilities when they become seriously sick and sometimes it’s too late to save them,” he said. Marisa said more education was needed to convince people to get tested earlier.

Ndlovu, the hairdresser, was told to return to the clinic in two days to get tested. She had several clients wanting to get their hair braided and wanted to avoid putting them at risk, but could not afford the private tests elsewhere that might cost up to \$60.

“Monday is far (away),” she said. “I am too anxious.”

Olympic spotlight back on China for a COVID-tinged Games

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Long before the global pandemic upended sports and the world in general, the 2022 Winter Olympics faced unsettling problems.

It started with the fact that hardly anybody wanted to host them.

Beijing ended up solving that problem, but only after four European cities thought about it and dropped out, mostly because of expense and lack of public support. In the end, it was a race between two authoritarian countries. The IOC narrowly chose China’s capital and its mostly bone-dry surrounding mountains over a bid from Kazakhstan. “It really is a safe choice,” IOC President Thomas Bach said after the balloting.

Some seven years after that fateful vote, the world will find out if Bach was right. Starting with Friday’s opening ceremony at the lattice-ribbed Bird’s Nest Stadium, the spotlight will be trained on China, a country with human-rights record that troubles many, an authoritarian government and a “zero-tolerance” policy when it comes to COVID. It will be trained on what figures to be the most closed-off, tightly controlled, hard-to-navigate Olympics in history.

The build-up has turned the idea of “making it to the Games” into as much of a logistical and sometimes moral conundrum as a competitive one.

“This is one where you can do your absolute best but you kind of have to juggle your sanity and being able to perform at the Olympics, and not lose your mind beforehand,” U.S. moguls skier Hannah Soar said.

To be sure, if the 2 1/2 weeks of skiing, skating and sliding turn out to be like most Olympics before it, then it will be the athletes such as Hannah Soar — and snowboarder Chloe Kim, skier Mikaela Shiffrin and Norway’s cross country champion Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo, to name a few — that we’ll remember most.

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But there has been so much to process in the lead-up. And there's no pretending that the International Olympic Committee's decision to bring its biggest show to a country that is facing ever-increasing scorn from democracies in the West — a country that has been on a virtual lockdown since shortly after it sprouted the world's first cases of COVID-19 more than two years ago — does not bring with it some stark considerations:

— Human Rights. Led by the United States, a number of Western democratic countries are staging a diplomatic boycott of the Games to protest what the U.S. and human-rights groups have called the genocide of some 1 million Uyghurs in China's far western Xinjiang province.

— Dignitaries won't attend, but athletes still will. German slider Natalie Geisenberger was among those who considered not coming, but then decided to make the journey, along with some 2,900 athletes from around 90 countries. Her conclusion: "We athletes have absolutely nothing to do with the decision to award the Olympic Games to Beijing — the (IOC) decides and we athletes are presented with a fait accompli."

— Health and safety. To try to prevent the spread of COVID, China will run these Olympics in a "closed-loop" system. All participants will be tested daily. None will be allowed out of the hotels and venues that are cordoned off from the city and mountains where the Games will take place.

Participants will be placed in isolation if they test positive, and the stakes of a system that has not been clearly spelled out to everyone were on display when Belgian skeleton racer Kim Meylemans turned to social media Thursday and gave a tearful explanation of her situation.

— Tennis player Peng Shuai. Her plight touches on almost all the sore points involved in bringing these games to this country: The Chinese champion's safety has been in question since she accused a former high-ranking government official of sexually assaulting her. Some of the few signs that she might be OK have come courtesy of the IOC, which has shown pictures of Bach in video meetings with Peng, The IOC has indicated it will meet with Peng during the Olympics, but its previous meetings have brought forth as many questions as answers.

— Cybersecurity. Many countries are advising their athletes to leave their cell phones and laptops home lest they be compromised by the Chinese government. Earlier this week, the head of the FBI in the U.S. said the Chinese government's hacking operations are "more brazen" than ever before.

— Russia. President Vladimir Putin is expected to attend the opening ceremony in what some will view as an audacious bit of politicking on two fronts. With tensions escalating on the Ukraine border, this conjures memories of the 2014 Olympics in Putin's home country, during which Russia invaded and took over the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. It is also viewed by many as a slap in the face to anti-doping regulators who tried, without great success, to sanction the country for scandals of the past decade.

— The environment. The mountains hosting action sports and cross country skiing are about 150 miles from the Gobi Desert; they average less than a foot of snow a year. Though snowmaking is nothing new at Olympic venues, this is touted as the first Games to rely completely on artificial snow. To do it, the country had to build massive irrigations systems and will use up to 800 Olympic-sized swimming pools' worth of water. It brings into question Beijing's claims that these Games will be carbon neutral.

Oh, and about the sports — Norway is a decent bet to win the most medals, in part on the strength of a deep roster of biathletes and cross country skiers. Russia, officially called "Russian Olympic Committee" because of doping sanctions, could challenge. Its men's hockey team is favored after the NHL, with the omicron variant raging in North America, decided not to shut down its season to send players to the Olympics.

All in all, this is quite a different look for China from the last time the Olympics descended. That was in 2008, and the Summer Olympics were viewed as the world's chance to finally get to know a global behemoth.

More than attempting to put on a good face this time, China is doing things by its own rules. COVID restrictions offer a convenient justification for not letting journalists wander the country to report on what's really going on in this land of 1.4 billion.

"There are two audiences for this," said David Bachman, an expert on China who teaches at University

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of Washington. "There's the international audience. And it's also going to be important to impress their own people with how efficiently the Games are run."

Where Russia spent a record \$51 billion on the 2014 Sochi Winter Games, and South Korea looked comparatively frugal by only spending \$13 billion, part of China's pitch was that it wouldn't drop nearly that much on what will be the third straight Olympics held in Asia.

It is repurposing the opulent Bird's Nest, built for the 2008 Games, as the stage for its opening ceremony. It reclaimed an old steel mill to build a big air jumping stadium for skiers and snowboarders. Improvements in the mountains came thanks to the Olympics, and China is banking on a burst of new skiers and snowboarders to follow.

Beijing organizers have put out a budget of around \$3.9 billion, but with no watchdogs tracking the money, the real cost is anyone's guess. One estimate said the true cost could be as much as 10 times that original budget.

The money goes for what the IOC touts as a much-needed 17-day break from strife and politics — a break that allows a worldwide audience to revel in the glow of athletic accomplishment. NBC, for one, pays billions to pipe the action to the United States. But this year, its big-name commentators will be back home, calling the action remotely.

It's one of hundreds of concessions made to the virus that first cropped up in China some 26 months ago, and has slapped an indelible imprint on the way the country must run these Games.

Time will tell if all the trouble was worth it. The main reason American snowboarder Jamie Anderson decided to come: "At least for this one time in life," she said, "the world comes together over sports."

Putin heads to China to bolster ties amid Ukraine tensions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — American and European officials may be staying away from the Beijing Winter Olympics because of human rights concerns, but Russian President Vladimir Putin will be on hand even as tensions soar over his buildup of troops along his country's border with Ukraine.

Putin's talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday will mark their first in-person meeting since 2019 and are intended to help strengthen Moscow's ties with China and coordinate their policies in the face of Western pressure. After, the two will attend the Games' opening ceremony.

In an article published Thursday by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, Putin wrote that Moscow and Beijing play an "important stabilizing role" in global affairs and help make international affairs "more equitable and inclusive."

The Russian president criticized "attempts by some countries to politicize sports to the benefit of their ambitions," an apparent reference to a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics by the U.S. and some of its allies.

Many Western officials are skipping the Beijing Games in protest of China's detention of more than 1 million Uyghur Muslims in the northwestern region of Xinjiang. But leaders of the ex-Soviet Central Asian nations, which have close ties with both Russia and China, all followed Putin's lead and attending.

In an interview with China Media Group also released Thursday, Putin emphasized that "we oppose the attempts to politicize sport or use it as a tool of coercion, unfair competition and discrimination."

Putin's meeting with Xi and attendance at the opening ceremony "announces the further promotion of the China-Russia relationship," said Li Xin, director of the Institute of European and Asian Studies at Shanghai's University of Political Science and Law.

China and Russia have increasingly found common cause over what they believe is a U.S. disregard for their territorial and security concerns, Li said. Both their governments have also taken to mocking the U.S. over its domestic travails, from last year's Capitol riot to its struggle to control COVID-19.

"The U.S. and the Western countries, on the one hand, are exerting pressure against Russia over the issue of Ukraine, and on the other hand, are exerting pressure against China over the issue of Taiwan," Li said, referring to the self-governing island democracy and U.S. ally that China claims as its own territory. "Such acts of extreme pressure by the West will only force China and Russia to further strengthen cooperation."

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Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign affairs adviser, said that Putin's visit would mark a new stage in the Russia-China partnership that he described as a "key factor contributing to a sustainable global development and helping counter destructive activities by certain countries."

He said that Moscow and Beijing plan to issue a joint statement on international relations that will reflect their shared views on global security and other issues, and officials from the two countries are set to sign more than a dozen of agreements on trade, energy and other issues.

Ushakov noted that Moscow and Beijing have close or identical stands on most international issues. He particularly emphasized that China backs Russia in the current standoff over Ukraine.

"Beijing supports Russia's demands for security guarantees and shares a view that security of one state can't be ensured by breaching other country's security," Ushakov said in a conference call with reporters.

A buildup of more than 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine has fueled Western fears that Moscow is poised to invade its neighbor. Russia has denied planning an offensive but urged the U.S. and its allies to provide a binding pledge that NATO won't expand to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations or deploy weapons there and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe — the demands firmly rejected by the West.

Some observers suggested that Beijing is closely watching how the U.S. and its allies act in the stand-off over Ukraine as it ponders further strategy on Taiwan, arguing that indecision by Washington could encourage China to grow more assertive.

Putin on Tuesday accused the U.S. and its allies of stonewalling Russia's security demands but held the door open for more talks. He argued that NATO's expansion eastward and a potential offer of membership to Ukraine undermine Russia's security and violate international agreements endorsing "the indivisibility of security," a principle meaning that the security of one nation shouldn't be strengthened at the expense of others.

The Russian leader has warned that if the West refuses to heed Russian demands, he could order unspecified "military-technical moves." Other than a full-fledged invasion in Ukraine that the West fears, Putin could ponder other escalatory options, including beefing up already extensive military ties with China.

Russia and China have held a series of joint war games, including naval drills and patrols by long-range bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. In August, Russian troops for the first time deployed to Chinese territory for joint maneuvers.

Even though Moscow and Beijing in the past rejected the possibility of forging a military alliance, Putin has said that such a prospect can't be ruled out. He also has noted that Russia has been sharing highly sensitive military technologies with China that helped significantly bolster its defense capability.

US forces launch raid in Syria, civilians also reported dead

By GHAITH ALSAYED, LOLITA C. BALDOR and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

ATMEH, Syria (AP) — U.S. special forces carried out what the Pentagon said was a large-scale counterterrorism raid in northwestern Syria early Thursday. First responders at the scene reported 13 people were killed, including six children and four women.

Residents said helicopters flew overhead and U.S. forces clashed with gunmen for more than two hours around a two-story house surrounded by olive trees. They described continuous gunfire and explosions that jolted the sleepy village of Atmeh near the Turkish border, an area dotted with camps for internally displaced people from Syria's civil war.

The Pentagon did not identify the target of the raid. "The mission was successful," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in a brief statement. "There were no U.S. casualties. More information will be provided as it becomes available."

A journalist on assignment for The Associated Press and several residents said they saw body parts scattered near the site of the raid, a house in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province. Most residents spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

It was the largest raid in the province since the 2019 Trump-era U.S. assault that killed the Islamic State

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leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

An Iraqi intelligence official in contact with the U.S.-led coalition said Thursday's target was a high-ranking militant leader whose identity will be released by the White House later in the day. Information suggests he may be al-Baghdadi's successor, the current IS leader known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the official added. He spoke on condition of anonymity to divulge sensitive information.

Idlib is largely controlled by Turkish-backed fighters but is also an al-Qaida stronghold and home to several of its top operatives. Other militants, including extremists from the rival IS group, have also found refuge in the region.

"The first moments were terrifying, no one knew what was happening," said Jamil el-Deddo, a resident of a nearby refugee camp. "We were worried it could be Syrian aircraft, which brought back memories of barrel bombs that used to be dropped on us," he added, referring to crude explosives-filled containers used by President Bashar Assad's forces against opponents during the Syrian conflict.

The top floor of the house was almost totally destroyed in Thursday's raid, with the ceiling and walls knocked out.

Blood could be seen on the walls and floor of the remaining structure, which contained a wrecked bedroom with a child's wooden crib on the floor. On one damaged wall, a blue plastic children's swing was still hanging. The kitchen was blackened with fire damage.

The opposition-run Syrian Civil Defense, first responders also known as the White Helmets, said 13 people were killed in shelling and clashes that ensued after the U.S. commando raid. They included six children and four women, it said.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, also said the strike killed 13 people, including four children and two women. Ahmad Rahhal, a citizen journalist who visited the site, reported seeing 12 bodies.

The Pentagon provided no details on casualties in the raid.

The Observatory said the troops landed in helicopters. Residents and activists described witnessing a large ground assault, with U.S. forces using megaphones urging women and children to leave the area.

Omar Saleh, a resident of a nearby house, said his doors and windows started to rattle to the sound of low-flying aircraft at 1:10 a.m. local time. He then heard a man, speaking Arabic with an Iraqi or Saudi accent through a loudspeaker, urging women to surrender or leave the area.

"This went on for 45 minutes. There was no response. Then the machine gun fire erupted," Saleh said. He said the firing continued for two hours, as aircraft circled low over the area.

Taher al-Omar, an Idlib-based activist, said he witnessed clashes between fighters and the U.S. force. Others reported hearing at least one major explosion during the operation. A U.S. official said that one of the helicopters in the raid suffered a mechanical problem and had to be blown up on the ground. The U.S. official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the military operation.

The military operation got attention on social media, with tweets from the region describing helicopters firing around the building near Atmeh. Flight-tracking data also suggested that multiple drones were circling the city of Sarmada and the village of Salwah, just north of the raid's location.

The U.S. has in the past used drones to kill top al-Qaida operatives in Idlib, which at one point was home to the group's biggest concentration of leaders since the days of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The fact that special forces landed on the ground suggest the target was believed to be of high value.

A similar attack in Pakistan, in 2011, killed bin Laden.

Thursday's clandestine operation came as the Islamic State group has been reasserting itself in Syria and Iraq with increased attacks.

Last month, it carried out its biggest military operation since it was defeated and its members scattered underground in 2019: an attack on a prison in northeast Syria holding at least 3,000 IS detainees. The attack appeared aimed to break free senior IS operatives in the prison.

It took 10 days of fighting for U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led forces to retake the prison fully, and the force said more than 120 of its fighters and prison workers were killed along with 374 militants. The U.S.-led coalition carried out airstrikes and deployed American personnel in Bradley Fighting Vehicles to the prison

area to help the Kurdish forces.

A senior SDF official, Nowruz Ahmad, said Monday that the prison assault was part of a broader plot that IS had been preparing for a long time, including attacks on other neighborhoods in Kurdish-run north-eastern Syria and on the al-Hol camp in the south, which houses thousands of families of IS members.

The U.S.-led coalition has targeted high-profile militants on several occasions in recent years, aiming to disrupt what U.S. officials say is a secretive cell known as the Khorasan group that is planning external attacks. A U.S. airstrike killed al-Qaida's second in command, former bin Laden aide Abu al-Kheir al-Masri, in Syria in 2017.

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

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The Russia-Ukraine crisis entered another day that is expected to be packed with diplomatic efforts to prevent the simmering tensions from boiling over into war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is hosting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for talks in Kyiv while Russian President Vladimir Putin meets his Argentinian counterpart Alberto Fernandez in Moscow.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, meanwhile, voiced concerns that Russia continues to build up troop numbers along Ukraine's borders, including in Belarus.

Here are things to know Thursday about the international tensions surrounding Ukraine, which has an estimated 100,000 Russian troops massed along its borders.

NATO CHIEF: 'SIGNIFICANT' RUSSIAN TROOP BUILDUP IN BELARUS

Stoltenberg told reporters at NATO headquarters that Moscow has now deployed more troops and equipment to Belarus that at any time in the last 30 years.

Russia now has more than 100,000 troops stationed near Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, raising concern that Moscow might invade again, as it did in 2014. Russian officials deny that an invasion is planned.

Stoltenberg again called on Russia to "de-escalate," and repeated warnings from the West that "any further Russian aggression would have severe consequences and carry a heavy price."

The NATO chief said Russian forces in Belarus are likely to rise to 30,000 including special forces and supported by fighter jets and missiles.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu arrived in the Belarus capital, Minsk, on Thursday to monitor preparations for major Russia-Belarus war games that are expected to take place Feb. 10-20.

— By Lorne Cook in Brussels, and Dasha Litvinova in Moscow.

DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO DEFUSE CRISIS

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is visiting his Ukrainian counterpart in Kyiv, saying he wants to play his part in establishing "an atmosphere of peace and trust in our region."

Erdogan also underscored Turkey's support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, calling the nation a "strategic partner and neighbor."

"As a Black Sea nation, we invite all sides to exercise restraint and dialogue in order to bring peace to the region," Erdogan said.

Meanwhile, Putin is meeting with Argentinian President Alberto Fernandez in Moscow and will speak by phone to French President Emmanuel Macron, who had a call Wednesday night with U.S. President Joe Biden.

Macron will speak to Putin, then Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, according to Macron's office.

— By Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey, and Angela Charlton in Paris.

PUTIN HEADING TO WINTER OLYMPICS

After his meeting with Fernandez, Putin heads Thursday night to Beijing to bolster Moscow's ties with China and coordinate their policies in the face of Western pressure.

Ice hockey fan Putin will also attend Friday's opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics.

His talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday will mark their first face-to-face meeting since 2019 and will help cement a strong personal relationship that has been a key factor behind a growing partnership between the two former Communist rivals.

Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign affairs adviser, said the visit would mark a new stage in the Russia-China partnership that he described as a "key factor contributing to a sustainable global development and helping counter destructive activities by certain countries."

Ushakov emphasized that China backs Russia in the current standoff over Ukraine.

NATO chief wary of Russian troop buildup in Belarus

By LORNE COOK and SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg expressed concern Thursday that Russia is continuing its military buildup around Ukraine, and that it has now deployed more troops and military equipment to Belarus that at any time in the past 30 years.

More high-level diplomacy was expected in Moscow and Kyiv amid deep uncertainty about Russia's intentions. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is hosting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for talks in the Ukrainian capital. Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with his Argentine counterpart Alberto Fernandez in Moscow.

Russia now has more than 100,000 troops stationed near Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, raising concern that Moscow might invade again, as it did in 2014, and destabilize the Ukrainian economy. Russian officials deny that an invasion is planned.

"Over the last days, we have seen a significant movement of Russian military forces into Belarus. This is the biggest Russian deployment there since the Cold War," Stoltenberg told reporters at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

He said that Russian troop numbers in Belarus are likely to climb to 30,000, with the backing of special forces, high-end fighter jets, Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, and S-400 ground-to-air missile defense systems.

"So, we speak about a wide range of modern military capabilities. All this will be combined with Russia's annual nuclear forces exercise, expected to take place this month," Stoltenberg said.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu arrived in Minsk on Thursday to check on preparations for major Russia-Belarus war games scheduled for Feb. 10-20. Shoigu met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Speaking about the drills, Lukashenko said the goal was "to reinforce the border with Ukraine."

At the same time, Belarus' defense ministry accused Ukraine of violating the country's airspace with a drone last month. The ministry summoned Ukraine's defense attaché and handed him a note of protest over "frequent violations of the state border" of Belarus.

Kyiv rejected the allegation and accused Belarus of working with Russia to try to further unsettle Ukraine. "We call on Minsk to refrain from playing along with Russia's destabilizing activities," foreign ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said on Twitter.

Stoltenberg called on Russia to "de-escalate," and repeated warnings from the West that "any further Russian aggression would have severe consequences and carry a heavy price."

NATO has no intention of deploying troops to Ukraine should Russia invade, but it has begun to reinforce the defenses of nearby member countries — notably Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The 30-nation military alliance also plans to beef up its defenses in the Black Sea region near Bulgaria and Romania.

Stoltenberg also welcomed President Joe Biden's decision on Wednesday to send 2,000 U.S.-based troops to Poland and Germany and shifting 1,000 more from Germany to Romania, demonstrating to both allies and foes Washington's commitment to NATO's eastern flank.

"We are committed to finding a political solution to the crisis, but we have to be prepared for the worst," Stoltenberg said, and he welcomed other recent offers of troops and equipment from several allies. Russia objects to the troop move and has described it as "destructive."

Erdogan, a prominent NATO ally in the Black Sea region, is positioning himself as a possible mediator.

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Speaking before departing for Kyiv, he reiterated Turkey's support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and said Ankara was ready to do what it can to reduce tensions.

"We are closely following the challenges that Ukraine is faced with as well as the tension in the region," he said. "We express on every platform that we support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our strategic partner and neighbor, Ukraine."

"As a Black Sea nation, we invite all sides to exercise restraint and dialogue in order to bring peace to the region," Erdogan said. "I once again stress that we are ready to do our part to establish an atmosphere of peace and trust in our region."

WHO: Europe entering 'plausible endgame' to COVID pandemic

COPENHAGEN (AP) — The director of the World Health Organization's Europe office said Thursday the continent is now entering a "plausible endgame" to the pandemic and that the number of coronavirus deaths is starting to plateau.

Dr. Hans Kluge said at a media briefing that there is a "singular opportunity" for countries across Europe to take control of COVID-19 transmission due to three factors: high levels of immunization due to vaccination and natural infection, the virus's tendency to spread less in warmer weather and the lower severity of the omicron variant.

"This period of higher protection should be seen as a cease-fire that could bring us enduring peace," he said.

As the winter subsides in much of Europe in the coming weeks, when the virus's transmission naturally drops, Kluge said the upcoming spring "leaves us with the possibility for a long period of tranquility and a much higher level of population defense against any resurgence in transmission."

Even if another variant emerges, Kluge said, health authorities in Europe should be able to keep it in check, provided immunization and boosting efforts continue, along with other public health interventions.

He said, however, this demands "a drastic and uncompromising increase in vaccine-sharing across borders," saying vaccines must be provided to everyone across Europe and beyond. Scientists have repeatedly warned that unless the majority of the world's population is vaccinated, any opportunities for COVID-19 to keep spreading means it could mutate into deadlier and more transmissible forms.

Numerous countries across Europe, including Britain and Denmark, have dropped nearly all their coronavirus restrictions after saying that omicron has peaked. Others, including Spain, are now considering whether to consider COVID-19 to be an endemic problem that might be handled more like seasonal flu.

At WHO's Geneva headquarters, director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that the world as a whole is still far from exiting the pandemic.

"We are concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines — and because of omicron's high transmissibility and lower severity — preventing transmission is no longer possible and no longer necessary," Tedros said Tuesday. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

The agency has said even countries with high levels of vaccination should not succumb to political pressure and release all of their coronavirus measures at once.

Kluge noted that there were 12 million new coronavirus cases across WHO's European region last week, the highest single weekly total during the pandemic. He said that spike was driven by the hugely infectious omicron variant, but admissions to hospital intensive care units haven't risen significantly.

For Uyghur torchbearer, China's Olympic flame has gone dark

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — At the age of 17, Kamaltürk Yalqun was one of several students chosen to help carry the Olympic flame ahead of the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing.

Today, he is an activist in the United States calling for a boycott of the upcoming Winter Games over China's treatment of his Uyghur ethnic community.

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"It seems to me that our sense of global citizenship and sportsmanship is not moving forward with these Olympic Games anymore," Yalqun said in a phone interview from Boston, where he now lives in exile.

In the years since he took part in the Olympic torch relay and later attended the Games as a representative of his home region of Xinjiang, in western China, Beijing has imposed harsh policies on the Muslim Uyghurs, splitting apart Yalqun's own family.

With the Olympic flame set to return to Beijing with Friday's opening ceremony, these Games are attracting renewed global controversy as they spotlight the host country's treatment of the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. According to researchers, authorities have locked up an estimated 1 million or more members of minority ethnic groups in mass internment camps over the past several years — most of them Uyghurs.

Human rights groups have dubbed these the "Genocide Games," as the U.S. and other countries have cited rights abuses in leading a diplomatic boycott of the event.

China denies any human rights abuses, calling them the "lie of the century." It describes its policies in Xinjiang as a "training program" to combat terrorism.

Yalqun recalls being proud to participate in China's first Olympics. Those feelings vanished after his father disappeared. In 2016, Yalqun Rozi, an editor of books on Uyghur literature, was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison for attempting to "subvert" the Chinese state.

Yalqun never saw his father again — only catching a glimpse of him in a Xinjiang documentary by state broadcaster CGTN five years later. Yalqun moved to the U.S. for graduate school in 2014 and has stayed ever since.

In the past months, Yalqun has regularly joined protests in Boston calling for the boycott of the Winter Games.

In the run up to the 2008 Summer Games — the first ever held in China — Tibetan activists had demonstrated against Beijing's oppression of their community.

Yalqun says he didn't know anything that at the time. All he knew, as high school student who didn't pay attention to politics, was he had a chance to go to the capital and see the Olympics as part of a youth camp.

Xinjiang education officials picked the top students from a handful of schools, who were then interviewed by the Communist Youth League regional chapter for their interpersonal and English skills. When he got a phone call saying he had been selected, Yalqun was elated.

"Whether you were a volunteer, or a torchbearer, or whether you were just attending as an audience (member), everyone was so proud of themselves for being able to be part of the Games," he said.

An Olympics committee in Beijing later selected Yalqun to be a torchbearer as well.

The morning of the run was on a hot July day and went by "in a blink," he said. He and others ran a section that started at the eastern end of the Great Wall on the coast in the city of Qinhuangdao.

"The distance for us to run was very short, maybe 30 meters (100 feet)," he said with a chuckle.

Each runner was given a red, aluminum torch, decorated with a repeating cloud motif. An inner chamber with propane allowed them to catch the flame from the previous bearer.

He got to keep the tall aluminum torch as a souvenir. On the bus to Beijing, he was besieged by curious fellow passengers who asked for a photo. Everyone was caught up in the excitement, he said.

The torch and torchbearer uniform helped smooth things over when the police came to his hotel that night check on him. Police regularly conducted checks on Uyghur travelers in big cities.

His days in Beijing passed quickly. He was one of 70 youths selected to represent China at an Olympic Youth Camp. He made friends with students from other countries as the 400-plus group went on tours of historic sites like the Forbidden City and newly built shopping malls.

The 2008 Games were China's coming out party. The country had grown at a rapid pace and become wealthier. Wide boulevards once choked with bicycles were now jammed with cars.

The tall skyscrapers and wide streets were not the things that impressed Yalqun, but the trees.

"Back then, China didn't pay much attention to the environment. Everywhere it was just concrete and cement, no nature," he said. But he was struck when he saw the green corridor, filled with rows of trees, from the newly built international airport to the city. "I could see greenery everywhere."

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These days, Yalqun wants little to do with his home country.

The Olympic flame, which is meant to transmit a message of peace and friendship, has been doused for him. He is disappointed with the current diplomatic boycott, even as it has grown to include Australia, Canada and the UK. He says there should be a full boycott, including by the athletes.

Many heads of state and senior global figures, including U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and Russian President Vladimir Putin, are expected to attend Friday's opening ceremonies, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

"It should be a collective responsibility when such kind of atrocities are happening," he said. "It's heart-breaking for me to see such a cold response from people."

Platinum Jubilee: Queen's reign marks 70 years of change

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When 25-year-old Princess Elizabeth was proclaimed queen on Feb. 6, 1952, the British Empire stretched across the world, royalty was widely revered and televisions were still a novelty item.

The world has undergone profound changes since then and so has the monarchy. Queen Elizabeth II's empire shrank, then crumbled. While most people in Britain remain loyal to the queen and respect her years of service to the nation, attitudes about the monarchy have swung from unquestioning deference to scrutiny. In the 1980s, Princess Diana brought global star power to the House of Windsor, but also ushered in an era in which the royal family was forced to negotiate an uneasy relationship with the media.

Over her 70-year reign, the queen has — at times reluctantly — overseen the modernization of the family known as "The Firm" and its adaptation to evolving expectations.

As Britain marks the 95-year-old monarch's Platinum Jubilee on Sunday, here's a look at some key moments of change:

1953: ELIZABETH'S CORONATION AND THE AGE OF TELEVISION

On June 2, 1953, Elizabeth's coronation at Westminster Abbey was the first time most people had watched an event live on television. Millions around the world saw the ceremony on TV, outnumbering the radio audience for the first time.

The coronation broadcast heralded a turning point for television — as well as the monarchy — making the Windsors seem much more real by bringing them into people's living rooms.

In 1957, the queen made her first televised Christmas broadcast, saying she hoped the new medium would make her message "more personal and direct."

"It is inevitable that I should seem a rather remote figure to many of you ... But now, at least for a few minutes, I welcome you to the peace of my own home," she said at the time.

1957: 'WINDS OF CHANGE' AS THE COLONIES BREAK AWAY

In 1957, Ghana became the first British colony in Africa to celebrate independence. Three years later, then British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made his famous "winds of change" speech in South Africa, telling lawmakers there that "whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact."

By 1970, most of Britain's African and Caribbean colonies had gained independence. In 1997, the handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule marked the final chapter of the British Empire.

Britain still has pockets of overseas territories, the largest of which is the Falkland Islands. The queen remains the head of state in 15 Commonwealth countries including Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

1970: FIRST ROYAL 'WALKABOUT'

In another shift with the times, the queen carried out the first royal "walkabout" — which sees members of the royal family greeting, chatting and shaking hands with ordinary people at public events — in Sydney, during a royal tour of Australia and New Zealand.

The practice has since become a key part of the royals' public relations strategy. Princess Diana perhaps best embodied the power of such outings, showcasing her empathy and knack for connecting with people

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as she walked among adoring well-wishers.

1990s: PRINCESS DIANA AND A TURBULENT ERA

Diana's fairy-tale wedding to Prince Charles in 1981 brought youthful glamour and irresistible star power to the House of Windsor. But the very public way the couple's marriage disintegrated eroded respect for the monarchy.

The 1990s saw the monarchy's popularity sink to new lows as royal family dramas — from tell-all interviews to embarrassing phone conversations and topless photos — continued to play out in public like soap operas. In 1992, the queen famously referred to her 40th year on the throne as her "annus horribilis" (horrible year) as the marriages of three of her four children collapsed.

1997: DIANA'S DEATH AND A CHANGE OF TONE FOR THE MONARCHY

When Diana died in a Paris car crash in August 1997, the queen was widely criticized for her perceived aloofness and being out of touch with the grieving nation.

Many were angry at the royals' failure to lower the flag at Buckingham Palace and at the queen's decision to stay secluded with her family at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. After days of intense pressure, the queen finally broke her silence, addressing the nation on television as "your queen and grandmother" and acknowledging that "we have all been trying in our different ways to cope."

2011: ELIZABETH'S STATE VISIT TO IRELAND

In May 2011, the queen became the first British monarch to set foot in Ireland in 100 years. King George V visited in 1911, a decade before the creation of the Irish Free State. The queen spoke of her sincere sympathy for all those who suffered because of the two countries' "troubled past," and the trip was widely praised as a historic moment of reconciliation.

2012: DIAMOND JUBILEE AND THE LONDON OLYMPICS

The queen's Diamond Jubilee, celebrating her 60 years on the throne, marked a period of record popularity for the queen and the royal family. The national mood of jubilation and support for the queen was boosted by Prince William and Kate Middleton's royal wedding a year earlier and general euphoria as London hosted the 2012 Summer Olympics.

2020: 'MEGXIT' AND PRINCE ANDREW'S TROUBLES

In recent years the royal family has been buffeted by two unprecedented PR disasters: the departure of Prince Harry and his wife Meghan to the U.S., citing intense media scrutiny and racist attitudes among the British media, and growing sex abuse allegations against Prince Andrew, the queen's middle son.

Harry and Meghan, who stepped down from their royal duties in 2020, have accused the royal family of racism and called out its lack of compassion for Meghan's mental health struggles. Harry has openly and repeatedly criticized the royal family for the way he was brought up.

Meanwhile, Andrew is fighting a U.S. lawsuit filed by a woman who says she was forced to have sex with him when she was 17. Last month, Andrew was stripped of all his honorary military titles in an apparent effort to distance him from the monarchy.

2021: THE DEATH OF PRINCE PHILIP

On April 9, 2021, the queen lost Prince Philip, her husband of 73 years and her "strength and stay" throughout most of her life. A scaled-down, socially-distanced funeral was held amid coronavirus restrictions. Somber images of the queen sitting alone in St. George's Chapel were a stark reminder that she was entering the twilight years of her reign, with increasing duties handed to her heir, Prince Charles.

EXPLAINER: Why Europe lacks voice, power in Ukraine crisis

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

SAINT-SYMPHORIEN, Belgium (AP) — Scarred by losing tens of millions of lives on their soil in two world wars, many European Union nations have been wary ever since about military spending.

Now, as Russian pressure builds at the Ukrainian border, they face a painful reality: Europe remains heavily reliant on U.S. might to deter another potentially big conflict on its turf.

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Because of a half-hearted attitude to defense and security over decades, "the EU has almost nothing to bring to the table," says Piotr Buras, senior policy fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations think tank. "So, Russia can simply ignore it."

With U.S. President Joe Biden the most authoritative voice challenging Russian President Vladimir Putin on the European continent, some top EU policy makers know what they face.

"We have a choice to make. Either we seriously invest in our collective capacity to act, or we accept being an object and not a subject in foreign policy," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said last week.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

"War, never again," reads the visitors book of the Saint-Symphorien military cemetery south of Brussels, where some of the first and last casualties of World War I lie buried, German soldiers alongside former enemies. Bodies from the 1914-1918 war are dug up to this day in Flanders Fields, 100 kilometers (60 miles) away. Memorial sites and monuments to war dead are scattered around the continent.

After an equally brutal World War II left an estimated 36.5 million Europeans dead, it was clear things had to drastically change.

Germany, which had set off both global conflicts, and neighboring France needed to be knitted together in a tight economic embrace that would make war practically impossible.

The alliance that eventually grew to become the EU began with a trading community focused on steel, coal and farming — not soldiers and bombs. An attempt at a European Defense Community and a potential European army was politically stillborn and never got past French ratification in 1954.

After the United States was decisive in winning both world wars and then developed a nuclear arsenal to face the Soviet Union, relying on Washington became a political no-brainer for Europe.

WHY THAT'S A PROBLEM

Within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, set up in 1949, Europeans could shelter comfortably under U.S. military power, which grew significantly over the decades while spending by many of its Western allies lagged.

The Saint-Symphorien cemetery is close by NATO's military headquarters, called the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. It is invariably led by an American, ever since Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. Just outside its headquarters is a restaurant called "Chez L'Oncle Sam" or "At Uncle Sam" — well known for its burgers and Tex-Mex grills — and that's how NATO feels to this day.

The EU has grown into a global economic powerhouse, but never developed security and defense clout to match.

"Often people would describe the EU as an economic giant, but also a political dwarf and a military worm. I know that is a cliché. But, like many clichés, it had a basic element of truth," Borrell said.

It was painfully evident during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jacques Poos declared it was "the hour of Europe," yet it took U.S.-led NATO troops to make the difference.

To make matters worse, EU decision-making became more unwieldy as the bloc grew, with each individual nation able to threaten veto power on foreign policy and defense issues. This week, many in European capitals winced as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán went to visit Putin. He sought tighter relations through larger natural gas imports at a time when the rest of the EU wants to distance itself from Moscow.

Efforts to increase European defense spending or to integrate weapons systems have largely failed.

Here's how NATO sums up the situation on its website: "The combined wealth of the non-US Allies, measured in GDP, exceeds that of the United States. However, non-US Allies together spend less than half of what the United States spends on defense."

American presidents going back a half-century have expressed irritation at Europe's dependence on the U.S. military.

WELFARE VS WEAPONS

There are political and historical reasons for the gap.

The United States was intent to make the 20th century its own and massive defense spending came with that. In contrast, post-war Western European democracies built their welfare states. Spending on hospitals and school desks always trumped tanks, and any hint of military spending to bolster an aggres-

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sive posture could unleash demonstrations.

Even today, 15 years after committing toward spending 2% of gross domestic product on defense, 13 European NATO members still don't make the grade. Last year, major nations — like Spain with 1.02%, Italy with 1.41%, and Germany with 1.53% — still fell well short.

EU proponents note it won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 for keeping continental peace. Instead of hard power, it wants to be a giant of soft power, with its world-leading development aid, economic cooperation and cultural outreach.

But amid the Russia-Ukraine crisis, soft power doesn't pack the necessary deterrence. French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, representing Europe's two nuclear powers, have a direct line to Putin, while the EU seems to be largely locked out of the diplomatic efforts again.

"In the longer term, this situation can only change if Europeans themselves straighten their backs," wrote Alexander Mattelaer of the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations. "Only from a position of relative strength can progress be made at the negotiating table with Moscow."

EXPLAINER: Water Cube where Phelps ruled turns into Ice Cube

By BERNIE WILSON AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Somewhere under the four sheets of curling ice being used for the Beijing Olympics is the swimming pool where Michael Phelps splashed his way to history in the 2008 Summer Games.

At first glance, the few spectators allowed into the National Aquatics Center might think the pool is gone forever, filled in to allow the curlers to slide their heavy granite stones down long, narrow sheets of ice to try to knock out their opponent's rocks, accompanied by shouting and furious sweeping.

Not so. In a cool bit of engineering and technology, the Water Cube has turned into the Ice Cube.

The boxy building looks pretty much the same as it did 14 years ago, including its stunning blue exterior of translucent panels that resemble soap bubbles and light up at night in colorful displays. It's just that for the time being, it's a curling rink.

Here's more on what took place and how it's being received.

THE CONVERSION

After the 2008 Games, the Water Cube was converted to a public water park that included water slides, although the main pool and training pools were kept in place. The diving platforms from 2008 are still there, too, but are blocked from view during the curling competition by a large backdrop and a video board.

After Beijing was awarded these Winter Games, officials began planning a convertible support structure and a removable ice-making system to allow the building to be used for curling without losing the swimming pool. After the pool is drained, a structure of more than 2,500 steel beams and more than 1,500 lightweight prefabricated concrete panels is assembled to support the curling surface.

Water Cube/Ice Cube is perfect for curling because the ice sheets are just shorter than the 164-foot Olympic pool. It can be converted back to a pool in about 20 days.

THE COOL FACTOR

Curling stands on its own as a popular sport at the Winter Olympics, but the athletes say it is pretty neat competing in a venue made famous by Phelps' epic performances in 2008, when he won a record eight gold medals to eclipse Mark Spitz's haul of seven golds in 1972.

Canadian John Morris is the defending gold medalist in mixed doubles and would love to add to his collection at the Ice Cube. He also won a gold in the team competition in 2010.

"I didn't really understand it too well until I walked in here and I saw that Beijing 2008 sign on the diving board. I was like, 'Oh, that's pretty cool. I remember watching that on TV,'" says Morris, who is competing with new partner Rachel Homan. "It's a wonderful complex, the Ice Cube here, and hopefully they can fill it with as many fans as they're allowed in here because that obviously adds to the vibe and environment."

Morris noticed that the hot tub near the diving platform is up and running. During the Summer Olympics, it helped divers keep their muscles loose. At the Winter Games, it adds to the effects of humidifiers lined up along the sides of the playing surface. "I was hoping we could actually use the hot tub after the

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game," Morris says, "but we'll see."

STAMP OF APPROVAL

Morris says he's impressed with the job the Chinese did in both reusing a venue and laying down top-notch ice sheets.

"It would have been cool if they just froze the swimming pool water. That would have been real legit," he jokes. "But a lot more went into it and I know the Chinese pretty much didn't cut any corners in trying to make this as great an experience as they could for us curlers and people watching. I think that's cool how they can do that.

"And you know what? I have to say I think the future of the Olympics is these types of games that are held in previous cities that are more sustainable," Morris said. "They're not going to cost tons of money and get torn down after the games."

PHELPS' LEGACY LIVES ON

American mixed doubles curlers Chris Plys and Vicky Persinger say they were awestruck when they walked into the Ice Cube for the first time. Two-time Olympian Plys, who has an autographed photo of Phelps over his desk at home, says being in the Ice Cube made him think back to watching Phelps' races on TV in 2008.

"He's my favorite Olympian of all time, so to be in the same arena as him and all those races that happened is honestly just the coolest thing I could ever imagine," Plys says. "It would be like a hockey player getting to play in old Maple Leaf Gardens or something like that."

Olympic rookie Persinger says she noticed a floor drain and tiles that suggested there is indeed a swimming pool in the building and that there's still a big mosaic of koi fish in the dressing room. "I don't want to jinx myself here but I think it's one of the coolest venues I will ever play my entire life," Persinger says.

"Going to the Olympics may be once in a lifetime for a lot of people, and being able to play in this type of event is definitely once in a lifetime," Persinger says, "because, I mean, just to be on top of American Olympic history like this is really special."

In this case, it really is on top of history.

EXPLAINER: Peng Shuai case shows barriers Chinese women face

By The Associated Press undefined

BEIJING (AP) — The controversy surrounding Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai's accusations of sexual assault against a former top politician continues to cast a shadow of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games in the runup to their official kickoff on Friday.

Within China, however, her case has drawn little attention amid the crushing force of official censorship. Yet it points also to the barriers Chinese women face when raising such claims, both in the courts and within a male-dominated social and political culture that regards any dissent as a threat to the tightly-controlled, Communist Party-dominated system.

While the #MeToo movement gained some initial traction when it launched in China in 2018, recent cases show those early hopes for a significant change in official attitudes may have been unrealistic.

PAYING THE PRICE FOR GOING PUBLIC

Coming forward publicly with allegations can expose victims to a host of perils from online abuse to job loss, countersuits from those they accuse and simple disappearance into the judicial system.

In the case that first defined the Chinese #MeToo movement, activist Zhou Xiaoxuan sued state TV host Zhu Jun only after he sued her for defamation first. She accused him of groping her when she was a young intern at CCTV.

After initially receiving public support and media coverage, Zhou now gets messages attacking her every day and has been banned from posting on her Weibo account — a Twitter-like platform — for a year.

Other cases reflect the perils as well. Huang Xueqin, who publicly supported a woman when she accused a professor of sexual assault, was arrested in September. Wang Jianbing, who helped women report sexual harassment, was detained along with her. Neither has been heard from since.

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CONTROVERSY STILL SURROUNDS PENG'S ACCUSATIONS

Peng disappeared from public view last year after accusing former Communist Party official Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault. Her accusation was quickly scrubbed from the internet, and discussion of it remains heavily censored.

Zhang has not commented on the accusation posted of Peng's official social media account and in subsequent comments, she has appeared to deny making the claim while offering no explanation as to its origin.

"First of all, I want to emphasize something that is very important. I have never said that I wrote that anyone sexually assaulted me. I need to emphasize this point very clearly," Peng told a Singapore newspaper last month.

While the International Olympic Committee says it is satisfied she is fine, the Women's Tennis Association says it still lacks assurances and has suspended all its events in China this year, and possibly beyond. IOC President Thomas Bach intends to have a private dinner with Peng during his time in Beijing, although when and how that will occur remain under wraps.

BIG-NAME COMPANIES ALSO QUASH CASES

When a former employee of one of China's best known companies, Alibaba, couldn't get human resources or upper management to deal with her accusation of sexual assault, she took a more direct approach. Standing in the cafeteria at the e-commerce giant's headquarters, she yelled out her claims that she had been assaulted by a coworker and a client during a business trip.

As a result, she has been harassed online, accused of lying by the wives of the two men she accused and slapped with a defamation lawsuit from a Alibaba vice president who was forced to resign. The final insult: The company fired her on grounds of spreading false information about her assault and about the company's handling of the issue.

Using only her surname, Zhou, to avoid further harassment, the woman says she's still holding out for justice from the courts. Although both men were detained, police dropped the case against her former colleague, although Alibaba later fired him and Zhou's lawyer is pushing to have the case reopened. The client is in police custody and a criminal case is pending.

"My attitude is resolute," Zhou wrote in response to questions from The Associated Press. "I will not accept the result of the company's unsympathetic, unreasonable and illegal way of dealing with this."

LEGAL LOOPHOLES HELP DENY JUSTICE

Accusers face a high burden of proof in such cases, and although sexual harassment was recently defined by China's broad ranging Civil Code, the national law remains weak since it doesn't lay out any punishments.

Enforcement depends on local-level regulations and how courts interpret the law and those regulations. Also, many companies lack sexual harassment codes with explicit punishments and mechanisms for redress.

That results in very few cases ever making it before a court. Many that do are countersuits brought by the person being accused of abuse or harassment.

A recent report by researchers from Yale Law School found only 83 civil cases in public Chinese court databases related to sexual harassment or molestation between 2018 and 2020. Among them, 77 were brought by the alleged harasser against companies or the victims. In just six cases, victims sued their harassers.

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE BUT MEN DOMINATE POLITICS

While Chinese women are strongly represented in the work force and in legislative bodies such as the National People's Congress, they are largely absent from the highest levels of Communist Party and government power.

Just one woman — Vice Premier Sun Chunlan — sits on the 25-member Politburo and men make up all seven members of the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee. China has never had a female president or premier or even foreign minister. Only about 10% of delegates to the party's last national congress in 2017 were women, and that percentage doesn't appear set to rise this year.

Explanations are many. The party is a clubby, male-dominated organization in which women are often shunted off into less important positions. And the lack of opposition parties, free elections or an NGO

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sector that could offer alternative routes into public life are seen as undermining female participation.

The impact: Women often lack advocates at the upper levels to reflect concerns about sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination and attempts to effect change.

Team event up 1st as Olympic figure skating begins

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The team competition in Olympic figure skating has always been a three-team scramble for the podium.

There's the Russians, who won gold at the event's 2014 debut in Sochi and silver in Pyeongchang. There's the Canadians, who took silver before finding gold four years later. And there's the Americans, who have taken bronze each time.

There could be a new player in the mix when competition begins Friday in Beijing, though. After back-to-back fifth-place finishes, the Japanese bring their strongest bunch yet to the Olympics, and could knock off the podium a Canadian team that no longer has retired Patrick Chan or ice dancers Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir to pile up the points.

As for the Americans? Perhaps they can finally move up a step or two on the podium.

"It's important any time you compete," said Nathan Chen, who performed his short program for the U.S. team in Pyeongchang and finished a lackluster fourth in it. "I'm going to try to do the best I can. I know the rest of us will, too."

Chen is among the favorites to win individual gold in Beijing, and the team event should give him a competitive warmup. He doesn't know whether he will skate his short program, free skate or both for the team — that decision will be made by Team USA shortly before competition — but he is a lock to compete at least once.

The order of events changed from Pyeongchang, when pairs followed the team event, and that means Chen and the rest of the men will be up next week. Pairs got the misfortune of heading to the back of the Olympic program, meaning they won't be on the ice again until Feb. 18 — for some, a full two weeks after their first taste of competition.

"We honestly got the best end of the draw," Chen said after his practice Thursday morning at Capital Indoor Stadium, the arena in the heart of Beijing known for being the home of "ping-pong diplomacy" in the 1970s. "The pairs will have the hardest time moving from the front end to the back end."

How the team event shakes out could depend largely upon which skaters each nation selects.

The Russians have a trio of women's medal favorites — Kamila Valieva, Alexandra Trusova and Anna Scherbakova — along with pairs favorites Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov. They also have strong dance teams, though their trio of men took a hit when Mikhail Kolyada had to withdraw following a positive COVID-19 test.

The Japanese could send out two-time Olympic champion Yuzuru Hanyu after he skipped the team event in Pyeongchang; Shoma Uno still won the short program for them. They also have medal contender Kaori Sakamoto, leaving the pairs team of Riku Miura and Ryuichi Kihara and ice dancers Misato Komatsubara and Tim Koleto to keep pace with their rivals.

Canada might not have the same firepower it had four years ago, but pairs skater Eric Radford is back with new partner Vanessa James, and the ice dance team of Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier have medal expectations of their own.

Then there's the American team.

Along with Chen, they have another men's medal contender in high-flying but inconsistent Vincent Zhou, and veteran Jason Brown, whose fourth-place free skate during the team event in Sochi helped the U.S. win bronze.

Ice dancers Madison Chock and Evan Bates, Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue, and Kaitlin Hawayek and Jean-Luc Baker all have podium potential. Alysya Liu, Karen Chen and Mariah Bell are the U.S. options in the women's short program and free skate. And there are two pairs options in Beijing in Alexa Knierim

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and Brandon Frazier and Ashley Cain-Gribble and Timothy LeDuc after the Americans qualified only one for the Pyeongchang Games.

"I would love the opportunity to compete in that event," said Bell, the 25-year-old U.S. champion who will be making her long-awaited Olympic debut. "I know they will pick who they feel is best, but I would love the opportunity to compete."

So would Karen Chen. She sat out the team event in Pyeongchang along with Zhou and the dance teams of Chock and Bates and Hubbell and Donohue. And because they didn't compete in it, they also didn't take home a medal.

"I would love to be a part of the team event and especially since I didn't get to experience it last time," Karen Chen said, "so if I'm able to, it's going to be so much fun."

Another Beijing Olympics with human rights still major issue

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Beijing was awarded the 2008 Summer Olympics, largely under the assumption that the Games would improve civil liberties in the country.

There is no such talk now. The 2022 Winter Olympics open Friday under heavy security and warnings from officials that athletes or others could face legal action if they speak out on human rights or other touchy issues.

The Games are a reminder of both China's rise and its disregard for civil liberties, which has prompted a diplomatic boycott led by the United States.

Rights groups have documented forced labor, mass detentions and torture, and the U.S. has called China's internment of at least 1 million Uyghurs genocide. China has also come under criticism over the near-disappearance from public view of tennis star Peng Shuai after she accused a former senior member of the ruling Communist Party of sexually assaulting her.

But with more political, economic and military clout than it had 13 1/2 years ago, China appears to be worrying less about global scrutiny this time. And the COVID-19 pandemic has given it even more control over the Olympics, particularly with the isolation of visiting journalists, separated in a "bubble" from the Chinese population.

"There's nothing to 'prove' at this point; 2008 was a 'coming out' party and all this one does is confirm what we've known for the last decade," Amanda Shuman, a China researcher at the University of Freiburg, wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

"If anything, there's a lot less pressure than 2008," she said. "The Chinese government knows full well that its global economic upper hand allows it to do whatever it wishes."

The International Olympic Committee had few options when it awarded China the Games for the second time. Six possible European candidates, led by Norway and Sweden, bowed out for political or cost reasons. Voters in two other countries — Switzerland and Germany — voted no in referendums.

IOC members eventually picked Beijing — an authoritarian state that doesn't need voter approval to proceed — over Almaty, Kazakhstan, in a close vote, 44-40.

The IOC has allowed China to avoid human rights oversight. Beginning with the 2024 Paris Olympics, host cities must adhere to the U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. But China was not subject to those rules when it was picked in 2015.

"When China hosts the Olympics again, it is no longer the China back in 2008," dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei said in an email to The AP. Ai helped design the famous Bird's Nest stadium that was used in the 2008 Games — hoping it would signify a new openness — and then regretted doing so, calling it and the Olympics China's "fake smile."

Ai was jailed in 2011 in China on unspecified charges and now lives in exile in Portugal. The Bird's Nest will again host the opening ceremony.

"China today has deviated further away from democracy, freedom of press and human rights, and the reality has become even harsher," Ai added.

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China's tone has toughened since the last time it hosted the Games.

In 2008, Beijing put some curbs on broadcasting from Tiananmen Square but allowed it; agreed to "protest zones," though they were never used, with access repeatedly denied; and dropped some reporting restrictions more than a year ahead of the Games. It also unblocked its censored internet for journalists.

In 2022, there is less accommodation. The pandemic will limit journalists to a tightly sealed "bubble," though there is internet access. Chinese organizers have warned foreign athletes that any statement that goes against Chinese law could be punished. And a smartphone app widely used by athletes and reporters has glaring security vulnerabilities, according to an internet watchdog.

Some national Olympic committees have advised teams and staff not to take personal phones or laptops to Beijing.

The IOC, which generates billions from sponsorships and broadcast rights, seldom pushes back in public against Chinese organizers who are, in reality, the Chinese government.

Some of the changes that affect 2022 began a month after the 2008 Olympics ended, when the global financial crisis hit. China fared better than most countries, which increased its confidence.

China has since seen the rise of Xi Jinping, who headed the 2008 Olympics and was named general secretary of the Communist Party in 2012.

"Although Xi was in charge of 2008 Olympic Games, the Winter Games is truly Xi's Games," said Xu Guoqi, who teaches history at the University of Hong Kong. He is the author of "Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008."

Mary Gallagher, who teaches Chinese studies at the University of Michigan, said the state of U.S. democracy and its "poor pandemic response" have further emboldened China.

"Right now the multiple U.S. failures create momentum for renewed nationalism and confidence in China," Gallagher said by email. "This is made all the more effective by the Communist Party's strict control over information, which can rain 'positive energy' down on what's happening in China while only publicizing negative accounts of other countries, especially the U.S."

China complained in 2008 that human rights protests around Tibet politicized the Olympics. The Olympic Torch Relay, taken on a world tour, faced violent protests in London and elsewhere. The IOC has not tried such a relay since.

China, which has called the allegations of human rights abuses the "lie of the century," says mixing sports and politics goes against the Olympic Charter. IOC President Thomas Bach has likewise used that principle as a shield against critics.

But others see hypocrisy on China's part.

"Sports and politics do mix," Laura Luehrmann, a China specialist at Wright State University, said in an email. "Politics is about the distribution and use of limited resources — most notably power and decision-making, but also finances as well. Sports is all about power and money — even if framed as glorifying athletic achievement."

Victor Cha, who served in the White House under President George W. Bush and is the author of "Beyond the Final Score — The Politics of Sport in Asia," said China's moaning about others politicizing sports is "the pot calling the kettle black."

"There is no country that has ignored the Olympic Charter's mandate to keep politics out of sports more than China," Cha, who teaches at Georgetown University, wrote in an essay last week for the Center for Strategic & International Studies.

"Much as the world would like the Olympics to be devoid of politics, as George Orwell once wrote: 'Sport is war minus the shooting.'"

Strained US hospitals seek foreign nurses amid visa windfall

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

With American hospitals facing a dire shortage of nurses amid a slogging pandemic, many are looking abroad for health care workers.

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And it could be just in time.

There's an unusually high number of green cards available this year for foreign professionals, including nurses, who want to move to the United States — twice as many as just a few years ago. That's because U.S. consulates shut down during the coronavirus pandemic weren't issuing visas to relatives of American citizens, and, by law, these unused slots now get transferred to eligible workers.

Amy L. Erlbacher-Anderson, an immigration attorney in Omaha, Nebraska, said she has seen more demand for foreign nurses in two years than the rest of her 18-year career. And this year, she said, it's more likely they'll get approved to come, so long as U.S. consular offices can process all the applications.

"We have double the number of visas we've had available for decades," she said. "That is kind of temporarily creating a very open situation."

U.S. hospitals are struggling with a shortage of nurses that worsened as pandemic burnout led many to retire or leave their jobs. Meanwhile, coronavirus cases continue to rise and fall, placing tremendous pressure on the health care system. In California alone, there's an estimated gap of 40,000 nurses, or 14% of the workforce, according to a recent report by the University of California, San Francisco.

Hospitals are filling the gap by hiring traveling nurses, but that can be expensive. And hospital administrators say not enough nurses are graduating from U.S. schools each year to meet the demand.

Some hospitals have long brought nurses from the Philippines, Jamaica and other English-speaking countries, and more are now following suit. And both longtime recruiters and newcomers are trying to take advantage of the green card windfall before the fiscal year ends in September.

The U.S. typically offers at least 140,000 green cards each year to people moving to the country permanently for certain professional jobs, including nursing. Most are issued to people who are already living in the United States on temporary visas, though some go to workers overseas. This year, 280,000 of these green cards are available, and recruiters hope some of the extras can be snapped up by nurses seeking to work in pandemic-weary hospitals in the United States.

The Biden administration, which has made moves to reverse Trump-era policies restricting legal immigration, has taken some steps to try to help foreign health care workers so they can assist with the pandemic. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said it would speed the renewal of work permits for health care workers, which could help keep some foreign citizens already in the United States on the job. The State Department told consulates last year to prioritize applications for workers at facilities that are responding to the pandemic, an agency official said.

Faith Akinmade, a 22-year-old nurse from Nigeria, is among those hoping for a quick solution. After completing college in the U.S., Akinmade has been working as an ICU nurse for University of Louisville Hospital in Kentucky. But her work permit is set to expire in March. She said she needs it renewed, or her green card approved, to stay on the job.

"At this point and time, I just feel like I have faith that at the end of March something is going to show up to continue to work," Akinmade said. She said the issue affects many of her international colleagues as well as domestic ones, who may be pressed to take on shifts for colleagues if their immigration paperwork doesn't come through.

Dr. Roxie Wells, president of Cape Fear Valley Hoke Hospital in Raeford, North Carolina, said she started trying to bring over foreign nurses before the pandemic, but it wasn't until last year that these recruits started getting consular interviews in larger numbers. So far, about 150 were approved to come work, but Wells said they're still waiting on another 75.

"Obviously it has become more necessary during the pandemic," she said. "The 150, if we didn't have them, we would be in a precarious situation."

The surge in the omicron variant in the United States has made the strained staffing situation even more apparent in hospitals as health care workers, like so many others, have been sickened by the highly contagious virus and sidelined from work at a time when more patients are coming in.

Sinead Carbery, president of Nurse Staffing Solutions for AMN Healthcare, said the demand for international nurses has risen between 300% and 400% since the pandemic began. The number of nurses that can be brought into the United States even with the additional green cards won't be enough to meet

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demand, and many more recruiters are now seeking to hire nurses overseas because there are immigrant visas available, she said.

"This is a window of opportunity," she said. "Because everything is flowing so well, there's a lot of competition for that talent."

National Nurses United, a union representing 175,000 registered nurses, said more scrutiny should be given to international recruitment to ensure foreign nurses aren't brought in and subjected to unsafe working conditions. The union contends hospitals drove away U.S. nurses by keeping staffing levels so low — and this was well before concerns arose about worker safety and protections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Michelle Mahon, the union's assistant director of nursing practice, said many foreign nurses sign yearslong contracts with employers, which can make it hard for them to speak up about labor or patient safety concerns. She said hospitals that saw nurses quit during the pandemic are turning to an overseas workforce to replace them.

"This kind of dynamic is particularly attractive right now to employers who have not made any of the changes necessary to ensure patient and nursing safety during this COVID-19 pandemic," Mahon said. "Instead of them addressing the actual problem, they want to go and pivot to this other really fake solution."

Hospital administrators, however, contend there simply aren't enough U.S.-trained nurses to go around. Patty Jeffrey, president of the American Association of International Healthcare Recruitment, said the United States should expand nursing education programs to train more nurses domestically, as well as let more nurses come in from overseas. But she acknowledged bringing in a much larger number of nurses would require legislation.

"The calls are every day ringing off the hook: We need 100, we need 200, we need all these nurses," Jeffrey said.

Jorge Almeida Neri, a 26-year-old nurse from Portugal, arrived in the United States in December, though he began the process before the pandemic. He said a required international nursing exam was delayed due to the virus and it took four months to get a consular interview, though other international nurses he's met waited much longer. He interviewed for his current job at a Virginia hospital, which he got through a staffing agency, about a year ago.

"After getting everything certified, the immigration process started, and I was like, 'Oh, this is going to be quick.' I was wrong," he said.

Almeida Neri said many Portuguese nurses seek work overseas since wages are low, though many go elsewhere in Europe, which doesn't take as long as the United States.

Despite the demand, there's no guarantee hospitals will in fact snap up more visas. Greg Siskind, an immigration attorney, said U.S. consular offices aren't required to issue visas solely because they're available, and are hampered by limits on remote work and video interviews. He said most employment-based green cards tend to go to professionals already in the United States, not overseas, though more could be done to speed these up, too.

"Under their current policies, if they don't make any changes, it is going to be hard," he said of the likelihood the U.S. government will issue all the available visas, "but there's a lot of things they could do."

High court conservatives target O'Connor, Kennedy opinions

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For years, the Supreme Court moved to the left or right only as far as Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy allowed.

They held pivotal votes on a court closely divided between liberals and conservatives. Now, though, a more conservative court that includes two men who once worked for Kennedy at the high court is taking direct aim at major opinions written by the two justices, now retired.

The court already was weighing a dramatic rollback of abortion rights when last week, it added cases that could end the use of race in college admissions and limit the reach of the nation's main water pollution law, the Clean Water Act.

Kennedy or O'Connor, or both, wrote the opinions that have been called into question on all three topics.

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"It's just evidence that the middle or center of the court has moved dramatically right," said Leah Litman, a University of Michigan law professor who once worked for Kennedy.

Since Kennedy and O'Connor played pivotal roles in some of the court's biggest decisions, Litman said, "it's not particularly surprising to see some of those decisions come under attack."

A decision on abortion is expected by early summer. The other issues are expected to be argued in the fall and decided by June 2023.

Following Justice Stephen Breyer's announcement that he is retiring, a new justice is expected to be on the court when it hears the affirmative action and water pollution cases in the fall. But the change is unlikely to affect the outcomes or the balance on a court that will retain a 6-3 conservative majority.

The first woman to serve on the Supreme Court, O'Connor let it be known more than 12 years ago that she was not happy to see her work being "dismantled" by a court that grew more conservative when she retired in 2006 and was replaced by Justice Samuel Alito.

"What would you feel?" she said at a College of William & Mary event in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 2009, when asked what she thought about recent abortion and campaign finance rulings that would have come out differently had she remained on the court. "I'd be a little bit disappointed. If you think you've been helpful and then it's dismantled, you think, 'Oh dear.' But life goes on. It's not always positive."

O'Connor, 91, withdrew from public life in 2018 when she revealed that she has dementia. Kennedy, 85, declined to comment for this story. He stepped down in 2018, his seat filled by Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

One of three appointees of President Donald Trump, Kavanaugh generally appears to be more conservative than Kennedy, for whom he once worked. Another Trump appointee, Justice Neil Gorsuch, also reported to Kennedy when he was a high court law clerk the same year as Kavanaugh.

Abortion rights are facing their stiffest test in nearly 30 years. In 1992, O'Connor, Kennedy and Justice David Souter, also now retired, jointly wrote an opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* that preserved the right to an abortion until the point of viability, when a fetus can survive outside the womb.

The court suggested in arguments in December that it would at the very least uphold Mississippi's ban on abortions after 15 weeks, well before viability, and could overrule *Casey* and the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision entirely.

Last week, the justices agreed to take up a challenge to O'Connor's 2003 opinion for the court in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, which sustained the consideration of race among many factors in college admissions.

Kennedy dissented from the *Grutter* decision, but in 2016, he wrote the majority opinion that again upheld affirmative action in higher education in a case from Texas.

Also last week, the court said it would consider an appeal from landowners who have been blocked from building a house near a scenic Idaho lake. The issue is whether their property contains wetlands that bring it under the Clean Water Act.

In 2006, Kennedy wrote the court's controlling opinion that governs how to decide whether the Clean Water Act applies. That opinion is now under threat.

None of these issues demanded the court's attention at this moment. The high court steps in when lower courts disagree about a legal question, but that was not the case on abortion and affirmative action.

Even if there was a split over the Clean Water Act, the justices had turned away several appeals before Kennedy's retirement and the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 2020.

The changed composition of the court, then, appears to be the prime motivation for the court's intervention. In one sense, that's no surprise.

Trump's three picks were chosen because their outlook on the law put them closer to the court's most conservative justices, Clarence Thomas and Alito, than to Kennedy or even Chief Justice John Roberts.

But a striking aspect of this moment is that Kavanaugh and Gorsuch could well provide the votes to undo opinions written by their former boss.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the third justice named by Trump, once worked for the late Justice Antonin Scalia.

Still, some former Kennedy clerks said the former justice was most passionate about his opinions on

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gay rights and the First Amendment, and they said those are not threatened. Kennedy wrote a series of opinions culminating in a 2015 decision extending same-sex marriage nationwide, as well the Citizens United decision in 2010 that opened the door to unlimited independent spending in federal elections.

"He pushed the court toward a broader understanding of the First Amendment. I don't see the court as doing anything to cut back in that area," said Misha Tseytlin, a former clerk now in private practice.

Litman, though, cautioned that religious carve-outs to gay rights rulings working their way through the courts could further undermine Kennedy's legacy.

"Those opinions are going to be substantially limited when the court says people with religious objections to marriage equality can't be forced to comply," she said.

While it's not yet clear how far the court will go in any of these areas, there has already been a substantial move to the right, said Jonathan Adler, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

One way to look at it, Adler said, is to consider that the court for many years had four liberal justices who needed to pick off a single conservative vote to prevail.

On gay rights issues, Kennedy was that justice. Roberts provided the crucial fifth vote to preserve the Affordable Care Act.

That's changed, Adler said. Roberts, Kavanaugh and Barrett now seem most likely to be the middle of a more right-leaning court, and for the liberals to win, "they need two out of those three," he said. "That's a dramatic shift."

Race is on to save the Great Salt Lake: Will it be enough?

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The largest natural lake west of the Mississippi is shrinking past its lowest levels in recorded history, raising fears about toxic dust, ecological collapse and economic consequences. But the Great Salt Lake may have some new allies: conservative Republican lawmakers.

The new burst of energy from the GOP-dominated state government comes after lake levels recently hit a low point during a regional megadrought worsened by climate change. Water has been diverted away from the lake for years, though, to supply homes and crops in Utah. The nation's fastest-growing state is also one of the driest, with some of the highest domestic water use.

This year could see big investment in the lake that's long been an afterthought, with Gov. Spencer Cox proposing spending \$46 million and the powerful House speaker throwing his weight behind the issue. But some worry that the ideas advancing so far at the state Legislature don't go far enough to halt the slow-motion ecological disaster.

One proposal would tackle water use in homes and businesses, by measuring outdoor water that's considered some of the country's cheapest. Another would pay farmers for sharing their water downstream, and a third would direct money from mineral-extraction royalties to benefit the lake.

"I long took for granted the lake. It's always been there, and I've assumed it always would be there," said House speaker Brad Wilson at a summit he convened on the issue. But learning about the lake's precarious position this summer left him terrified. "The Great Salt Lake is in trouble. ... We have to do something."

The shrinking of the lake poses serious risks to millions of migrating birds and a lake-based economy that's worth an estimated \$1.3 billion in mineral extraction, brine shrimp and recreation. Health risks exist too: The massive dry lakebed could send arsenic-laced dust into the air that millions breathe.

"The Great Salt Lake needs some leaps to be saved. It's not going to do it with baby steps," said Zach Frankel, executive director of the nonprofit Utah Rivers Council. "These are tiny baby steps that should have been taken 20 years ago."

The lake took a pummeling last year, with especially devastating effects on its microbialites, the Great Salt Lake's version of a coral reef. The mushroom-like structures are formed by furry, deep green mats of microbes, which are the base of the lake's food chain and main sustenance for brine shrimp.

The shrimp both support a multimillion-dollar industry supplying food for fish farms and nourish millions of migrating birds whose massive flocks can show up on radar. The lake is also the nation's biggest source

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of magnesium and could soon provide lithium, a key mineral for renewable energy batteries.

But last year the lake matched a 170-year record low and kept dropping, hitting a new low of 4,190.2 feet (1,277.2 meters) in October. A significant portion of the microbialites were exposed to air, killing the vital microbes. The die-off will likely take years and years to repair even if they are fully submerged again, said Michael Vanden Berg, a state geologist.

And if the water levels continue to drop, the lake could get too salty for the edible microbes to survive, something that's already happened in the bright pink waters of the lake's north arm.

Still, Vanden Berg is cautiously optimistic for the south arm, where a portion of the green microbialites did survive last year's lake drop.

"It's bad but not catastrophic yet," he said. "There is still time to fix and mitigate the situation."

In some ways, the fix is simple: More water needs to flow into the lake.

But that's no small task in the state that grew by 18.4% over the past decade, to nearly 3.28 million people.

Utah has relatively inexpensive water overall. A 2015 state audit found Salt Lake City water prices were lower than almost every other city surveyed, including Phoenix, Las Vegas and Santa Fe.

But a subset of homes have access to especially low-price water — the cheapest in the nation, according to the Utah Rivers Council.

About 200,000 homes and businesses pay a flat fee for an entire season of irrigation water. It's called a secondary water system, made from converted agricultural supply in communities that are now largely suburban. Those account for a disproportionately large segment of the state's water use — and many of them are on the Great Salt Lake watershed, Frankel said.

"It's like an all-you-can-eat buffet," he said. While most people have a water meter on the side of their homes, usage isn't measured for secondary-water users.

But small-scale projects have shown that simply being aware of how much they're using makes people cut back by 20%, said GOP Utah Rep. Tim Hawkes.

There's been pushback to change the system before, and part of the reason is the per-meter cost of about \$1,500, but the governor has backed spending about \$250 million in federal pandemic relief money to install them.

The Utah Rivers Council would like to see people pay more for that water, but there's been little public discussion of that this year. Hawkes argues that even conserving 20% through awareness would dramatically increase the chances that the lake stays healthy.

This year is shaping up to be a wetter year than 2021, but that doesn't immediately translate to more water for the lake. First comes replenishing drinking water supplies. Then comes the lake.

And homes and businesses aren't the only ones that need moisture. About 65% of the water on the Great Salt Lake watershed goes to agriculture. Farmers have a right to that water, and under historic laws they could lose the water they don't use.

"Right now, there's actually a disincentive for agriculture to conserve, or optimize, the water they're using," said Republican Rep. Joel Ferry.

He's sponsoring legislation that would let farmers get paid for water they let flow to the Great Salt Lake and other bodies. Because each farm is so much larger than the average home, even slight adjustments can have a major impact.

Under his plan, which has advanced at the state Legislature, it would be up to each farm to decide whether to sell water in a given year. The fund would also likely start with some federal pandemic money, and backers would hope to get donations as it continues.

"This is going to be a slow start," said Ferry, who is a farmer himself. "We recognize there's a problem, and farmers want to be part of the solution. ... Ultimately the solutions to this are going to be expensive."

The costs of doing nothing may be even higher. The draining of California's Owens Lake as Los Angeles grew has cost billions. Overseas, the Aral Sea became a source of toxic dust after its water was diverted away by the former Soviet Union. Experts estimate a drying Great Salt Lake could cost Utah more than

\$2 billion every year.

"There's a real question about what happens next. Are we going to break through some critical thresholds here in the next little bit if we continue to go lower?" Hawkes said. "If we act now and we are thoughtful about it ... there's a good chance we can keep the lake healthy and happy — and us along with it."

Digital warfare tech at sea helping US foes evade sanctions

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Technology to hide a ship's location previously available only to the world's militaries is spreading fast through the global maritime industry as governments from Iran to Venezuela — and the rogue shipping companies they depend on to move their petroleum products — look for stealthier ways to circumvent U.S. sanctions.

Windward, a maritime intelligence company whose data is used by the U.S. government to investigate sanctions violations, said that since January 2020 it has detected more than 200 vessels involved in over 350 incidents in which they appear to have electronically manipulated their GPS location.

"This is out of hand right now," Matan Peled, co-founder of Windward and a former Israeli naval officer, said in an interview. "It's not driven by countries or superpowers. It's ordinary companies using this technique. The scale is astonishing."

Peled said U.S. authorities have been slow to catch on to the spread of technology that has been part of the electronic warfare arsenal for decades but is only now cropping up in commercial shipping, with serious national security, environmental and maritime safety implications.

Windward was able to identify suspect ships using technology that detects digital tracks that don't correspond to actual movements, such as hairpin turns at breakneck speed or drifting in the form of perfect crop circles.

William Fallon, a retired four-star admiral and former head of the U.S. Pacific Command, said U.S. authorities have been aware for some time of the threat from electronic manipulation, one of a growing number of so-called "gray zone" national security challenges that cut across traditional military, commercial and economic lines.

"Any time you can deceive somebody into believing you're somewhere where you're not is concerning," said Fallon, who is now a board member of the American Security Project, a Washington think tank. "It illustrates the extent to which people who don't have any scruples are willing to go to achieve their objectives and the ease with which they can do it."

One of the more egregious examples found by Windward involves a 183-meter-long oil tanker that could be tracked sailing to Iraq even as it was in reality loading crude in Iran, which is banned from selling its oil by U.S. sanctions.

The tanker, whose name Windward asked to be withheld so as not to disrupt any potential U.S. government investigation, set sail on Feb. 11, 2021, from the United Arab Emirates, reporting its destination as Basra, Iraq. When it was 20 nautical miles away, its global navigation system began exhibiting strange drifting patterns. Twelve days later, its transmission stabilized and it could be tracked heading back through the Hormuz strait at normal sailing speed, this time fully laden with crude.

Satellite imagery shows that during the two-week voyage a ship of identical length and with the same red deck broken up by a white pole and bridge was spotted dozens of nautical miles away, in Iran's Kharg Island oil terminal. That vessel was then followed on satellite sailing back to the UAE, its course merging with the reported position of the original ship after it resumed its normal transmission.

Under a United Nations maritime treaty, ships of over 300 tons have been required since 2004 to use an automated identification system to avoid collisions and assist rescues in the event of a spill or accident at sea. Tampering with its use is a major breach that can lead to official sanctions for a vessel and its owners.

But what was intended as an at-sea safety mechanism has also driven a proliferation in ship-spotting platforms like MarineTraffic.com.

Experts say such websites can be easily tricked since they partly rely on data gathered from thousands

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of amateur base stations that function like police radio scanners picking up maritime movements. Last year, two journalists from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation managed to register online a fake base station near Somalia and insert the false coordinates of a real vessel. Seconds later, the falsified location popped up on MarineTraffic.com.

"To minimize errors and always ensure data integrity, MarineTraffic has introduced a series of key actions in the last few months as we strive to keep securing incoming data further," MarineTraffic's Anastassis Touros said in a statement. Steps include blocking specific stations and IP addressees that consistently transmit false data.

Despite such quality control efforts, the sheer volume of data has cut into the utility of such open-source platforms, two U.S. intelligence officers told The Associated Press. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss what they described as the latest — and most extreme — tactic in the cat and mouse game between authorities and bad actors.

Another blind spot: China. The recent implementation of a harsh data privacy law has cut by nearly half the amount of terrestrial data on maritime activity in Chinese waters, making it harder to track everything from activity at busy ports key to global supply chains to the movements of the world's largest distant water fishing fleet.

Researchers from Global Fishing Watch, which uses satellite data and machine learning to monitor activity at sea, have made similar findings as Windward. It has identified 30 vessels whose locations, as reported on ship-tracking platforms, regularly fell outside the range of the satellite receiving the ship's position.

Among the vessels caught suspected of falsifying its digital tracks was the Tulip, a Panama-flagged oil tanker. For almost six months last year, it broadcast its position along the west coast of Africa. But the satellite that should have picked up the ship's movements was often thousands of miles away, suggesting the ship was likely in Venezuela.

The Associated Press obtained internal documents from Venezuela's state-owned oil company indicating the Tulip loaded 450,000 barrels of fuel oil during the first 15 days of September. Like several other of the suspicious vessels, the crude was purchased by a shell company, M and Y Trading Co., registered in Hong Kong in November 2020, according to the documents. The Tulip is owned by another Hong Kong-registered shell, Victory Marine Ltd. Neither company returned emails seeking comment.

Bjorn Bergman, a data analyst for Global Fishing Watch and Sky Truth, said attempts to hide a ship's position can be easily detected.

"While we need to remain vigilant, vessel operators choosing to manipulate their data are just going to end up shining a spotlight on their activities," he said.

Of the 200 vessels identified by Windward with similar patterns of deception, the vast majority exhibited no other or just a few classic red flags such as disabling on-ship tracking systems, falsifying a vessel's flag state or constantly changing ownership from one shell company to another.

These shipping practices have become clear indications for possible involvement in sanctions evasion and are described as such in a 2020 advisory by the U.S. State and Treasury departments and the U.S. Coast Guard.

But the advisory, heralded as an important step to crack down on the shipping companies that do business with U.S. adversaries, makes no mention of the latest GPS trick to hide illicit trade in oil, seafood and other products. As a result, the practice has exploded into what Windward has called a "free for all" with no immediate end in sight.

"The vast majority of these vessels were meticulously chosen for these missions because they are otherwise well behaved," said Dror Salzman, a risk product manager at Windward. "If you walk to a bank with a ski mask on, everyone knows what you're up to. But here it's like they are working from the inside with the teller. Nobody can see them."

Ex-cop who killed Black teen leaving prison: Was it justice?

By DON BABWIN Associated Press

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CHICAGO (AP) — Ex-Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke is set to leave prison on Thursday after being locked up less than four years, and in the city that witnessed the historic murder conviction of the first officer for an on-duty shooting in a half century, that release is seen as another chapter in a troubling history of race and policing.

Among many there was hope that Van Dyke's 2018 conviction of second-degree murder and 16 counts of aggravated battery signaled a willingness to hold officers accountable. But word that he's being set free after serving about three years and four months of his sentence of six years and nine months has turned McDonald, and them, into victims again.

"This is the ultimate illustration that Black lives don't matter as much as other lives," said the Rev. Marshall Hatch, a prominent minister on the city's West Side. "To get that short amount of time for a murder sends a bad message to the community."

To give the teen and the community the justice it hoped it had with Van Dyke's conviction, the NAACP this week asked U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland to bring federal civil rights charges against Van Dyke. McDonald's grandmother, Tracie Hunter, has asked for the same thing.

Whether those charges are coming is unknown. But what's clear is that Van Dyke's release comes at a perilous time for the city and its police force. Chicago is experiencing a surge in violent crime and had more homicides last year than in any of the last quarter century and nearly twice as many as were reported in 2014, the year Van Dyke killed McDonald. The city continues to pay multi-million settlements to victims of police abuse. And just this week, prosecutors said they would vacate the convictions of nearly 50 more people who were framed or falsely accused by police of drug crimes.

To be sure, the shooting of the Black teenager by a white officer eventually led to a court-ordered consent decree that resulted in several reforms, including the creation of a civilian-led police oversight board and new rules governing investigations into police shootings. And after the city refused to release the police video of McDonald's killing for more than a year and only did so after a judge ordered it to do so, it now must release such videos within 60 days.

But reforms have come slower than expected and the city has struggled to meet some of the consent decree's deadlines. Not only that, but just as then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel fought in court the release of the McDonald video, Mayor Lori Lightfoot's administration tried to prevent a TV station from airing video of a botched police raid in which an innocent Black woman was handcuffed while naked. Ultimately, the botched raid led to a \$2.9 million settlement with the woman, Anjanette Young.

To Hatch and others, Van Dyke's early release is another reminder of what they already knew.

"It just reinforces this feeling of hopelessness in African American communities, and reinforces the thought that police can continue their oppressive behavior in those communities and be either exonerated or given light sentences," said Chico Tillmon, a senior research fellow at the University of Chicago Crime Lab and a former gang member.

"I served 16 years and 3 months for conspiracy to sell drugs and somebody who committed murder, openly, publicly, did 3 1/2 years," he said. "This kind of thing happens over and over."

Hatch's anger stems in part from a sense that the criminal justice system came tantalizingly close to finally working for a Black victim of police violence before the judge called a legal audible by sentencing Van Dyke only for second-degree murder — a charge that allows defendants to serve half their sentences if they behave in prison — and not any of the 16 counts of aggravated battery.

After watching the city fight to keep the public from seeing the video of McDonald's killing, Hatch said he was hopeful when the jury found the officer guilty.

"I feel like the jury did its job," he said. "Then the judge gave such a lenient sentence."

Craig Futterman, a University of Chicago law professor who helped lead the push to force the city to release the video, agrees, calling the sentence "a slap in the face for Black folks and those of us who care about police accountability."

But at the same time, Futterman said, "It was next to unbelievable that there was a prosecution and a conviction for murder."

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And although McDonald's great uncle, the Rev. Marvin Hunter, believes the sentence was woefully inadequate, he said it doesn't take away from the significance of the case.

"Had Jason Van Dyke gotten one day in jail it would have been a victory because he was the first," said Hunter. "Since then, police across the country are getting convicted of murdering Black people."

Joseph McMahan, the special prosecutor who led a team of attorneys that secured Van Dyke's conviction and who asked the judge to impose an 18-20 year sentence, said he hopes people don't think Van Dyke escaped punishment.

"I know this is difficult to accept, especially for minority communities marginalized by police and the criminal justice system for decades, but this (the conviction and sentence) is a sign of progress," he said.

"Any length of time for a former cop is difficult," McMahan added. "He was physically attacked, spent most of the time in isolation and that is the result of the very real danger he faced day in and day out for the last 3 1/2 years."

The way Hatch sees it, Van Dyke's release couldn't come at a worse time for the police department, which has been scrambling to regain public trust that the McDonald case helped shatter.

"They're trying to restore faith in law enforcement and now we have this?" he said. "And it will absolutely make it harder to get people to come with complaints about cops."

Adulterated cocaine kills 20, sickens 74 in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Apparently adulterated cocaine killed 20 people and seriously sickened 74 others in Buenos Aires, health officials said early Thursday as authorities searched frantically for the remainder of the deadly batch to get it off the streets before it is consumed.

Experts were still analyzing the drug to determine what was in it that caused the deaths. Judicial officials said one hypothesis being considered was that the cocaine was intentionally adulterated as part of a settling of scores between traffickers.

Police said that the cocaine was sold in the poor neighborhood "Puerta 8" in San Martín — a suburb to the north of Argentina's capital — and that a dozen people had been arrested.

"This event is absolutely exceptional. We have no precedent," San Martin Attorney General Marcelo Lapargo told cable channel Todo Noticias. "If the situation has escalated and the nature of trafficking has changed to the point where this becomes commonplace, I hope I never see it again."

Argentine authorities initially reported that eight members of the same group had died after buying the drug Tuesday. But as time passed, the number of deaths grew. The province's health ministry said early Thursday that 20 people had died and 74 more were in the hospital, with 18 of those requiring mechanical respiration.

"The urgency is to remove the poison from the market, to stop it from being sold," Lapargo said. "There must be a lot of people with a bag in their pocket and the number of people hospitalized shows that the most important thing is to stop this extremely high risk."

Authorities urged anyone who might have bought the deadly drug not to use it.

Sergio Berni, the security minister for Buenos Aires province, called on "those who have bought drugs in the last 24 hours to discard what they bought."

Washington's NFL team unveils new name as Commanders

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Sports Writer

Washington has some new Commanders in town.

The NFL team announced its new name on Wednesday, 18 months after fresh pressure from sponsors helped persuade the once-storied franchise to drop its old moniker following decades of criticism that it was offensive to Native Americans. The organization committed to avoiding Native American imagery in its rebrand after being called the Washington Football Team the past two seasons.

Washington is the latest American major professional team to abandon its name linked to Native Americans, and it was considered one of the most egregious.

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Suzan Shown Harjo, who is Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee, called the change “an amazing and a giant step in the maturation of America.” The 76-year-old Harjo has been advocating for sports teams to drop Native imagery and mascots since the 1960s.

“That’s sort of our place in the world, Native people’s place in the world, to help the rest of the country come to grips with its past and to understand how to move on,” she said. “And, I hope, how to do it with grace.”

While Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Guardians have changed their name, the NFL’s Kansas City Chiefs, NHL’s Chicago Blackhawks and baseball’s Atlanta Braves have said they are not planning to make a change.

That doesn’t sit well with IllumiNative, a Native American woman-led social justice organization, though founder and executive director Crystal Echo Hawk praised the move by the Commanders.

“Native mascots are inaccurate and stereotypical depictions of Native culture,” the Pawnee woman said in a statement. “They do not honor or celebrate Native peoples but are rather a tool of white supremacy created to dehumanize and objectify us. Research has shown time after time that Native mascots lead to lowered self-esteem and self-worth, and increases rates of depression, self-harm, and violence against Native youth.

“The Washington Commanders are proof that ending the use of Native American imagery in sports is possible. The Cleveland Guardians are further proof.”

Washington owner Dan Snyder said the change pays “homage to our local roots and what it means to represent the nation’s capital.”

“As we kick off our 90th season, it is important for our organization and fans to pay tribute to our past traditions, history, legacy and the greats that came before us,” Snyder said. “We continue to honor and represent the Burgundy and Gold while forging a pathway to a new era in Washington.”

President Joe Biden welcomed the name change by posting a picture on Twitter of Commander, his recently acquired German shepherd puppy, in front of the White House.

“I suppose there’s room for two Commanders in this town,” Biden wrote.

Starting in 1933 in Boston until two seasons ago, the team used the name Redskins — which offended Native Americans and others.

“Redskins” is the worst name that Native Americans can be called in the English language, according to Harjo. She said the word harkens to a time when bounties were paid for the scalps of Native Americans.

While thousands of high schools, colleges and professional sports organizations have dropped Native imagery and mascots, she estimated about 1,000 remain.

“All of this cultural thievery really has to stop,” Harjo said. “What the Washington team and the Cleveland team have done is to remove two of the most grotesque and vile images and names that exist. They provided by example what can be done even if you’re making a fortune doing it.”

“Even if they didn’t think it was 100% wrong, the owners, a whole lot of people did. And so they had to as well. So, good, as long as they can help clear the decks.”

Ray Halbritter, representative of the New York-based Oneida Indian Nation and leader of the Change the Mascot campaign, said the name change is “a victory for all of those around the world seeking to advance inclusivity and respect in our societies.”

“Yet, equally important is how we all choose to remember what was involved in getting the team to finally change its name,” Halbritter said.

As the Commanders, Washington keeps the same burgundy and gold colors that were around for the three Super Bowl championships in the 1980s and early ‘90s glory days. It follows the desire of team president Jason Wright and coach Ron Rivera for the new name to have a connection to the U.S. military.

Commanders was chosen over other finalists such as Red Hogs, Admirals and Presidents. Red Wolves, an initial fan favorite, was ruled out earlier in the process because of copyright and trademark hurdles.

The rebranding process had been going on since the summer of 2020, when team officials opted for the temporary Washington Football Team name that lingered into the 2021 season.

The change comes amid the organization’s latest controversy: dozens of former employees describing a

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toxic workplace culture, which caused Snyder to commission an investigation that was taken over by the NFL. After the investigation by attorney Beth Wilkinson's firm, the league fined Washington \$10 million and Snyder temporarily ceded day-to-day operations of the team to his wife, Tanya, while he focused on a new stadium agreement.

The league did not release a written report of Wilkinson's findings, a move that sparked criticism. The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform is holding a roundtable discussion Thursday with a handful of former team employees to discuss their experiences.

Getting a stadium deal done is next on the agenda for Snyder and his front office. The team's lease at FedEx Field expires after the 2027 season and momentum is building for an agreement in Virginia, though sites in Maryland and the District of Columbia are still under consideration.

Winter storm packing snow, freezing rain moves across US

By KATHLEEN FOODY and JILL BLEED Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — A major winter storm with millions of Americans in its path brought a mix of rain, freezing rain and snow to the central U.S. on Wednesday as airlines canceled thousands of flights, officials urged residents to stay off roads and schools closed campuses.

The blast of frigid weather, which began arriving Tuesday night, put a long stretch of states from New Mexico and Colorado to Maine under winter storm warnings and watches. On Wednesday morning, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan saw freezing rain, sleet and snow.

By midday Wednesday, some places had already reported snow totals exceeding or nearing a foot, including the central Illinois town of Lewistown with 14.4 inches (36.6 centimeters) and the northeastern Missouri city of Hannibal with 11.5 inches (29.2 centimeters).

"And it's still snowing across these areas," said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

Central Illinois and northern Indiana appeared likely to receive the most snowfall, with expected totals ranging from 12 to 18 inches (30 to 45 centimeters) by the end of Thursday, Orrison said.

Snow had begun to taper off in Missouri by early afternoon but much of the state could wind up with 8 inches to a foot (20 to 30 centimeters) of snow. Parts of Michigan also could snow totals around a foot by Thursday.

In Chicago, Elisha Waldman and his sons welcomed the opportunity to hit a sledding hill Wednesday morning, even as snow continued to fall.

"Cold and wet and wonderful, and getting cold and wet is part of the fun with the guys, and we get to go inside and have hot cocoa and warm up," Waldman said.

In Detroit's western suburbs, Tony Haley also found an advantage to the weather. He owns a landscaping and irrigation company that offers snow removal and salting services, but the early winter weeks offered few opportunities for business.

"This one here, we're looking for a good two, three days of work," Haley said after clearing snow away from several businesses in Canton.

But for those on the roads, the heavy snow created hazardous conditions.

"We're receiving a lot of snow over here in northwest Indiana and it's the wet, slushy snow that causes treacherous driving conditions to say the least," Indiana State Police Sgt. Glen Fifield told WFLD-TV.

In central Missouri, officials shut down part of Interstate 70 midday after a crash made the roadway impassable.

Areas south of the heavy snow were expected to see freezing rain, with the heaviest ice predicted along the lower Ohio Valley area from Louisville, Kentucky, to Memphis, Tennessee.

"If everything holds to where it is right now, this is the real deal," said Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, who ordered state government offices to close on Thursday. "It is dangerous. People need to be prepared."

The disruptive storm moved across the central U.S. on Groundhog Day, the same day the famed groundhog Punxsutawney Phil predicted six more weeks of winter. The storm came on the heels of a nor'easter

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last weekend that brought blizzard conditions to many parts of the East Coast.

The storm's path extended as far south as Texas, nearly a year after a catastrophic freeze buckled the state's power grid in one of the worst blackouts in U.S. history. The forecast did not call for the same prolonged and frigid temperatures as the February 2021 storm, and the National Weather Service said the system would, generally, not be as bad this time for Texas.

No large-scale power outages were reported by early afternoon Wednesday in Texas or elsewhere, according to poweroutage.us.

Snowfall totals reached 22 inches (56 centimeters) in Colorado Springs and up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) in the Denver area, with more expected, prompting universities, state government offices and the Legislature to shut down.

Airlines canceled nearly 8,000 flights in the U.S. scheduled for Wednesday or Thursday, the flight-tracking service FlightAware.com showed. Airports in St. Louis, Chicago, Kansas City and Detroit canceled more flights than usual. Almost 700 flights were canceled Thursday alone at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, and more than 300 were canceled at nearby Dallas Love Field.

In an effort to stay ahead of the weather, Southwest Airlines announced Tuesday that it would suspend all of its flight operations Wednesday at St. Louis Lambert International Airport and Thursday at its Dallas Love Field hub.

National Weather Service forecasters in Little Rock put their own spin on the Groundhog Day tradition with a photo of their office cat, Tarmac, and the caption: "SHADOWS EVERYWHERE! THE WINTER STORM IS HAPPENING!"

Senate Dem leader meets with Biden to talk Supreme Court

By COLLEEN LONG and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden had Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer over to the White House on Wednesday to talk about how to fill an upcoming vacancy on the Supreme Court.

Biden has promised to nominate the first Black woman to the high court to fill the spot being vacated by Justice Stephen Breyer, who is retiring at the end of this term. The president, who has promised to make a decision by the end of the month, has amassed a list of potential candidates that includes women with a range of professional expertise, from federal defenders to longtime judges and academics.

Schumer, D-N.Y., said after the meeting that it went well, and repeated that as soon as Biden decides on the nominee, the Senate will move quickly to fill the vacancy. A White House official said Biden hosted Schumer for a conversation about the court as he continues his efforts to consult lawmakers while he reviews candidates. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press to discuss a closed-door meeting.

On Tuesday, Biden played host to Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and ranking Republican Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa. The president also spoke by phone with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

The court was made up entirely of white men for almost two centuries. Justice Clarence Thomas and the late Thurgood Marshall are the only two Black men who have served on the court. There has never been a Black woman.

Among the candidates under consideration are Ketanji Brown Jackson, who serves on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, U.S. District Court Judge J. Michelle Childs from South Carolina, California Supreme Court Justice Leondra 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.

According to people familiar with the discussions, another name in the mix is Leslie Abrams Gardner, a U.S. district judge for the Middle District of Georgia and the sister of Stacey Abrams, a powerful voting rights activist and nominee for Georgia governor.

Biden, who led the Judiciary Committee through six nominations during his time as a Delaware senator,

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said Tuesday that he planned to seek the "advice and consent" of senators during the process, and he is hoping for a bipartisan nominee.

Two Republicans signaled they could vote for a Biden nominee — if it is the right one. South Carolina Sens. Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott have both praised Childs, who got her law degree from the University of South Carolina School of Law. She is also the favorite of Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, a powerful Democratic ally.

Graham on Wednesday tweeted out a photo of the three South Carolina lawmakers sitting together at lunch. "Great fellowship today with my colleagues" he wrote. Graham told reporters his vote would be "much more problematic" if Childs is not the nominee. Scott told reporters Childs has a strong record and would be a strong candidate, but said he'd want to go through the vetting process before formally committing.

Former Alabama Sen. Doug Jones, a Democrat who often crossed party lines before he was defeated for reelection in 2020, will serve as an adviser to help Biden navigate the Senate confirmation process, the White House said Wednesday. Mynon Moore, a public affairs strategist, will serve as an adviser for engagement, and Ben LaBolt, who worked in communications during the Obama administration, will be the communications adviser working on messaging around the confirmation process.

President Xi Jinping, China's 'chairman of everything'

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The last time the Olympics came to China, he oversaw the whole endeavor. Now the Games are back, and this time Xi Jinping is running the entire nation.

The Chinese president, hosting a Winter Olympics beleaguered by complaints about human rights abuses, has upended tradition to restore strongman rule in China and tighten Communist Party control over the economy and society.

Xi was in charge of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing that served as a "coming-out party" for China as an economic and political force. A second-generation member of the party elite, Xi became general secretary of the party in 2012. He took the ceremonial title of president the next year.

Xi spent his first five-year term atop the party making himself China's strongest leader at least since Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Xi was dubbed "chairman of everything" after he put himself in charge of economic, propaganda and other major functions. That reversed a consensus for the ruling inner circle to avoid power struggles by sharing decision-making.

The party is crushing pro-democracy and other activism and tightening control over business and society. It has expanded surveillance of China's 1.4 billion people and control of business, culture, education and religion. A "social credit" system tracks every person and company and punishes infractions from pollution to littering.

Xi's rise coincides with increased assertiveness abroad following three decades of China keeping its head down to focus on economic development.

Xi wants China to be "the greatest country on Earth, widely admired and therefore followed," said Steve Tsang, a Chinese politics specialist at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

"The world where China is top dog is a world where authoritarianism is safe," Tsang said. Democracies will "need to know their place."

Born in Beijing in 1953, Xi enjoyed a privileged youth as the second son of Xi Zhongxun, a former vice premier and guerrilla commander in the civil war that brought Mao Zedong's communist rebels to power in 1949. At 15, Xi Jinping was sent to rural Shaanxi province in 1969 as part of Mao's campaign to have educated urban young people learn from peasants. Xi was caught trying to sneak back to the Chinese capital and returned to Shaanxi to dig irrigation ditches.

"Knives are sharpened on the stone. People are refined through hardship," Xi told a Chinese magazine in 2001. "Whenever I later encountered trouble, I'd just think of how hard it had been to get things done back then and nothing would then seem difficult."

Beijing is pushing for a bigger role in managing trade and global affairs to match its status as the second-

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biggest economy. It has antagonized Japan, India and other neighbors by trying to intimidate Taiwan — the island democracy that the ruling party says belongs to China — and by pressing claims to disputed sections of the South and East China Seas and the Himalayas.

The party has ended limits on foreign ownership in its auto industry and made other market-opening changes. But it has declared state-owned companies that dominate oil, banking and other industries the “core of the economy.”

Beijing is pressuring private sector successes such as Alibaba Group, the world’s biggest e-commerce company, to divert billions of dollars into nationalistic initiatives including making China a “technology power” and reducing reliance on the United States, Japan and other suppliers by developing processor chips and other products.

That, combined with U.S. and European curbs on Chinese access to technology due to security fears, is fueling anxiety global industry might decouple or split into markets with incompatible auto, telecom and other products. That would raise costs and slow innovation.

Xi, 68, looks certain to break with tradition again by pursuing a third term as party leader at a congress in October or November. He had the constitution’s limit of two terms on his presidency repealed in 2018. That reversed arrangements put in place in the 1990s for party factions to share decision-making and hand over power to younger leaders once every decade.

Even before Xi took power, party officials complained that group leadership was too cumbersome and allowed lower-level leaders to ignore or obstruct initiatives. Officials defend Xi’s efforts to stay in power by saying he needs to ensure reforms are carried out.

Xi led an anti-corruption crackdown whose most prominent targets were members of other factions or supported rival leadership candidates. The campaign was popular with the public but led to complaints that officials refused to make big decisions for fear of attracting attention.

Xi has called for a “national rejuvenation” based on tighter party control over education, culture and religion. Many of the changes are hostile to ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, pro-democracy and other activists and independent-minded artists and writers. Social media groups for gay university students have been shut down. Men deemed insufficiently masculine were banned from TV.

An estimated 1 million Uyghurs and members of other mostly Muslim minority groups have been confined in camps in the Xinjiang region in the northwest. Activists complain Beijing is trying to erase minority cultures, but officials say the camps are for job training and to combat radicalism. They reject reports of force abortions and other abuses.

Xi oversaw the 2015 detention of more than 200 lawyers and legal aides who helped activists and members of the public challenge official abuses.

After the coronavirus emerged in 2019, Xi’s government suppressed information and punished doctors who tried to warn the public. That prompted accusations Beijing allowed the disease to spread more widely and left other countries unprepared.

Beijing extended its crackdown to Hong Kong following 2019 protests that began over a proposed extradition law and expanded to include demands for greater democracy.

A national security law was imposed on Hong Kong in 2020, prompting complaints that Beijing was eroding the autonomy that had been promised when the former British colony returned to China in 1997 — and ruining its status as a trade and financial center.

Pro-democracy figures have been imprisoned. They include Jimmy Lai, the 73-year-old former publisher of the Apple Daily newspaper, which shut down under government pressure, and organizers of candlelight memorials of the party’s deadly 1989 crackdown on a pro-democracy movement.

A big potential stumbling block to achieving Xi’s ambitions is the struggling economy. Growth is slumping after Beijing tightened controls on use of debt in its real estate industry, one of its biggest economic engines. That adds to the drag from politically motivated initiatives, including tech development and orders to manufacturers to use Chinese suppliers of components and raw materials, even if that costs more.

“Xi himself weakens the economy rather than strengthening it,” Tsang said. “If you mess up the economy, he’s not going to make China the dominant power in the world.”

Trump son, allies sued by witness from 1st impeachment case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A retired Army lieutenant colonel who was a pivotal witness in the first impeachment case against Donald Trump has sued the oldest son of the former president and other Trump allies, accusing them of participating in an “intentional, concerted campaign of unlawful intimidation and retaliation” over his decision to testify.

The lawsuit from Alexander Vindman, who testified during 2019 impeachment proceedings about a phone call in which Trump pressed his Ukraine counterpart to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden and his son, Hunter, was filed Wednesday in federal court in Washington. Trump was impeached by the House but acquitted by the Senate in February 2020.

The suit names as defendants Donald Trump Jr.; Rudy Giuliani, a longtime Trump adviser who has served as Trump’s lawyer; and former White House communications officials Dan Scavino and Julia Hahn.

It alleges that after Vindman was summoned by House lawmakers to testify, the defendants and others coordinated and advanced “false narratives” about him, including that he was a spy for Ukraine and had spoken pejoratively about the U.S. to foreign officials; leaked classified information about him; falsely accused him of lying under oath; and worked to derail his expected promotion to colonel.

“The actions taken by Defendants against Lt. Col. Vindman sent a message to other potential witnesses as well: cooperate at your own peril,” the suit states, adding that “the message reverberates to this day” as witnesses in the congressional investigation into the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol defy subpoenas at the Republican former president’s direction.

Lawyers for Trump Jr., Scavino and Giuliani did not immediately return messages seeking comment. Hahn also did not return an email seeking comment.

Vindman, an Iraq war veteran whose family fled the Soviet Union when he was a child, was a key impeachment witness, testifying that he twice raised concerns over the Trump administration’s push to have Ukraine investigate Biden. After listening to the July 2019 call between Trump and Ukraine leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy, he said he reported his concerns to a lawyer at the National Security Council.

Vindman says in the suit that he swiftly became a “household name” thanks to a intimidation campaign laden with falsehoods.

“The attacks on Lt. Col. Vindman did not simply happen by accident or coincidence, nor were they the result of normal politics or modern newscycles,” the lawsuit states.

“Rather,” it adds, “the coordinated campaign was the result of a common understanding and agreement among and between President Trump, Defendants, and others comprising a close group of aides and associates inside and outside of the White House, to target Lt. Col. Vindman in a specific way for the specific purpose of intimidation and retaliation.”

As a result of the treatment, Vindman “has sustained significant financial, emotional, and reputational harm,” according to the lawsuit, which seeks compensatory and punitive damages.

Vindman announced in July 2020 that he was retiring from the Army after more than 21 years, and at the time raised similar allegations of harassment, bullying and intimidation as in Wednesday’s lawsuit. He has since come out with a book about his experiences, titled, “Here, Right Matters: An American Story.”

Sen. Luján to be out at least 4 weeks, Biden agenda at risk

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Democrats’ fragile hold on the Senate majority became vividly apparent Wednesday with the sudden illness of New Mexico Sen. Ben Ray Luján, who won’t be back to work for at least four weeks, throwing President Joe Biden’s Supreme Court pick and lagging legislative agenda in doubt.

The 49-year-old Democrat remained hospitalized after suffering a stroke and is expected to make a full recovery. But Senate colleagues were blindsided by the news — even top-ranking leaders were reportedly

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unaware that Luján fell ill last Thursday, a stunning oversight. Barring any complications, he is expected to be back at work in four to six weeks, according to a senior aide granted anonymity to discuss the situation.

Without Luján's presence, the party no longer has full day-to-day control of what has been an evenly split Senate, leaving Biden's potential Supreme Court nomination, big priorities and even routine business at risk in the face of Republican objections.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who went to the White House later Wednesday to discuss the court nominee with Biden, spoke of the "awful, frightening" situation, but remained hopeful that Luján, one of the chamber's youngest members, would be "back to his old self" before too long and the Senate would carry on with its business.

"All of us are rooting for him every step of the way — between now and the day he makes his return to the Senate," Schumer said Wednesday.

The uncertainty shows just how precarious the Democrats' hold on power in Washington really is and the limits of Biden's ability to usher what's left of a once-bold agenda through Congress. The president's chance to confirm a Supreme Court nominee, a hoped-for reset for the administration and the party, could be dangerously at risk if Democrats are unable to count on their majority to overcome hardening Republican opposition.

Already, routine Senate business was being rearranged Wednesday, as the Senate Commerce Committee announced it would be postponing consideration of some of Biden's executive branch nominees because the panel, on which Luján is a member, needs all Democrats for the votes.

More pressing, though, is the upcoming Supreme Court confirmation battle to replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer. Democrats have been eager to shift to the high court fight, believing it will galvanize voters at a time when Biden's broader legislative agenda, including his sweeping Build Back Better Act and voting legislation, have collapsed.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said the panel is planning to push ahead with consideration of Biden's Supreme Court pick as soon as the president announces his nominee, expected later this month.

"We don't anticipate any difficulties," Durbin told reporters at the Capitol.

Schumer has signaled a swift confirmation of Biden's Supreme Court nominee. And after meeting with Biden at the White House, the majority leader's spokesman said Luján's absence is not expected to affect the Senate's timeline for the process.

The Senate is split 50-50, with Democrats holding an ever-so-fragile majority because Vice President Kamala Harris can cast a tie-breaking vote.

As it stands, Biden's agenda has fallen apart on Capitol Hill, taken down by the one-two punch of Republican opposition and two Democrats, Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, who have joined Republicans to halt the president's priorities.

Luján's illness is a reminder it's not just Manchin, Sinema and Republican opposition, but the health and welfare of every single senator that could make or break the Democrats' hold on power and the outcome of Biden's agenda.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has stymied both parties, as senators have been forced to isolate after testing positive for the virus or being exposed. This week, two Republicans, Sens. Mitt Romney of Utah and John Hoeven of North Dakota, are working remotely because of positive virus tests.

"We always knew a 50/50 Senate was going to require patience as well as cooperation and we hope he's back soon," said Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis.

Asked if progress on the president's agenda could be imperiled, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, "Life is precious," and noted the average age of senators. It is 64.

"I would just say we spend most of our time engaging in good faith about the president's agenda, and not making those calculations," Psaki said.

Luján's condition appears serious, but also improving. He is expected to be out for at least a month, according to a Democrat familiar with the situation who discussed it on condition of anonymity.

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Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., the chairman of the Finance Committee, said, "Everybody in the Senate can count so we all know what votes mean."

Past illnesses, including strokes, have led to prolonged absences in the Senate, most recently with Republican Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois and earlier with Democratic Sen. Tim Johnson of South Dakota.

More recently, Democrats faced a health scare last year when Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., was diagnosed with cancer. She underwent radiation therapy and is cancer-free.

Rarely has a president tried to accomplish so much in Congress with so slim a majority, and the fallout has been swift and stark.

Luján's office announced that he checked himself into a hospital in Santa Fe on Thursday. His chief of staff, Carlos Sanchez, said the senator was then transferred to a hospital in Albuquerque for further evaluation.

His office added that Luján is still in the hospital but is expected to make a full recovery.

"Senator Luján was found to have suffered a stroke in the cerebellum, affecting his balance," the statement released Tuesday said. "As part of his treatment plan, he subsequently underwent decompressive surgery to ease swelling."

Most Senate Democrats hadn't spoken directly to Luján or his office as of Wednesday. Even his New Mexico colleague, Democratic Sen. Martin Heinrich, shut down reporters inquiring about Lujan's health and wellbeing, calling the questions "unbelievable." But his absence was felt throughout the Senate, with both Republicans and Democratic lawmakers hailing his bipartisan work at the Commerce hearing Wednesday morning, according to committee chairwoman Maria Cantwell.

"He'll be back," Cantwell said. "But this is just a reminder of how fragile we all are as individuals, And certainly we get all in the big fight about trying to get things done, but this is a reminder that we should all work together."

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said the entire Senate is "praying for and pulling for our colleague."

GOP Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota said he texted Luján Tuesday night to tell him he was thinking about him, but has not heard back yet and his staff said, "It may be a couple of days before he's able to get back to you."

Elected to the Senate in 2020, Luján is a quiet but well-known lawmaker on Capitol Hill, who helped lead Democrats to the House majority with its record-breaking class of freshmen recruits heading the campaign committee during the 2018 election year.

New Zealand to end quarantine stays and reopen its borders

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand's government on Thursday said it will end its quarantine requirements for incoming travelers and reopen its borders, a change welcomed by thousands of citizens abroad who have endured long waits to return home.

Since the start of the pandemic, New Zealand has enacted some of the world's strictest border controls. Most incoming travelers need to spend 10 days in a quarantine hotel room run by the military, a requirement that has created a bottleneck at the border.

The measures were initially credited with saving thousands of lives and allowed New Zealand to eliminate or control several outbreaks of the coronavirus.

But, increasingly, the border controls have been viewed as out-of-step in a world where the virus is becoming endemic, and in a country where the omicron variant is already spreading. The bottleneck forced many New Zealanders abroad to enter a lottery-style system to try and secure a spot in quarantine and passage home.

The shortcomings of the system were highlighted over the past week by pregnant New Zealand journalist Charlotte Bellis, who was stranded in Afghanistan after New Zealand officials initially rejected her application to return home to give birth. After international publicity, officials backed down and offered her a spot in quarantine, which she has accepted.

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The border changes mean that vaccinated New Zealanders returning from Australia will no longer need to go into quarantine from the end of this month, and vaccinated New Zealanders returning from the rest of the world can skip quarantine by mid-March. They will still be required to isolate at home.

However, most tourists will need to wait until October before they can enter the country without a quarantine stay. And anybody who isn't vaccinated will still be required to go through quarantine.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she knows many people associate the border controls with heartache but they have undeniably saved lives.

"There is no question that for New Zealand, it has been one of the hardest parts of the pandemic," she said. "But the reason that it is right up there as one of the toughest things we have experienced is, in part, because large-scale loss of life is not."

She said the controls "meant not everyone could come home when they wanted to. But it also meant that COVID could not come in when it wanted to, either."

Ardern said the restrictions had allowed New Zealand to build its defenses against the virus by achieving high levels of vaccination while also keeping the economy running strongly.

About 77% of New Zealanders are fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data. That rises to 93% among those aged 12 and over, according to health officials.

New Zealand has reported just 53 virus deaths among its population of 5 million.

New Zealand's economy did return to growth quickly after a pandemic dip, and unemployment decreased to 3.2% in the latest quarter, the lowest level since record-keeping began in 1986. But the government has also increased borrowing sharply and home prices have skyrocketed.

Opposition leader Christopher Luxon said the reopening of the border was welcome news, and his National Party had long called for the government to "end the lottery of human misery."

Ardern said it was a first step toward normality.

"There was life before, and now life with COVID, but that also means there will be life after COVID too, a life where we have adapted, where we have some normality back, and where the weather can once again take its rightful place as our primary topic of conversation," Ardern said. "We are well on our way to reaching that destination. We're just not quite there yet."

4 charged after overdose death of actor Michael K. Williams

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Four men face charges that they were members of the drug distribution crew that supplied a deadly mix of narcotics to Michael K. Williams, the renowned actor from "The Wire" who overdosed just hours after buying fentanyl-laced heroin in a deal recorded on security camera video.

The man seen on camera handing Williams the drugs on a Brooklyn sidewalk, Irvin Cartagena, was charged with directly causing the actor's death, authorities said.

Williams' death was investigated by the New York City police department, but the charges were brought by federal prosecutors in Manhattan, who revealed that the suspects had been under surveillance even before the actor's fatal overdose last September.

It was a sting that bore a striking resemblance to the kind depicted on "The Wire," where Williams gained fame playing the bandit Omar Little.

For months, a paid informant working for the NYPD had been making controlled buys of heroin on the same block where Williams purchased his drugs. An undercover police officer made one buy just days before the actor copped his fatal dose, court papers said.

The vials of drugs found with Williams when his body was discovered on Sept. 6 bore the same label, "AAA Insurance," as the vials purchased by the officer.

The day after the actor's death, the NYPD's informant went back to buy more drugs from the same group, recording a conversation in which some members of the crew talked about Williams' overdose. One denied selling any drugs containing fentanyl.

Cartagena and the three other men in the case were arrested Tuesday. Three made initial appearances

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Wednesday in Manhattan federal court. Cartagena's initial court appearance is scheduled for Thursday in Puerto Rico, where he was arrested.

It was not immediately clear who would represent him or who could comment on his behalf.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams, who announced the charges with New York City Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell, called overdose deaths a "public health crisis."

"And it has to stop. Deadly opioids like fentanyl and heroin don't care about who you are or what you've accomplished. They just feed addiction and lead to tragedy," Williams said.

Sewell said police detectives in Brooklyn "lived this case, never relenting in their investigation until they could bring a measure of justice to Michael K. Williams and his family."

Williams, 54, was found dead in his penthouse apartment in Brooklyn Sept. 6. At that time, the medical examiner's office ruled Williams' death an accident.

Police pieced together Williams' movements in the hours before his death using data from his mobile phone and license plate readers.

A security camera on the block recorded the drug deal, police said.

Williams talked with the group, and one of the people placed his hand on the actor's shoulder in an apparent gesture of recognition, according to the complaint. Cartagena then walked around a row of trash cans, retrieved a plastic bag and handed it to the actor, the court papers said.

The men continued to sell fentanyl-laced heroin in broad daylight amid apartment buildings in Brooklyn and Manhattan even after knowing that Williams had died from one of their products, authorities said.

The others charged were identified as Hector Robles, 57, Luis Cruz, 56, and Carlos Macci, 70, all of Brooklyn. Their lawyers did not immediately return messages seeking comment. It wasn't clear whether they were the men seen in the surveillance video.

All three were ordered detained at their initial court appearances.

The conspiracy charges against all four carry a mandatory minimum of five years in prison and a maximum sentence of 40 years. The charge against Cartagena accusing him of causing the actor's death carries a mandatory minimum of 20 years in prison and a maximum of life.

Cartagena had been arrested in February 2021 on state drug charges in Brooklyn after selling four small waxy paper bags to an undercover investigator, according to a federal complaint against him. At the time, he was on pretrial release from a gun charge arrest in August 2020.

He pleaded guilty Aug. 26 to disorderly conduct in both crimes and was sentenced to time served, the complaint read.

Williams' "stick-up boy" Omar Little on "The Wire" — a fictionalized look at the underpinnings of Baltimore that ended in 2008 but remains popular in streaming — was based on real-life figures. He created another classic character as Chalky White in HBO's "Boardwalk Empire" and appeared in the films "12 Years a Slave" and "Assassin's Creed."

He had spoken frankly in interviews about his experiences with addiction.

Biden orders forces to Europe amid stalled Ukraine talks

By ROBERT BURNS, LOLITA C. BALDOR, AAMER MADHANI, LORNE COOK and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is ordering 2,000 U.S.-based troops to Poland and Germany and shifting 1,000 more from Germany to Romania, demonstrating to both allies and foes America's commitment to NATO's eastern flank amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

Russia fired back with a sharply worded objection, calling the deployments unfounded and "destructive."

Russian President Vladimir Putin also had a new telephone exchange with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. But readouts from both governments showed no progress, with Putin saying the West was giving no ground on Russia's security concerns and Johnson expressing deep concern about Russia's "hostile activity" on the Ukrainian border, referring to Putin's buildup of 100,000 troops there.

The Biden administration is aiming to demonstrate U.S. resolve without undermining efforts to find a

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diplomatic solution to the crisis. Biden notably has not sent military reinforcements to the three Baltic countries on NATO's eastern flank — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — that are former states of the Soviet Union.

No U.S. troops are being sent to Ukraine, and White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Wednesday said the administration has stopped calling a Russian invasion "imminent," because that word implies Washington knows Putin has made a decision to invade. Officials say Putin's intentions remain unclear.

However, increasing U.S. troop levels in Eastern Europe is exactly what Putin has said he finds intolerable, along with the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO. The U.S. already has several thousand troops in Poland, and Romania is host to a NATO missile defense system that Russia considers a threat. The U.S. presence in the region has increased since 2014 when Russia made its first invasion of Ukraine.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the soon-to-deploy U.S. forces are intended to temporarily bolster U.S. and allied defensive positions.

"These are not permanent moves," he said, stressing that the purpose is to reassure allies. Kirby said Russia had continued its buildup, even in the previous 24 hours, despite U.S. urgings that it deescalate.

In Moscow, a senior official said the U.S. movements will complicate the crisis.

"The unfounded destructive steps will only fuel military tensions and narrow the field for political decisions," Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said in remarks carried by the Interfax news agency.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba again played down fears of a Russian attack in a call with reporters but said that if Russia makes moves that could signal an imminent invasion Ukraine would react as necessary.

Of the 2,000 U.S. troops newly deploying from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, about 1,700 are members of the 82nd Airborne Division infantry brigade, who will go to Poland. The other 300 are with the 18th Airborne Corps and will go to Germany as what the Pentagon called a "joint task force-capable headquarters."

Poland's Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak wrote on Twitter that the deployment to his country is "a strong signal of solidarity in response to the situation in Ukraine."

The 1,000 U.S. troops going to Romania are members of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment based at Vilseck, Germany. They will augment about 900 already in Romania, Kirby said.

The cavalry deployment's purpose is to "deter aggression and enhance our defensive capabilities in front-line allied states during this period of elevated risk," the Pentagon said in a separate written statement.

"It's important that we send a strong signal to Mr. Putin and to the world" of the U.S. commitment to NATO, Kirby said.

He said France has decided it, too, will send troop reinforcements to Romania under NATO command, and he noted that a number of other European NATO countries are considering adding forces on NATO's eastern flank. Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron touched base in a phone call Wednesday night.

NATO has been beefing up its defenses around allies in Eastern Europe since late last year. Denmark, for example, said it was sending a frigate and F-16 warplanes to Lithuania, and Spain was sending four fighter jets to Bulgaria and three ships to the Black Sea to join NATO naval forces. The Netherlands plans to send two F-35 fighter aircraft to Bulgaria in April and is putting a ship and land-based units on standby for NATO's Response Force.

Biden has said he will not put American troops in Ukraine to fight any Russian incursion, although the United States is supplying Ukraine with weapons to defend itself and seeking to reassure allies in Eastern Europe that Washington will fulfill its treaty obligation to defend them in the event they are attacked.

Ukraine is not a NATO member, and therefore the U.S. has no treaty obligation to come to its defense.

The military moves come amid stalled talks with Russia over its buildup at Ukraine's borders. And they underscore growing fears across Europe that Russian President Putin is poised to invade Ukraine. Smaller NATO countries on the alliance's eastern flank worry they could be next.

The Pentagon also has put about 8,500 U.S.-based troops on higher alert for possible deployment to Europe as additional reassurance to allies, and officials have indicated the possibility that additional units could be placed on higher alert soon. The U.S. already has between 75,000 and 80,000 troops in Europe as permanently stationed forces and as part of regular rotations in places such as Poland.

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Washington and Moscow have been at loggerheads over Ukraine, with little sign of a diplomatic path forward. However, Kirby on Wednesday confirmed the validity of a document reported by a Spanish newspaper that indicated the United States could be willing to enter into an agreement with Russia to ease tensions over missile deployments in Europe if Moscow steps back from the brink in Ukraine.

The daily El Pais published two documents that Kirby confirmed were written replies from the United States and NATO last week to Russia's proposals for a new security arrangement in Europe. The U.S. State department declined to comment on them.

In reference to the second document, NATO said that it never comments on "alleged leaks." But the text closely reflects statements made to the media last week by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg as he laid out the 30-nation military organization's position on Russia's demands.

The U.S. document, marked as a confidential "non-paper," said the United States would be willing to discuss in consultation with its NATO partners "a transparency mechanism to confirm the absences of Tomahawk cruise missiles at Aegis Ashore sites in Romania and Poland."

That would happen on condition that Russia "offers reciprocal transparency measures on two ground-launched missiles bases of our choosing in Russia."

Aegis Ashore is a system for defending against short- or intermediate-range missiles. Russia argues the site in Romania could be easily adapted to fire cruise missiles instead of interceptors, a claim that Washington has denied.

In his first public remarks on the standoff in more than a month, Putin on Tuesday accused the U.S. and its allies of ignoring Russia's central security demands but said that Moscow is willing to keep talking.

Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, and in 2014 annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and provided military support for a pro-Russian separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. Around 14,000 people have been killed in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Asian Americans mark Lunar New Year amid ongoing hate crimes

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

For two years now, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders across the country have endured racist verbal, physical and sometimes deadly attacks fueled by the coronavirus pandemic.

With the start of the Lunar New Year, many are looking forward to carrying out family traditions and joining in community celebrations throughout February. These include family dinners and giving children red envelopes filled with money. New York, Chicago and San Francisco are among the cities with parades planned later this month in their respective Chinatowns.

The Year of the Tiger — a Chinese zodiac symbol that represents strength and courage — also is the perfect time to convince Asian elders who have lived in fear because of widespread anti-Asian sentiment to join in the festivities.

"We really just want to share our culture, and basically be able to celebrate this joyous event with everyone," said William Gee, a longtime organizer of San Francisco's annual Chinese New Year Parade & Festival. "Just the presence alone in numbers, it might actually deter anything — any malicious or nefarious activity that might be planned."

While most Lunar New Year revelry was sidelined last year because of COVID-19, many outdoor events are returning with organizers encouraging masking for the public but mandating them for staff. The various parades will feature floats, marching bands, lion dances — and even "Star Wars" cosplayers in San Francisco.

"I hope anyone that is actually in fear of stepping outdoors because of everything that's been happening can find assurance and a bit of solace, in terms of coming to an event where you're going to be surrounded by like people," Gee said.

Several cities that are holding parades and festivals held rallies recently marking the one-year anniversary of the deadly attack on Vicha Ratanapakdee. The 84-year-old Thai American was assaulted while walking in his San Francisco neighborhood.

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His death was one of the first reported in what has been a series of fatal incidents targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The grim anniversary came just a couple of weeks after the death of Michelle Alyssa Go in New York City's Times Square. The 40-year-old died after a mentally unstable man shoved her in front of a subway.

Amanda Nguyen, an activist whose January 2021 Instagram video highlighting attacks on elderly Asians gained wide attention, said the continuous hostility is all the more reason to openly celebrate Asian cultures. Having fun with family and friends isn't dismissing tragedy but rather "the most radical form of rebellion."

"I know that it's a difficult time, but Lunar New Year is a joyous celebration that's deeply rooted in community," Nguyen said. "I want people to know that you can grieve. You can collectively grieve, heal, and also make space to be you, to have joy."

Russell Jeung, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, which has been tracking incidents nationwide based on victims self-reporting, said nervous elders in Chinatowns are stuck in "de facto segregation." For two years, they've limited themselves to certain streets or neighborhoods.

"So to honor our elders, we really need to help address that sense of isolation, by making them again feel included, safe and secure," Jeung said. "You do that by ... taking them out, escorting them around, bringing them shopping, inviting them to the meals and then working for broader safety in the community."

Earlier this month, the San Francisco Police Department reported that anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021 jumped 567% from 2020. Preliminary data collected by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism indicates Los Angeles and New York also saw record highs of anti-Asian hate incidents. Georgia saw the most fatalities after the March 2021 Atlanta-area spa business shootings that left six Asian women dead.

Initial figures from individual police agencies indicate anti-Asian hate crime overall in the U.S. increased 339% in 2021, compared to a 124% rise in 2020, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. Many people attribute the trend to former President Donald Trump talking about the coronavirus, which first appeared in China, in racial terms.

"The data is just so horrific that to see it confirmed in other sources, it doesn't surprise us and validates what we know," Jeung said.

Nguyen thinks incorporating more Asian American and Pacific Islander history in K-12 education can help change the climate in the future. She has been organizing petitions in various states.

"That's when people are learning about everything. I think that a lot of hate, the xenophobia, that professional foreigner stereotype, even 'yellow fever,' the way that AAPIs are characterized — that stems from ignorance," Nguyen said, using the acronym for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. "Let's celebrate the people who have broken barriers."

U.S. Rep. Grace Meng announced this week proposed legislation to make Lunar New Year a federal holiday. Its passage would show Asian Americans their government values the holiday, the New York Democrat said in a statement.

Bing Tang, of Monterey Park, California, says he doesn't dwell too much on anti-Asian hate because nothing would come of it. Tang, who was shopping in Los Angeles' Chinatown last week for tiger decorations for a family dinner of steamed chicken, fish and lobster, said fortunately neither he nor anyone close to him has experienced any harassment or attacks.

"There's good people, bad people all around the country," Tang said. "I just go out normally and just have a positive attitude. What can we do? We only can control ourselves and be nice to other people."

With COVID staffing crunch, who's going to teach the kids?

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

With teacher absences mounting and substitutes in short supply, parents may be wondering: Who's teaching the kids?

The answer around the U.S. could be a local police officer, National Guard soldier, state budget analyst, parent or recent high school graduate — nearly anyone willing to help keep schools' doors open through the omicron-driven staffing crunch.

States have been loosening teaching requirements to give schools more flexibility on hiring as corona-

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virus exposures, illness and quarantines add to strains on schools that also have been tapping librarians, custodians and support staff to help cover classrooms during the pandemic.

Brian McKinney, a parent with students in second and 10th grade in Hays County, Texas, spent part of this week as a substitute, helping sixth graders through a social studies assignment that had them writing essays about the Soviet Union. A former teacher, he decided he could help as he waited out a cold snap that has slowed business at the World War II-themed miniature golf course he and his wife now own.

"There was no down time today; I was heavily involved with the kids," he said after school Tuesday.

The measures have kept schools from having to revert to the waves of remote learning that disrupted homes and left many students behind earlier in the pandemic. Supporters say it's better to have students in school, where they are supervised and have access to food and services, even if the solutions fall short academically.

Still, the lowering of the bar for teachers raises some concerns about whether schools are just treading water. In some cases when possible, virtual school taught by students' regular teachers could be a better alternative, said Richard Ingersoll, an expert on the teaching profession at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Remote sometimes might be much more preferable to getting some substitute in there who's basically babysitting," he said.

Governors have been issuing executive orders to make more people eligible to work in schools. In states including California, Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, governors have taken action to give schools more flexibility to bring back retired teachers for short-term assignments.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox have made it possible for schools to dip into the states' workforces.

Cox's executive order allows state workers, including budget analysts, social workers and highway patrol officers, to take up to 30 hours of administrative leave to work as substitute teachers or in other school jobs. Oklahoma's initiative lets state workers volunteer as substitute teachers and continue to receive their state salary.

"We know that kids learn best in the classroom, so we want to do what we can to help schools stay open. Our teachers and our children deserve our support during this difficult phase of the pandemic," Cox said in a statement.

In Kansas, the state Board of Education has begun allowing districts to hire substitute teachers as young as 18 and with little more than a high school diploma after waiving requirements they have at least 60 college credits, the equivalent of at least two years, to receive a temporary license. The changes will last only until June 1, when the more stringent requirements will return.

State officials in Nevada will consider a similar change for emergencies for the state's two most populous counties later this month. Currently, substitute teachers must have at least 60 college credits — or an associate degree or higher — to obtain a license.

In addition to asking state workers to step up, New Mexico has called in the National Guard to work as substitute teachers, an unprecedented move that has troops drawing their usual pay for serving on active duty.

At least some schools are choosing to prioritize time with professional teachers, even if it means students don't keep a full schedule.

In Millville Public Schools in New Jersey, administrators were so concerned about the toll on learning after months of staffing challenges that they moved middle and high school students to a half-day schedule — with teachers -- for the month of February.

"After an analysis of our staffing over the past 5 months, we determined instruction at the secondary level has been severely impacted due to students' lack of access to direct instruction on a daily basis. Moving to an early dismissal schedule will address our staffing shortages by utilizing our current employees so that we are delivering consistent instruction from teaching professionals," a notice on the district's website said.

In the Hays Consolidated Independent School District in Texas, where McKinney filled in as a sub this week, at one point in January the district needed 455 subs in a single day, well over the usual 185, and could fill only 40% of the need, district spokesperson Tim Savoy said.

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The district raised the pay to an average of \$120 a day, up from about \$90, and invited parents to join the ranks of substitutes, waiving for some a requirement they have 30 hours of college. About half of the 60 new subs hired in January were parents, Savoy said.

After an orientation that included refreshers on things like classroom management and discipline, along with a background check that included fingerprinting, there are days McKinney has his pick from a long list of assignments but gravitates first to his specialties of history and physical education.

He said remote learning was hard on families like his that had to juggle kids and jobs, and he praised the district for working to stay open, even if it meant making exceptions for those running the classrooms.

"That's a huge emotional and physiological burden on families," he said of virtual school, "so I think Hays is just trying to figure out every possible option to not have to do that to families."

Army to immediately start discharging vaccine refusers

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Army said Wednesday it will immediately begin discharging soldiers who have refused to get the mandatory COVID-19 vaccine, putting more than 3,300 service members at risk of being thrown out soon.

The Army's announcement makes it the final military service to lay out its discharge policy for vaccine refusers. The Marine Corps, Air Force and Navy have already discharged active-duty troops or entry-level personnel at boot camps for refusing the shots. So far, the Army has not discharged any.

According to data released by the Army last week, more than 3,300 soldiers have refused to get the vaccine. The Army has said that more than 3,000 soldiers have been issued official written reprimands, which suggests they are already identified in the disciplinary process, and some of them could be among the first to be discharged.

The Pentagon has ordered all service members — active-duty, National Guard and Reserves — to get the vaccine, saying it is critical to maintaining the health and readiness of the force. COVID-19 cases continue to surge around the country as a result of the omicron variant.

Roughly 97% of all Army soldiers have gotten at least one shot. More than 3,000 have requested medical or religious exemptions.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth issued the directive Wednesday ordering commanders to begin involuntary separation proceedings against those who have refused the shots and do not have a pending or approved exemption.

"Army readiness depends on soldiers who are prepared to train, deploy, fight and win our nation's wars," she said. "Unvaccinated soldiers present risk to the force and jeopardize readiness. We will begin involuntary separation proceedings for Soldiers who refuse the vaccine order and are not pending a final decision on an exemption."

The order includes active-duty soldiers, reserves serving on active duty, and cadets at the Military Academy at West Point, its preparatory school and ROTC.

The detailed order said soldiers will be discharged for misconduct, and noted that those who are eligible to retire may do so before July 1.

Overall, more than 650 Marines, airmen and sailors have been thrown out of the military or dismissed from entry-level training at boot camps, according to data released this week and last week by the services.

The military services have been going through a methodical process to deal with those who refuse the vaccine as well as those who request medical, administrative or religious exemptions. The reviews require counseling with medical personnel and chaplains as well as senior commanders.

HBCU bomb threat caller described elaborate plot: police

By JEFF MARTIN and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WOODSTOCK, Ga. (AP) — A caller who threatened to blow up a historically Black university in Florida — one of numerous threats made against schools across the nation — described an elaborate plot involving

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seven bombs hidden in duffel bags and backpacks around the school's perimeter, a Florida police chief said. In a 20-minute phone call, the caller said the bombs containing C-4 explosives would be detonated at Bethune-Cookman University on Monday, Daytona Beach Police Chief Jakari Young said at a news conference. The caller also said a gunman would open fire on the campus around lunchtime the same day, Young said.

At least a half-dozen historically Black universities in five states and the District of Columbia received bomb threats Monday, and at least a dozen more schools received such threats on Tuesday. Many of the schools locked down their campuses for a time. Authorities found no bombs after extensive searches.

The threats to some of the other schools also were telephoned in, school officials have said, but few details of those calls have been released.

Investigators have identified at least five "persons of interest," a law enforcement official told The Associated Press on Wednesday. The investigators believe a spoofed phone number was used to make the threats, the official said.

The official could not discuss details of the investigation publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity. ABC News was first to report the development.

Both the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives announced investigations. The FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces is investigating the threats as hate crimes, the agency said in a statement Wednesday.

"This investigation is of the highest priority for the Bureau and involves more than 20 FBI field offices across the country," the agency said. "These threats are being investigated as Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism and hate crimes."

In Florida, Young said the caller with whom he spoke claimed to be affiliated with the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division.

In May, a federal judge in Virginia sentenced former Atomwaffen Division leader John Cameron Denton to more than three years in prison for his role in a conspiracy to make bogus bomb threats and 911 calls to over 100 targets, including a Black church. Others charged in the "swatting" scheme were affiliated with or expressed sympathy for the group.

Oren Segal, vice president of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, said he is "reserving judgment" for now on whether Atomwaffen is connected to the bomb threat investigation.

"Does that fit the Atomwaffen bill? It does. In other ways, it could be people who have no affiliation with Atomwaffen but are using it because they know it will create shock value," Segal said. "I just think it's too early to tell."

In addition to Florida, threats were sent to schools in Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi and other states.

"What I'm saying is, it's plain and simple terrorism, no matter how you cut it, no matter how you slice it," Belvin Perry, chairman of the Bethune-Cookman Board of Trustees, told the Daytona Beach News-Journal. "It is designed to inflict terror. It is designed to make people feel uncomfortable. It is designed to make people be afraid."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki has called the threats disturbing, and said the White House is in touch with federal law enforcement officials.

The bomb scares come at the start of Black History Month, and less than a month after a series of bomb threats were made to multiple historically Black universities on Jan. 4.

CNN president resigns after relationship with co-worker

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN President Jeff Zucker abruptly resigned Wednesday after acknowledging a consensual relationship with another network executive — an entanglement that came to light during an investigation of now-fired anchor Chris Cuomo.

Zucker said he was asked about his relationship with longtime aide Allison Gollust as part of the Cuomo

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investigation, which revealed that the former anchor had aided his brother, then-New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, as he navigated a sexual harassment scandal.

"I acknowledged the relationship had evolved in recent years," Zucker wrote in a memo announcing the end of his nine-year tenure. "I was required to disclose it when it began but I didn't. I was wrong."

A memo to employees from Jason Kilar, CEO of CNN parent WarnerMedia, said three senior executives at CNN would run the network on an interim basis.

Zucker, 56, has been an industry leader since he was executive producer of the "Today" show in the 1990s. In the following decade, he ran NBC's entertainment division, where he was instrumental in putting the reality show "The Apprentice" starring Donald Trump on the air.

He rose to become chief of NBC Universal and left in 2010 when Comcast took over.

In a statement Zucker said he wished that his tenure at CNN had ended differently but, "it was an amazing run. And I loved every minute."

Gollust, a former publicist who rose to the rank of CNN's executive vice president and chief marketing officer, is staying at the network.

"Jeff and I have been close friends and professional partners for over 20 years," she said in a statement. "Recently, our relationship changed during COVID. I regret that we didn't disclose it at the right time. I'm incredibly proud of my time at CNN and look forward to continuing the great work we do everyday."

Prior to joining CNN, Gollust served as communications director for Andrew Cuomo. Like Zucker, she worked at NBC prior to that. Both are divorced.

Chris Cuomo, at the time CNN's most popular prime-time anchor, was fired in December when it was revealed in documents released by New York Attorney General Letitia James that his behind-the-scenes role helping craft his brother's response to harassment charges was more extensive than previously acknowledged.

James' office found that Andrew Cuomo sexually harassed at least 11 women. The former governor resigned in August to avoid a likely impeachment trial.

Chris Cuomo is reportedly seeking a settlement from CNN, and speculation that Zucker and Gollust's relationship might come up in those talks was raised when Radaronline.com wrote a story about the two last month.

Cuomo's lawyer, Bryan Freedman, did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

The resignation was met with shock within CNN, where Zucker was generally well liked. He sharpened the network's focus and, as a former producer, was often seen in the control rooms giving hands-on advice about running shows.

Like other news outlets, CNN has suffered in the ratings following the end of the 2020 election, and has not yet named a replacement for Cuomo.

Particularly in prime time, CNN personalities have become much more likely to express their opinions on the air, and Zucker's downfall was met with glee in some conservative circles.

Ironically, Zucker had been criticized early in the 2016 election cycle when CNN gave extensive time to covering Trump's rallies live.

"Zucker made Donald Trump a star, more than once. That is his legacy," tweeted media analyst Jeff Jarvis on Wednesday.

Yet in his presidency, Trump frequently called CNN "fake news" and criticized Zucker personally. The former president issued a statement crowing about his departure on Wednesday.

Experts said Zucker's resignation might affect the upcoming CNN+ streaming service, which has been making an aggressive effort to recruit big media names like Fox News' Chris Wallace and NPR's Audie Cornish. That service is expected to launch in March.

"The timing of this departure is probably about as ill-timed as you can get," for CNN+, said Tim Hanlon, CEO of media consultancy The Vertere Group. "CNN is making up for a lot of lost time with the arrival of their streaming service ... The vision of CNN+ is very much in question. It has Jeff Zucker's hallmarks all over it."

There had been uncertainty over Zucker's future at CNN in recent years. He had previously announced

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he was leaving amid reports of friction with Kilar. But there was some hope at CNN that he would stay given a pending corporate merger that would put CNN under the umbrella of Discovery executive David Zaslav, known to be Zucker's close friend.

"This obviously makes it pretty clear that their future is more wide open," said Moody's senior vice president Neil Begley. "It makes a cleaner slate for the new team to come in and decide what is the best way to optimize CNN and news overall."

Zucker was named chairman of WarnerMedia News and Sports in March 2019. He has also served as president of CNN Worldwide since 2013.

He oversaw all of WarnerMedia's live programming, including all divisions of CNN Worldwide and Turner Sports. At CNN, that includes the US television network, CNN International, HLN, and CNN's digital properties. His sports portfolio included Turner Sports and Bleacher Report.

The circumstances of Zucker's resignation are likely to hurt CNN's reputation because it shows a pattern of ethical laxness, said Paul Argenti, a Dartmouth College professor of corporate communication.

CNN was criticized for moving too slowly when it was revealed that Chris Cuomo had been helping his brother behind the scenes. At about the same time, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis, CNN bent its own rules to allow Chris to interview Andrew on the air.

"You've got to jump on these things quickly and respond by saying 'We made a mistake and here's what we're doing so it never happens again,'" Argenti said. "They should have done that after Cuomo."

The gender advocacy group UltraViolet on Wednesday called on CNN to launch an independent investigation into its leadership and workplace policies.

While Gollust and Zucker said their relationship had changed only recently, their closeness had been noted before. Katie Couric, in her 2021 memoir "Going There," said Zucker had pushed her to hire Gollust when he was advising her on the 2012 launch of her syndicated daily talk show.

"When we worked together at NBC, she and Jeff cooked up ever bolder ways to draw attention to 'Today' and later to Jeff himself when he moved to entertainment," she wrote. "They were joined at the hip."

Revenue windfall pushes states to consider range of tax cuts

By BRIAN WITTE and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Soaring tax revenue and billions in pandemic aid from the federal government have left many states with an unusual problem — too much money.

The result is one of the most broad-based movements in recent memory toward giving consumers and taxpayers a break. In red states and blue, lawmakers and governors are proposing to cut taxes and fees, create tax credits, or delay tax and fee hikes that had been planned before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Even high-tax states controlled by Democrats, from California to New Jersey, are dangling the possibility. Among those are Washington state, where one Democratic senator has proposed cutting the state sales tax from 6.5% to 5.5%.

"We need to get money back in people's pockets if we're to make a full recovery from the high public health cost and economic cost of this pandemic," said state Sen. Mona Das, the Democrat who proposed the measure. Legislative leaders in her party are cool to the idea of using temporary revenue to finance permanent cuts, but some have rallied behind a one-time sales tax holiday proposal.

States coffers are overflowing after nearly two years of Congress pumping out trillions to help the U.S. economy stay afloat through the pandemic, including sending billions to state governments. Most are enacting or considering tax cuts even while considering big boosts on public schools and infrastructure.

Income and sales taxes are on the chopping block as are vehicle license fees, gas taxes and more.

In Maryland, Republican Gov. Larry Hogan has long pushed for a gradual elimination of income taxes for retirees, something he says will reduce the migration of people leaving the state to lower-tax places such as Florida when they're finished working. He may finally have a window for striking a deal with the Democrat-controlled legislature.

The state's projected surplus for the fiscal year that starts July 1 is \$4.6 billion in a \$58.2 billion budget.

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That is giving Hogan leeway for a renewed effort to sell his plan. As part of the deal, he's also calling for making permanent an enhanced income tax credit favored by Democrats for lower-income workers that was put into place last year as a temporary measure.

"We now can afford to do this," Hogan told reporters at the start of this year's legislative session.

The idea is appealing to retirees such as Karen Morgan, a lawyer who worked for the state legislature and lives in a Maryland suburb outside Washington, D.C.

"It would be nice to not have to spend some of these limited resources on taxes, and that means that there is extra money to spend on health care," said Morgan, 65. "There's extra money to spend on just managing my life. You know, it doesn't get any easier the older you get."

For Maryland and other state governments, the fiscal fallout from the pandemic has turned out to be the opposite of the calamity they were bracing for in the spring of 2020.

The federal government has allocated states and local governments about \$500 billion in general relief, plus more for specific areas such as education. It has offered separate aid to businesses and committed to \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending, with much of that money funneled through states.

And most high-earners avoided layoffs during the pandemic and investors have done well — keeping income tax receipts high. Consumers have used that money to buy a lot of goods: home-office furniture, patio heaters, vehicles. That's sent sales tax revenue, a key source of government income in most states, soaring.

"States have more money than they can realistically and sustainably spend," said Jared Walczak, vice president of state projects at the Tax Foundation, a Washington-based think tank that advocates for tax policies fostering growth.

Walczak counted 16 states with income tax cuts last year, including a move toward a flat tax in Arizona and a sweeping one in Arkansas that was passed alongside a tax credit for low-income earners. The Urban Institute tallied 29 states that cut taxes or expanded tax credits last year.

Walczak says more than a dozen states are seriously considering income tax reductions this year.

He said states need to consider tax cuts because the pandemic made it clear that many people can move to a more desirable place and keep working remotely. But some plans might go too far — and some tax cuts could end up disproportionately hurting those on lower incomes.

A proposal in Republican-dominated Mississippi to phase out the personal income tax could drag down revenue enough to force cuts in state government spending in future years. The plan already has passed in the House, but Senate Republicans are calling for shallower cuts.

In addition to the income tax proposal, the House bill would reduce the taxes people pay each year to renew license plates for their vehicles and cut the sales tax on groceries. But the sales tax on most other items would rise from 7% to 8.5%.

"The end result would be a tax code that rewards work and is fairer for everyone," said Republican state Rep. Trey Lamar, chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee.

But Deloris Suel, 73, isn't convinced the broader sales tax boost — which is not included in the Senate GOP plan — would be fair. She operates a child care center in Jackson and said the changes would end up costing the low-income families her center serves. Suel said a higher sales tax would hit them hard and would not be balanced by eliminating the income tax because many of them make too little to be required to pay it now.

Suel said lawmakers should evaluate the impact of tax cuts before rushing to make a decision.

"Sometimes, Mississippi joins in for the sake of being part of something," she said.

An analysis by One Voice, which advocates for vulnerable and marginalized people, found that the tax plans would save \$30,000 a year for the highest-income people in the state but increase the overall tax burden slightly for those making under \$19,000.

Seeking more widespread benefits, taxes on groceries, which are in place in about a dozen states, are being targeted.

That includes Illinois, where the governor has proposed a one-year suspension that would save consum-

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ers in the state a collective \$360 million. Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker has pitched it as a way to combat inflation, along with relief at the gas pump and on property tax bills.

In Oklahoma, where the GOP-led legislature cut individual and corporate income tax rates last year amid higher-than-expected revenue, some Republicans are talking about even more tax cuts, including the sales tax on groceries.

Rep. Sean Roberts, a Republican who also is running for Congress, wants a public vote on whether to remove the grocery tax.

"We currently have a surplus in funds and revenues are up, so now is the time to bring this much-needed relief to Oklahoma families," he said.

Tax and fee cuts are on the table in Colorado, New York, Rhode Island and Utah. Even in tax-happy California, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is proposing delaying the next step in a multi-year increase in the gas tax.

But some economists caution that states should be careful about making permanent tax cuts, noting the flush times won't last forever.

"What goes up must come down," said Michael D'Arcy, who follows public finance for Fitch Ratings.

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

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The United States is bolstering its military presence in central and eastern Europe, the Pentagon announced Wednesday, in response to fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The announcement came after a leaked document published in a Spanish newspaper suggested the United States could be willing to enter into an agreement with Russia over missile deployments in Europe if Moscow steps back from the brink in Ukraine.

The document was published a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the West of ignoring Russia's key security demands in diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

Here are things to know Wednesday about the international tensions surrounding Ukraine, which has an estimated 100,000 Russian troops massed along its borders.

WHAT ARE THE LEADERS OF GERMANY AND FRANCE PLANNING?

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says he plans to travel to Moscow to meet Putin, but isn't specifying a date.

Scholz will meet President Joe Biden in Washington on Monday. He told Germany's ZDF television on Wednesday that he will go to Moscow "soon" to discuss "the necessary questions."

Scholz said it is "important that we are very clear in what we are saying and what we are preparing: that endangering the territorial sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine, attacking militarily, would have a very high price." He added: "I think this message has been understood."

French President Emmanuel Macron, who's been pushing for a diplomatic solution, said Wednesday he will speak to Biden in the "coming hours," and is open to meeting with Putin or traveling to the region depending on how the situation develops in the coming days.

"I don't exclude any initiative or trip," Macron told reporters in northern France.

___ Geir Moulson and Angela Charlton

U.S. NO LONGER DESCRIBING INVASION AS 'IMMINENT'

The Biden administration is moving away from describing a Russian invasion as "imminent" in public discussion of the crisis.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki confirmed the decision on Wednesday after Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., told National Public Radio the administration was not arguing an invasion was imminent "because we are still pursuing a diplomatic solution to give the Russians an off ramp."

Psaki added the administration has decided to stop using the term "because I think it sent in a message that we weren't intending to send, which was that we knew that President Putin had made a decision."

___ Aamer Madhani

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WHERE IS U.S. SENDING TROOPS?

Biden is sending about 2,000 U.S.-based troops across the Atlantic to Poland and Germany this week and moving part of an infantry Stryker squadron of roughly 1,000 troops based in Germany to Romania as demonstrations of American commitments to allies on NATO's eastern flank.

In announcing the deployments, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the U.S. forces will not enter Ukraine and will move to their new positions in coming days under U.S. command.

Russia fired back with a sharply worded objection, calling the deployments "destructive."

With talks between Russia and the West stalled, there are growing fears across Europe that Putin is poised to invade Ukraine and smaller NATO countries on the eastern flank could be next.

Poland's Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said in a video posted on Twitter: "The strengthening of NATO's eastern flank shows that the U.S. and the alliance are taking seriously the threat on Russia's part and are taking resolute deterrent steps."

___ Aamer Madhani, Lolita C. Baldor

BRITISH DEFENSE SECRETARY WARNS ALL WOULD SUFFER ECONOMICALLY FROM WAR

British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace underscored warnings to Russia about the consequences of invading Ukraine, but cautioned that the West would be affected, too.

Wallace said at a press conference with Slovenia's Defense Minister Matej Tonin that the message to Putin is clear that "there would be severe consequences for any invasion in Ukraine."

Wallace added that "we would all suffer economically" in such a scenario, and there likely would be a mass migration from Ukraine if Russia invades.

"Therefore, I think it is in all our interest to put as much effort as possible to both deter but also to engage the Russian government to make sure that this does not develop," he said.

___ Jovana Gec

WHAT'S IN THE U.S. AND NATO REPLIES TO RUSSIA?

The Spanish daily El Pais published two documents that the Pentagon confirmed were written replies from the United States and NATO last week to Russia's proposals for a new security arrangement in Europe.

The U.S. document, marked as a confidential "non-paper," said the United States would be willing to discuss in consultation with its NATO partners "a transparency mechanism to confirm the absences of Tomahawk cruise missiles" at sites in Romania and Poland.

That would happen on condition that Russia "offers reciprocal transparency measures on two ground-launched missiles bases of our choosing in Russia."

In reference to the second document, NATO said that it never comments on "alleged leaks." But the text closely reflects statements made to the media last week by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg as he laid out the 30-nation military organization's position on Russia's demands.

___ Lorne Cook and Dasha Litvinova

WHAT ARE THE DUTCH DOING TO HELP UKRAINE?

The Netherlands is working out if it can offer cyber defense expertise to Ukraine.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte visited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday for long-planned talks about economic links and the 2014 downing of a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet in eastern Ukraine. But Rutte said the discussions were dominated by the tensions on Ukraine's border with Russia.

He said "the only route to a solution is through de-escalation, diplomacy and dialogue."

Rutte said the Netherlands "will in the meantime support Ukraine wherever we can. For example, we are talking about offering Dutch assistance to fend off cyberattacks against Ukraine."

Russia has carried out significant cyberattacks against Ukraine and would almost certainly do so again as part of any operation against its neighbor. Such hostile activity against Ukraine could spread far and wide, as the devastating NotPetya attack did in 2017.

___ Mike Corder

WHAT EFFECT IS THE UKRAINE CRISIS HAVING ON INFLATION?

The specter of conflict between Russia and Ukraine is helping drive up prices across the 19 nations that

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use the shared euro currency.

The European Union's statistics agency reported Wednesday that inflation in the eurozone rose an annual 5.1% in January, breaking records set in the two previous months and reaching the highest level since record-keeping started in 1997.

Soaring energy prices have played a major role, rising a whopping 28.6%. Natural gas prices have surged in Europe because of depleted winter reserves, lower supplies from Russia and fears of a renewed military move by Moscow against Ukraine. Meanwhile, oil prices have spiked as the global economy recovers from the worst of COVID-19 restrictions.

EU nations get around 40% of their natural gas supplies from Russia.

HOW IS UKRAINE'S ECONOMY FARING?

Zelenskyy says the embattled country's government has successfully shored up its currency amid jitters over the prospect of war breaking out.

"Today we have contained the situation, despite the information panic. We have taken many different steps, stabilized the hryvnia and calmed the markets," Zelenskyy said after talks with the Dutch prime minister. "Today we see that the national currency is strengthening."

Ukraine's president also said the country has been boosting its military capabilities, but stressed that all the weapons Ukraine is getting from its Western allies are strictly for defense purposes.

"It's very important for us that all these weapons are for defense. We think only about peace and de-occupation of (our) territories, solely through diplomatic means," Zelenskyy said.

___ David McHugh

FAMILY OF JAILED AMERICAN FARMER CALLS FOR U.S. TO GET HIM HOME

The family of an American farmer detained in Ukraine on what they call bogus charges is calling on the Biden administration and State Department to "use their leverage" to get him home.

Kurt Groszhans set out from North Dakota for Ukraine in 2017 to connect with his family's ancestral homeland and farm the country's fertile soil. But his farming venture with a law professor who's now a high-ranking Ukrainian government official fell apart in acrimony and accusations that culminated in his arrest last November on charges of plotting to assassinate his former business partner.

His family and supporters say the accusations are designed to silence Groszhans' claims of corruption in Ukraine.

As he awaits trial, Ukraine is bracing for a potential Russian invasion and the U.S. has ordered the families of American personnel at the U.S. Embassy to evacuate. That has left his family fearing that Groszhans could be left behind.

Asked for comment, the State Department said the administration took seriously its responsibility to help detained Americans and was closely following the case, but declined to comment further.

As Russia tensions boil, US farmer remains jailed in Ukraine

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Kurt Groszhans set out from North Dakota for Ukraine in 2017, he was eager to connect with his family's ancestral homeland and to farm the rich, black soil for which the country is known.

But his farming venture with a law professor who's now a high-ranking Ukrainian government official soon collapsed in acrimony and accusations, culminating in his arrest last November on charges of plotting to assassinate his former business partner. His family and supporters say the accusations are bogus and designed to silence Groszhan's claims of corruption in Ukraine, a country pulled between Russian and Western interests and straining to shed its reputation for graft and cronyism.

The case is unfolding as Ukraine braces for a potential Russian invasion and as the U.S. has ordered the families of American personnel at the U.S. Embassy there to evacuate. The upheaval has Groszhan's family afraid that the North Dakota farmer could be left behind, with the U.S. government preoccupied with broader concerns of possible military action and geopolitical chaos.

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"We're terrified for my brother's well-being right now, especially everything that you're hearing in the news with the Russian troops on the border," his sister, Kristi Magnusson, said in an interview with The Associated Press. With fears an invasion could force the evacuation of U.S. diplomatic staff, she called on the Biden administration and the State Department to "use their leverage" to get him home.

"If the embassy is not there to check on him and make sure that he's doing OK, we don't know what will happen," she added.

Asked for comment, the State Department said the administration took seriously its responsibility to help detained Americans and was closely following the case, but declined to comment further.

Republican Sen. Kevin Cramer of North Dakota, who recently visited Groszhans at a detention center as he awaits trial, said the episode has "created friction between at least me and them, if not our two governments, that should be alleviated" at a time when U.S. and Ukrainian interests should be aligned in countering the threat from Moscow.

"This bit of friction is unnecessary," he added. "And I think we could relieve all of us of it simply by releasing Kurt."

Groszhans, a 50-year-old farmer from Ashley, North Dakota, decided in 2017 to move to Ukraine, where his ancestors are from. The chance to work the country's coveted black earth was a "dream come true," and he invested a large sum to get a farming operation up and running, his sister said. In a country with a prized agricultural sector, Groszhans was proud of his work, she said, sending pictures of his crops to his family.

Once there, he connected with a law professor, Roman Leshchenko, who offered himself up as a native speaker with knowledge of the local farming business and regulatory requirements. Groszhans named him the director of his company.

Things fell apart quickly.

Groszhans has alleged in a lawsuit and in an internet post that Leshchenko began embezzling money from him, defrauding him of over \$250,000 in total and transferring funds to a family company. Groszhans has been vocal about his allegations, describing himself in a Medium post in August as a "humble" but deceived investor.

"Probably, I am not the first or the last American investor who made a mistake in the person hired as a manager. But the personality of this manager makes my case unique," he wrote.

Leshchenko declined to comment to the AP, but has denied the embezzlement claims in interviews with the Ukrainian media and has insisted that the men had agreed that Leshchenko's company would run the farming business.

He's leveled his own accusations against Groszhans, alleging that the American farmer planted genetically modified soybean that is banned from cultivation and sales in Ukraine and it was that discovery that prompted Leshchenko to resign from the company and was the source of their dispute.

"The circumstances of this criminal proceedings must be verified as part of the pre-trial investigation conducted by the National Police and only on the basis of the results of which, after the relevant facts and their evidence have been clarified and established, the prosecutor's office can make appropriate procedural decisions," Tetyana Kozachenko, a lawyer for Leshchenko, told The Associated Press.

Ukrainian media that began looking into the conflict reported that Leshchenko had used some of the funds for a roughly \$60,000 contribution to the 2019 campaign of current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who later named Leshchenko the government's minister of agrarian policy and food.

The AP was unable to independently confirm the contribution. Zelenskyy's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Amid controversy about the contribution, Leshchenko was interviewed by the Kyiv Post last year. The article said the \$60,000 donation came from Leshchenko's dying father. Leshchenko said he and his father saw Zelenskyy "as the only person who wants to change Ukraine, bring structural reforms."

Magnusson says Leshchenko ultimately did return some money to her brother, but also threatened to have him arrested if he didn't stop talking publicly about his fraud accusations.

In November, Groszhans was arrested along with his assistant on charges of plotting to assassinate Leshchenko, allegations that Groszhans' supporters say are wholly fabricated but may have arisen from Groszhans' hiring of a private investigator to dig into Leshchenko as part of his litigation.

The arrest, his family and supporters believe, was a pretext for silencing his allegations, particularly in a country that has sought to shore up diplomatic and military support from the U.S. through reassurances it is making a serious effort to curb corruption.

"My brother has never in all of his 50 years of life.. been in trouble with the law," Magnusson said. "And we don't believe any of this can be true because why would you want to assassinate somebody if you're trying to collect money back that is legally owed to you?"

His supporters are asking the Biden administration to formally designate him a wrongful detainee, a classification that would allow for his case to be reassigned to the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the State Department.

But his family fears the window for attention to Groszhan's case may be limited, given the potential for an incursion by Russia and the dwindling diplomatic presence by the U.S.

"It just makes us more and more concerned for him and for his safety to know that these people could be leaving and Kurt is forgotten about, and he's left behind," Magnusson said.

Doctors: Cancer patients cured a decade after gene therapy

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

In 2010, doctors treated Doug Olson's leukemia with an experimental gene therapy that transformed some of his blood cells into cancer killers. More than a decade later, there's no sign of cancer in his body.

The treatment cured Olson and a second patient, according to the University of Pennsylvania doctors, who said it was the first time the therapy had been studied for so long.

"I'm doing great right now. I'm still very active. I was running half marathons until 2018," said Olson, 75, who lives in Pleasanton, California. "This is a cure. And they don't use the word lightly."

His doctors describe the two cases in a study published Wednesday in the journal Nature. They say the two examples show the treatment, called CAR-T cell therapy, can attack cancer immediately, then stay inside the body for years and evolve there to keep the disease at bay. Such so-called "living drugs" are now used by thousands around the world to treat certain blood cancers.

Based on the 10-year results, "we can now conclude that CAR-T cells can actually cure patients of leukemia," said Dr. Carl June, one of the authors of the study.

The one-time treatment involves collecting the patient's own T cells, white blood cells key to the immune system, and genetically changing them in the lab so that they will find and attack cancer cells. The modified cells are given back to the patient through IV.

By the time Olson got the treatment, he'd been fighting cancer for years. When doctors diagnosed him with chronic lymphocytic leukemia in 1996, he said, "I thought I had months to live."

He eventually underwent chemotherapy and, at one point, his physician, Dr. David Porter, suggested he may need a bone marrow transplant. Porter also raised the idea of joining a CAR-T therapy study. Olson, CEO of a New Hampshire lab products company, said he was excited by the science and eager to avoid the transplant.

A couple weeks after getting the treatment, he felt sick for about a week and was hospitalized for three days.

"It was the very next week he sat me down and he said, 'We cannot find a single cancer cell in your body,' Olson recalled.

The other patient, retired corrections officer Bill Ludwig, had similar results.

Over time, researchers said, the modified cells evolved, many turning into "helper" cells that work with the cancer-killing cells. Helper cells eventually became dominant in both patients.

Study author J. Joseph Melenhorst said they were able to isolate and analyze the cells using new technologies, which gave them "very good insight" into how they persisted in the patients' bodies.

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Dr. Armin Ghobadi of Washington University in St. Louis, an expert in gene and cellular immunotherapy for cancer, called the findings "incredible." Though the word "cure" is rarely used in cancer, he said it appears these patients were "most likely" cured.

He was intrigued by the persistence of the CAR-T cells and the way the living drug evolves.

"That's just really beautiful to see," said Ghobadi, who was not involved in the study.

At this point, June said, tens of thousands of patients are being treated with CAR-T cell therapies, which have been approved for certain blood cancers by health authorities around the world, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The agency first approved a CAR-T therapy treatment in 2017 developed by Penn and the drugmaker Novartis for childhood leukemia.

The Nature study was paid for partly by the Novartis Institute for Biomedical Research and partly by National Institutes of Health grants.

Scientists hope to see wider use of CAR-T therapies in the future for other cancers. Last year, a CAR-T cell therapy was approved for multiple myeloma, the most common malignancy of the bone marrow in adults. According to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, leukemia, lymphoma and myeloma were expected to make up just under 10% of the 1.9 million new cancer cases in the U.S. last year.

"But the big scientific challenge – and it's a big one – is how to make this work in solid cancers," like those in the lung, colon and other places, June said.

Even in blood cancers, there are challenges. The therapies are expensive, running into the hundreds of thousands of dollars just for the drugs. And there's the risk of significant side effects, including an immune overreaction called "cytokine release syndrome" and nervous system-related problems such as brain swelling.

Both of the Penn patients did extremely well after the treatment. Ludwig traveled the country with his wife in a motor home and celebrated family milestones before dying early last year of COVID-19 complications.

Olson said he's extremely grateful for the decade of life since doctors used cutting-edge science to save him.

"What's changed is the dimension of hope. The pace of discovery takes your breath away," he said. "It's a brand new world."

EXPLAINER: COVID vaccines for kids under 5: What's next?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Parents who thought their children under 5 would have to wait several more months for COVID-19 vaccinations instead just might get them as early as March. Here's what needs to happen first, and some things to expect if they do become available in the U.S.

GOVERNMENT REVIEW

Pfizer has asked the Food and Drug Administration to authorize extra-low doses of its COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 6 months through 4 years. The FDA will review the application and convene a panel of outside advisers in mid-February to debate the data. The FDA will use that advice in deciding whether the new doses are safe and effective enough for the youngest children.

But that's not the last step. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will gather its own expert panel to help decide if the shots should be recommended for this age group — and if so, for all of them or only those at higher risk from COVID-19.

SPECIAL SHOTS

Shots for children in this age group are one-tenth the size of the adult doses. That's even smaller than the doses given for 5- to 11-year-olds, which are one-third the dose. Pfizer will have to specially bottle the extra-low doses so vaccine providers don't mix them up with the two other dosages already being used.

TWO DOSES OR THREE?

Here's where this gets complicated. In December, Pfizer announced a setback: Preliminary study results showed two of the extra-low doses appeared strong enough to protect babies but weren't strong enough for 2- to 4-year-olds. The company added a third shot to the study, but results are not expected until late

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March.

Still, the FDA took the highly unusual step of urging Pfizer to apply now for a two-dose series with potentially a third shot added later. During the FDA advisory committee meeting, the public will get its first look at any new evidence of whether two extra-low doses are working better than initially expected among the preschoolers.

IF CLEARED, WHERE WOULD SHOTS BE GIVEN?

While the government expanded pharmacists' ability to vaccinate children during the pandemic, shots for the youngest children primarily are given in pediatricians' offices.

WHAT ABOUT KIDS YOUNGER THAN 6 MONTHS?

There are no plans to test shots in newborns.

WILL THE SHOTS BE IN HIGH DEMAND?

Vaccinations have been lower among children than in other age groups, a pattern likely to continue with kids under 5. As of last week, just 20% of kids ages 5 to 11 and just over half of 12- to 17-year-olds were fully vaccinated, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nearly three-quarters of adults are fully vaccinated. While COVID-19 tends to be less severe in children than adults, the omicron wave has caused record numbers of child hospitalizations.

Shortened Olympic torch relay starts for Beijing Games

BEIJING (AP) — The three-day torch relay for the Beijing Olympics, shortened considerably because of concerns about the coronavirus, started Wednesday with an 80-year-old former speedskater carrying the flame.

The relay opened at the Olympic Forest Park. Luo Zhihuan, the country's first internationally competitive speedskater, ran the first leg.

The torch will be carried through the three Olympics zones, starting with downtown Beijing before heading to Yanqing district and finally Zhangjiakou in neighboring Hebei Province.

The Beijing Games have already been impacted on a scale similar to that experienced by Tokyo during last year's Summer Olympics. China says only selected spectators will be allowed to attend events, and Olympic athletes, officials, staff and journalists are required to stay within a bubble that keeps them from contact with the general public.

Beijing, with its 20 million residents, has experienced only a handful of COVID-19 cases and reported just two new ones on Wednesday. However, in keeping with China's "zero tolerance" approach to the pandemic, strict rules require lockdowns and mass testing when any real or suspected case is discovered.

The truncated program seemed to have little effect on Luo, who after receiving the torch from Vice Premier Han Zheng said it was the realization of decades-long aspiration.

"I've never participated in the Winter Olympics, so I had hoped our country could host the Winter Olympics and I had the dream for nearly 60 years," said Luo, wearing a red and white jacket marked with No. 1. "Today my dream has come true ... How happy I am!"

The opening of the Beijing Games comes only days after the start of the Lunar New Year holiday, China's biggest annual celebration when millions traditionally travel to their hometowns for family reunions. For the second straight year, the government has advised those living away from home to stay put, and train and plane travel has been curtailed.

Participants in the torch relay have undergone health screenings and have been carefully monitored, starting from two weeks before the event.

Others among the 135 torchbearers heading out Wednesday were Jing Haipeng, captain of the Chinese Astronaut Corps, Ye Peijian, a 77-year-old consultant to China's lunar exploration program, former NBA player Yao Ming, and Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, who will direct Friday's opening ceremony at the Bird's Nest.

The scaled-down torch relay is a far cry from 2008, when Beijing sent the Olympic flame on a global journey ahead of hosting that year's Summer Games. The relay drew protesters against China's human

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rights violations and policies in Tibet, Xinjiang and elsewhere, leading to violent confrontations and the cancellation of some overseas stages.

The Winter Games have been beset by similar political controversies, alongside medical considerations.

Six weeks ago, the United States, Britain and several allies said they would not send dignitaries to attend the Beijing Games as a protest against human rights abuses by the Communist Party regime.

Athletes have been threatened by the organizing committee with "certain punishments" for saying or doing anything that would offend their Chinese hosts, while several delegations urged anyone headed to Beijing to take "burner" phones instead of their personal devices because of concerns their personal information could be compromised.

The National Hockey League cited uncertainty caused by the pandemic to hold back all of its players from the Olympic tournament. And American broadcaster NBC said it won't be sending announcing teams to China, citing the same virus concerns raised when the network pulled most of its reporters from the Tokyo Games.

Punxsutawney Phil predicts six more weeks of winter

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. (AP) — There will be six more weeks of winter, Punxsutawney Phil predicted as he emerged from his burrow Wednesday to perform his Groundhog Day duties.

Thousands of people from around the nation and other countries gathered at Gobbler's Knob as members of Punxsutawney Phil's "inner circle" summoned him from his tree stump at dawn to learn if he had seen his shadow, a message they said Phil communicated in "groundhogese." After Phil's prediction was announced, the crowd repeatedly chanted "six more weeks!"

According to folklore, spring would come early if he didn't see it.

The event took place virtually last year because of the coronavirus pandemic, depriving the community, which is about 65 miles (105 kilometers) northeast of Pittsburgh, of a boost from tourists. It was streamed live and seen by more than 15,000 viewers worldwide at one point. About 150 cardboard cutouts of fans were there to "watch."

The annual event has its origin in a German legend about a furry rodent.

According to records dating back to 1887, Phil has predicted winter more than 100 times. Ten years were lost because no records were kept, organizers said.

The 2020 forecast called for an early spring.

Punxsutawney Phil may be the most famous groundhog seer but he's certainly not the only one, and one competitor disagreed with his prediction. New York City's Staten Island Chuck expects an early spring, according to Staten Island District Attorney Michael McMahon, who presided over a ceremony that was livestreamed from Chuck's home at the Staten Island Zoo.

"He did not see his shadow. We will have an early spring," McMahon announced.

New York Mayor Eric Adams did not attend the ceremony but said in a videotaped message, "Chuck has been very accurate in his predictions since 1981. I think I can speak for all New Yorkers when I say, 'Chuck, please don't see your shadow.'"

For Taiwan's Olympics team, everything is in a name

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — For Taiwan, every appearance on the global stage is fraught with politics — and even more so when that stage is China.

The four Taiwanese athletes competing in Beijing at the Winter Olympics, which open Friday, can't use Taiwan's flag. They have long competed under a name — Chinese Taipei — that is rarely used and was forced on the team by a geopolitical divide that predates the Cold War.

Maggie Lee, a 19-year-old slalom skier, found herself giving people an impromptu lesson in the name as she traveled across Europe for training and competitions ahead of the Olympics.

"When I'm meeting people, I'll tell them I'm from Taiwan, because if you tell people you're from Chinese

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Taipei, nobody knows where you're from, you can't find it on Google," she said.

Taiwan is an island of 24 million people off China's east coast. It functions in many ways like a country with its own government and military. But China claims Taiwan as its territory, and only 14 countries recognize Taiwan as a nation. Most of the world, including the United States, have official ties with China instead.

The divide was born of a civil war in the late 1940s in which the Communists toppled the Republic of China's government and founded the People's Republic of China that rules to this day. China's former Nationalist leaders fled to Taiwan and set up a rival government in the city of Taipei.

Both claimed to represent China, and the U.S. among others sided with the government in Taipei. But a growing number of countries shifted to Beijing over the next two decades. The U.N. switched in 1971, forcing Taipei out of the organization. U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China the next year and the United States established ties with Beijing in 1979.

The name issue surfaced at the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. Taiwanese athletes had competed as the Republic of China in the previous two Winter Games, under its red flag with a white sun on a blue rectangle in one corner.

It was communist China's first time at the Olympics, and the government successfully protested the island's participation under the Republic of China, Taiwan's formal name. The athletes got the bad news after arriving in Lake Placid, said Thomas Liang, a cross-country skier who competed in the 1972 and 1976 Games.

"We all went to the U.S., but they wouldn't let us on the playing field," he said. "I was sad because I couldn't compete. Losing this opportunity was such a shame."

The next time Liang went to the Olympics, he was a coach, and his team was known as Chinese Taipei. A 1981 agreement with the International Olympics Committee created the name and allowed athletes to compete under a newly designed white flag with a flower outline around a sun and the Olympic rings in the middle. A flag-raising song is played at medal ceremonies instead of the anthem.

In the decades since, a Taiwanese identity distinct from China has grown stronger, even as the island developed close economic ties with the mainland. The share of the population identifying as Taiwanese has risen to 62%, up from 48% in 2008, according to an annual survey by National Chengchi University in Taipei. Thirty-two percent of the islanders identify themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese, while 3% say they're Chinese.

Under President Tsai Ing-wen, who took office in 2016, Taiwan has sought to shore up its de facto position, while stopping short of declaring formal independence, a move that could spark a Chinese military invasion.

China has responded by sending warplanes on training missions toward Taiwan and cajoling other countries to break their ties with the island. It has also pressured airlines, hotels, luxury brands and others doing business in China to label Taiwan as a province of China online and in maps.

But not everyone was satisfied with the status quo. In 2018, former Olympian Cheng Chi launched a national referendum to change the team's name to Taiwan for last year's Tokyo Olympics.

"Is our country's name Chinese Taipei? Of course not," Cheng said in an interview with the Liberty Times newspaper in 2018. "In the past, we accepted that one moment of injustice to ensure the fulfillment of a lifetime of striving."

The vote failed after many athletes came out against it, worried that the change could result in them being blocked from competing. Many say they just want to focus on the competition, and not the politics.

The name doesn't bother Lee, the skier. "As long as we are clear on who we are, that's enough," she said.

At the Winter Olympics this week, the two skiers representing Taiwan say their focus is on doing their best, and that would serve their home better rather than political statements.

"I don't have the right to deal with this issue, as an athlete," said Ray Ho, the other skier representing Taiwan. "I can only do what is within my ability, which is to train and compete."

Dolly Parton, Eminem, Lionel Richie among Rock Hall nominees

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NEW YORK (AP) — Dolly Parton, Eminem, Lionel Richie, Duran Duran and A Tribe Called Quest are among this year's first-time nominees for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

The Cleveland-based institution announced 17 artists and groups being considered for Rock Hall induction, including Rage Against the Machine, Pat Benatar, Dionne Warwick, Carly Simon, Judas Priest and Beck.

Beck and Simon are also nominated for the first time. Eminem, who is playing the Super Bowl Halftime Show with Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Mary J. Blige and Kendrick Lamar, earned a nomination in the first year he was eligible.

This year's class will be announced in May, with an induction ceremony planned for later this year.

"This year's ballot recognizes a diverse group of incredible artists, each who has had a profound impact on the sound of youth culture," said John Sykes, head of the foundation that runs the Rock Hall, in a press release on Wednesday.

Artists must have released their first commercial recording at least 25 years before they're eligible for induction.

Duran Duran singer Simon Le Bon thanked fans on Twitter for their support over the years. "This distinction is due in large part to the fact that we have an army of fans around the world who have unwaveringly supported us for the past four decades," he wrote.

The other nominees are Kate Bush, DEVO, Eurythmics, Fela Kuti, MC5 and the New York Dolls.

Olympic athletes face many doping, virus tests in Beijing

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Alongside the daily collection of coronavirus samples, the athletes at the Beijing Olympics also have to contend with the usual doping tests — both in and out of competition.

The 2,900 or so competitors at the Winter Games have to make themselves available for unannounced doping control visits, putting them at greater risk of catching COVID-19 and possibly ruling them out of their event.

The International Testing Agency, which oversees sample collection at the Olympics, said Wednesday the daily tests, which everyone in the Olympic bubble must do, add extra psychological weight and uncertainty.

"There is a lot of attention when they go through the doping control process to go through all the COVID measures," said Matteo Vallini, the ITA head of testing. "It puts them under pressure."

The ITA, which designed the Olympic athlete testing, and World Anti-Doping Agency, which oversees the rules and the testing laboratory in Beijing, detailed their plans on the first day of competition, two days before the opening ceremony.

OMICRON CHALLENGES

The wave of COVID-19 cases caused by the recent omicron variant has added to the ITA's work.

Late and unpredictable team selections because of athletes testing positive meant their replacements were less of a priority in pre-Olympic testing plans.

The agency said Wednesday it still hit a target of about 80% collected of the 5,400 samples recommended to sports bodies.

The ITA and WADA draw confidence in hoping for a clean Olympics after more tests were done on athletes training in 2021 away from their competitions than in the last pre-pandemic year of 2019.

There were only four positive doping tests at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, though all samples taken four years ago are in storage. They can be re-analyzed until 2028 if new testing methods or intelligence emerge.

RUSSIA RELATIONS

This year's Olympics are likely the last where Russian athletes are not allowed to compete under their country's name and without its flag and anthem.

In Beijing, as at the Summer Games in Tokyo six months ago, they will officially represent ROC and gold medalists will hear an excerpt from a Tchaikovsky piano concerto while standing on the podium.

Those World Anti-Doping Agency sanctions expire in December, two years after being imposed by the

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Court of Arbitration for Sport.

"The chapter is coming to an end," WADA director general Olivier Niggli said Wednesday. "We are still remaining very vigilant."

WADA's case was against the Russian anti-doping agency, known as RUSADA. A key step to re-establishing it in international sports was electing a new leader two months ago.

"We were very pleased with that," Niggli said of the process to appoint Veronika Loginova, who used to work for Russia's sports ministry. "We certainly at the moment think that RUSADA is operating independently and we see no sign of undue interference."

There are still pending disciplinary cases for sports governing bodies related to the 2014 Sochi Olympics using evidence gathered from the Moscow testing laboratory.

"There are still quite a number of them that are (not) dealt with," Niggli said.

The 212-member Russian team has been the most tested in the pre-Olympic program.

BEIJING LABORATORY

The WADA-accredited laboratory at Beijing Sports University will analyze about 2,900 blood and urine samples during the Olympics.

It's a different lab from the one in the city that had past issues with Olympic and pre-Olympic testing.

Errors during the 2008 Beijing Olympics at the National Anti-Doping Laboratory led to two hammer throwers from Belarus regaining their medals at CAS after being disqualified for testing positive for testosterone.

In 2016, WADA shut down the same lab for the four months prior to the Rio de Janeiro Olympics for mistakes in analyzing samples.

Now, the lab is part of a university instead of China's anti-doping agency — a situation Niggli said "is always better because we like labs to be involved in research."

"They have progressed a lot. We have no particular worries with the lab," he said.

Niggli is sure there can be no repeat of the systematic sample-swapping in Sochi's lab.

"The situation is different," he said. "There is a lot of safeguards in there."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 3, the 34th day of 2022. There are 331 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 3, 1943, during World War II, the U.S. transport ship SS Dorchester, which was carrying troops to Greenland, sank after being hit by a German torpedo in the Labrador Sea; of the more than 900 men aboard, only some 230 survived. (Four Army chaplains on board gave away their life jackets to save others and went down with the ship.)

On this date:

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens held a ship-board peace conference off the Virginia coast; the talks deadlocked over the issue of Southern autonomy.

In 1913, the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for a federal income tax, was ratified.

In 1917, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, the same day an American cargo ship, the SS Housatonic, was sunk by a U-boat off Britain after the crew was allowed to board lifeboats.

In 1959, rock-and-roll stars Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson died in a small plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa.

In 1966, the Soviet probe Luna 9 became the first manmade object to make a soft landing on the moon.

In 1988, the U.S. House of Representatives handed President Ronald Reagan a major defeat, rejecting his request for \$36.2 million in new aid to the Nicaraguan Contras by a vote of 219-211.

In 1994, the space shuttle Discovery lifted off, carrying Sergei Krikalev (SUR'-gay KREE'-kuh-lev), the first Russian cosmonaut to fly aboard a U.S. spacecraft.

In 1995, the space shuttle Discovery blasted off with a woman, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Eileen Col-

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lins, in the pilot's seat for the first time in NASA history.

In 1998, a U.S. Marine plane sliced through the cable of a ski gondola in Italy, causing the car to plunge hundreds of feet, killing all 20 people inside.

In 2006, an Egyptian passenger ferry sank in the Red Sea during bad weather, killing more than 1,000 passengers.

In 2009, Eric Holder became the first black U.S. attorney general as he was sworn in by Vice President Joe Biden.

In 2020, in closing arguments at President Donald Trump's first impeachment trial, Democratic prosecutors urged senators to stop a "runaway presidency" and recognize Trump's actions in Ukraine as part of a pattern of behavior that would allow him to "cheat" in the 2020 election; Trump's defenders accused Democrats of trying to undo the 2016 election and said voters should decide Trump's fate.

Ten years ago: The breast cancer charity Susan G. Komen for the Cure abandoned plans to eliminate its funding for Planned Parenthood, following a three-day furor that resounded across the Internet, in Congress and among Komen affiliates. Federal prosecutors dropped their investigation of Lance Armstrong, ending a nearly two-year effort aimed at determining whether the seven-time Tour de France winner and his teammates had participated in a doping program. (In January 2013, Armstrong publicly admitted taking performance-enhancing drugs.) Actor-director Ben Gazzara, 81, died in New York.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump launched his long-promised attack on banking rules that were rushed into law after the nation's economic crisis, signing new orders after meeting with business and investment chiefs and pledging further action to free big banks from restrictions.

One year ago: A white Columbus, Ohio, police officer, Adam Coy, was charged with murder in the December 2020 shooting death of a Black man, Andre Hill. (Coy has pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial.) Country star Morgan Wallen was suspended from his label and his music was pulled by radio stations and streaming services after a video surfaced showed him shouting a racial slur. Tennis Hall of Famer Tony Trabert, a five-time Grand Slam singles champion, died at his Florida home at the age of 90.

Today's Birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Fran Tarkenton is 82. Actor Bridget Hanley is 81. Actor Blythe Danner is 79. Football Hall of Famer Bob Griese is 77. Singer-guitarist Dave Davies (The Kinks) is 75. Singer Melanie is 75. Actor Morgan Fairchild is 72. Actor Pamela Franklin is 72. Actor Nathan Lane is 66. Rock musician Lee Ranaldo (Sonic Youth) is 66. Actor Thomas Calabro is 63. Rock musician/author Lol Tolhurst (The Cure) is 63. Actor-director Keith Gordon is 61. Actor Michele Greene is 60. Country singer Matraca (muh-TRAY'-suh) Berg is 58. Actor Maura Tierney is 57. Actor Warwick Davis is 52. Actor Elisa Donovan is 51. Reggaeton singer Daddy Yankee is 46. Actor Isla (EYE'-luh) Fisher is 46. Human rights activist Amal Clooney is 44. Singer-songwriter Jessica Harp is 40. Actor Matthew Moy is 38. Rapper Sean Kingston is 32. Actor Brandon Micheal Hall is 29.