

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 1 of 81

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Groton Area COVID-19 Report](#)
- [2- Gun Show Ad](#)
- [3- Basketball teams have clean sweep over Faulkton](#)
- [4- Weather Pages](#)
- [8- Daily Devotional](#)
- [9- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [10- Subscription Form](#)
- [11- News from the Associated Press](#)

UpComing Events

The Groton Transit will be taking the transit bus to the girls basketball game in Madison on Saturday, Feb. 5. Anyone needing a ride should call the transit at 605-397-8661.

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



“At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.”

-JEAN HOUSTON

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 Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 2 of 81

Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

No change

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated February 2, 2022; 11:13 AM

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
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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 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.**

Larson has boys first double-double in win over Faulkton

Tate Larson had his first double-double of the season, in fact, it's the team's first double-double for the season as he had 12 points and 11 rebounds, and one assist as the boys defeated Faulkton Area, 57-38.

Groton Area jumped out to a 5-0 lead and took a 15-12 lead after the first quarter. The Tigers rallied late in the second quarter culminated with a near mid court three-pointer at the buzzer by Kaden Kurtz as Groton Area took a 33-24 lead at half time. The Tigers continued forward as Lane Tietz had seven points and Jacob Zak six in the third quarter as Groton Area took a 50-31 lead going into the fourth quarter.

Lane Tietz had 12 points, three assists and two steals. Kaden Kurtz had 12 points, one assist and four steals. Jacob Zak had 11 points, six rebounds, one assist, two steals and one block. Cole Simon had four points and two assists. Jayden Zak had three points, three rebounds, two assists and one steal. Wyatt Hearnen had three points and two rebounds. Logan Ringgenberg and Holden Sippel each had one rebound.

Groton Area made 17 of 37 field goals, four of 18 three-pointers, 11 of 14 free throws, had 24 rebounds, 11 turnovers, 10 assists, 10 steals, 13 fouls and one blocked shot.

Hunter Niederbaumer led Faulkton Area with 12 points followed by Bennett Cassens with nine, Ryan Beckler six, Roman DiMaria had four, Simon Bowar three and Layne Cotton two.

Faulkton Area made 16 of 48 field goals for 33 percent, three of seven free throws, had 17 turnovers and 11 team fouls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 40-22. Colby Dunker had 14 points, Cole Simon eight, Teylor Diegel seven, Logan Ringgenberg five, Braxton Imrie and Tyson Parrow each had three and Turner Thompson and Holden Sippel each had two.

Traphagen had double-double in girls win over Faulkton

Defense was the name of the game for the Lady Tigers as Groton Area held Isabel Aesoph with no field goals and Groton Area posted a 49-18 win. Faulkton held a 5-4 lead after the first quarter, but Groton Area took command in the second quarter and led, 22-8, at half time and 37-18 at the end of the third quarter.

Gracie Traphagen had a double-double with 17 points, 13 rebounds, two assists and one block shot. Alyssa Locke had nine points, four rebounds, one assist and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had seven points, six rebounds and one assist. Kennedy Hansen had five points, one rebound and one assist. Jerica Locke had four points, two assists and two steals. Alyssa Thaler had three points, one rebound, two assists and two steals. Sydney Leicht had two points, three rebounds, one assist, three steals and one block shot. Aspen Johnson had two points, two rebounds and two steals. Jayden Penning had three rebounds and three steals. Brooklyn Hansen had one rebound.

Groton Area made 12 of 29 field goals for 41 percent, five of 22 three-pointers for 23 percent, 10 of 18 free throws for 56 percent, had 34 rebounds, 11 turnovers, 10 assists, 12 steals, 14 fouls and two blocked shots.

Teralyn Cramer and Shayna Heitmann led Faulkton Area with six points each while Isabel Aesoph, Gabby Last and Ashly Senn each had two points.

Faulkton made six of 33 field goals for 18 percent, five of 11 free throws, had 22 turnovers and 18 team fouls.

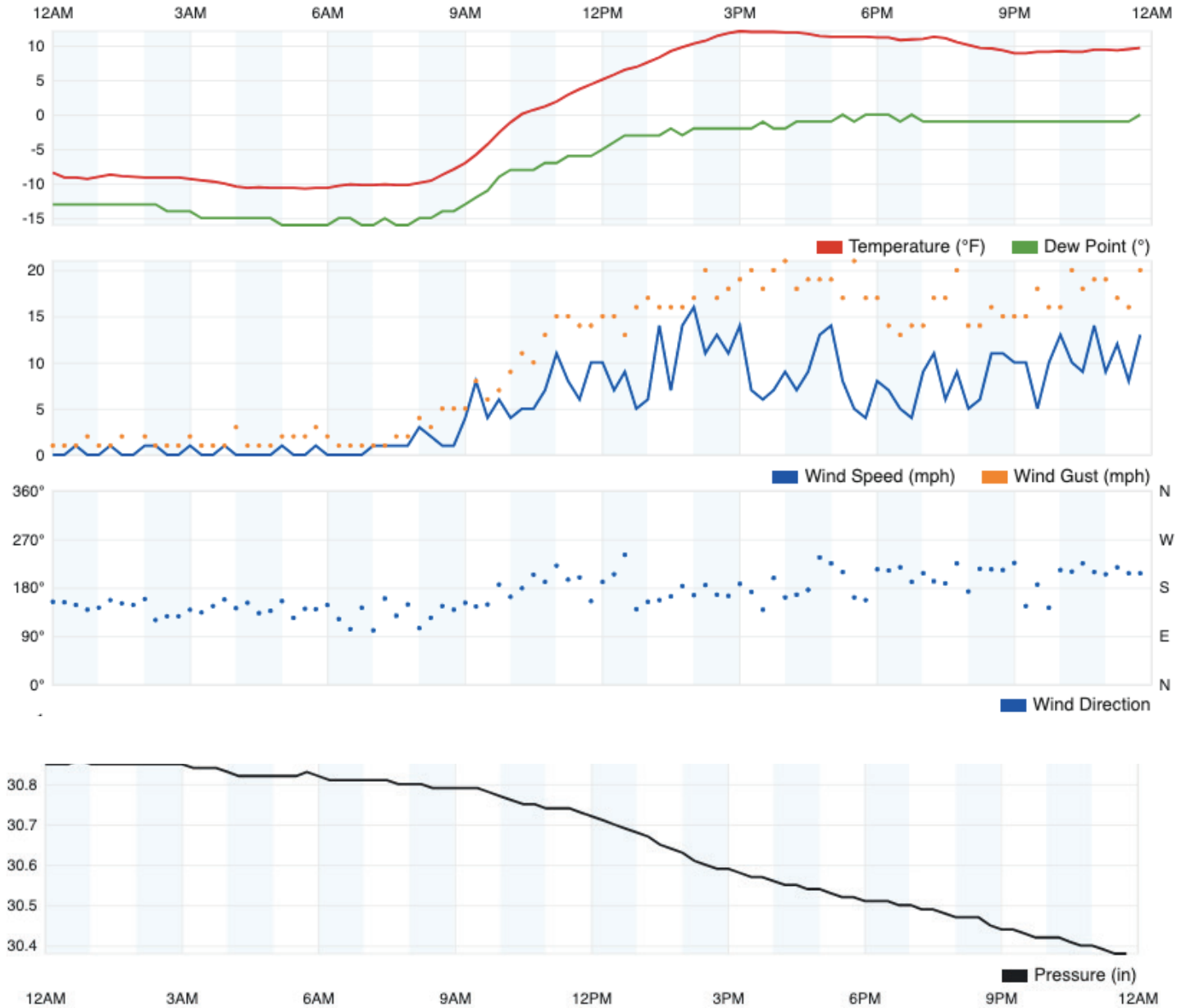
Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 24-16. Kennedy Hansen had eight points while Jerica Locke had six, Faith Traphagen four and Brooklyn Hansen, Elizabeth Flihs and Jaedyn Penning each had two points.

All games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM.

Groton Daily Independent

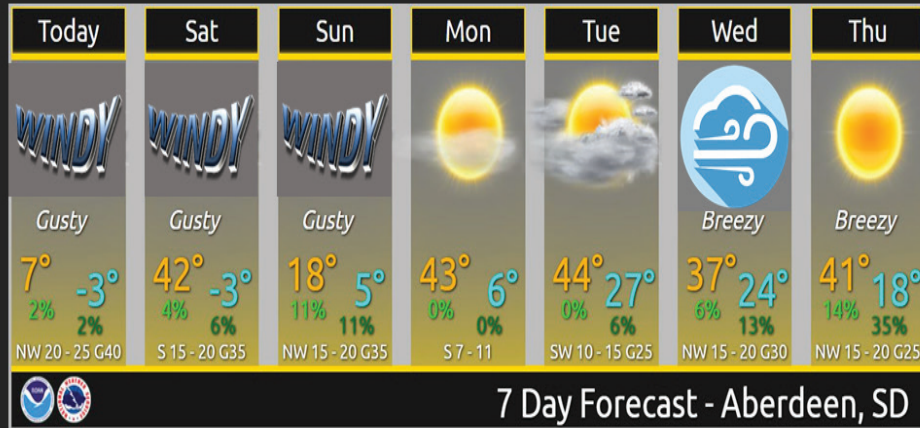
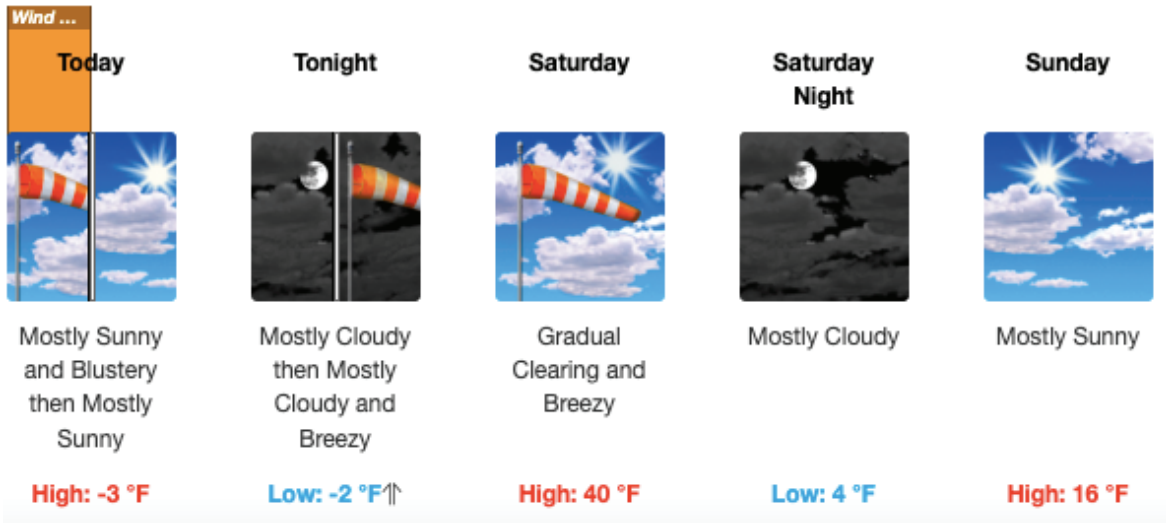
Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 4 of 81

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

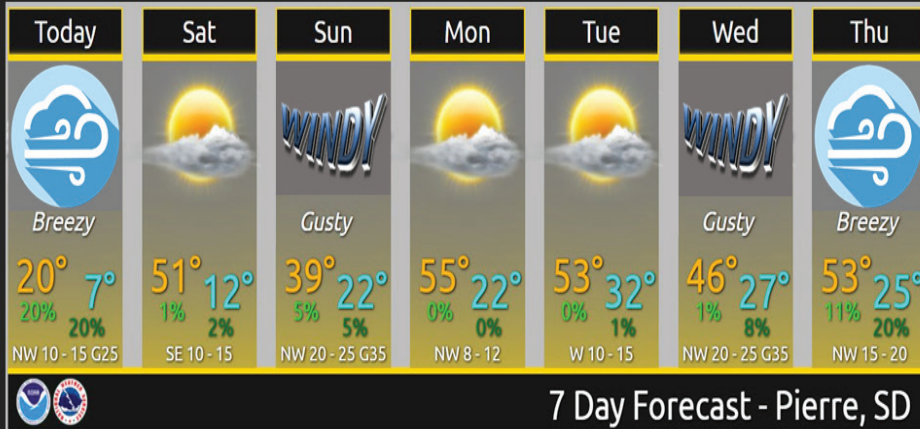


Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 5 of 81



7 Day Forecast - Aberdeen, SD



7 Day Forecast - Pierre, SD



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 2/4/2022 5:39 AM Central

Much of the seven day forecast is dry. Much of central and south central South Dakota will warm up after today, and probably stay warm through the middle of next week. However, there is a bit more temperature volatility across north central and northeast South Dakota into western Minnesota.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 6 of 81

Today in Weather History

February 4, 1984: A fast-moving blizzard pounded the northeast and east-central with light snow and raging winds. Snow amounts were less than 2 inches region-wide. As the storm progressed, temperatures dropped thirty degrees in three hours as winds gusted to 70 mph. Fierce winds struck quickly, plummeting visibilities to zero, and made travel difficult in a matter of minutes. No travel was advised across much of the area. Hundreds of travelers became stranded in the white-out, and the highway crews were pulled off the road to wait for decreasing winds. There were also some spotty power outages.

1842: A dreadful tornado passed over Mayfield, Kirkland, and other Cuyahoga and Lake Counties in Ohio. According to the Cleveland Herald, no less than 30 houses, barns, and buildings were entirely demolished or very much shattered. A "report from Kirtland says that one man and one child are dead."

1924: In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 20.3 inches of snow fell in 24 hours. This ranks as the most snowfall in 24 hours since 1884. This storm caused over \$1 million in damage. Streetcar and train service crippled. Snowdrifts of 8 to 10 feet high were common, along with much ice on trees and wires. Schools were closed, and several plate glass windows were broken.

1995: A massive nor'easter pounded areas from the southern Mid-Atlantic to northern New England. It would be the only significant storm in the 94-95 winter season. Over 20 inches of snow buried parts of upstate New York. Wind chills dropped as cold as 40 degrees below zero. Behind the storm, arctic air crossing the relatively warm waters of the Great Lakes produced intense lake effect squalls for nearly two weeks from the 4th through the 14th. Snowfall totals for the storm ranged from near two to seven feet. During the storm east of Lake Ontario, snow was falling at the incredible rate of five inches an hour! The heavy snow combined with strong winds produced whiteouts and hazardous driving. Actual storm totals downwind of Lake Erie included: Erie County: West Seneca 39 inches, Orchard Park 36 inches, Cheektowaga 36 inches, Colden 32 inches, and Buffalo Airport 31 inches; Genesee County: Corfu 38 inches; Chautauqua County: Sinclairville 27 inches and Jamestown 15 inches. Downwind of Lake Ontario, storm totals included: Oswego County: Palermo 85 inches, Fulton 60 inches, and Oswego 46 inches; Lewis County: Montague 66 inches, Highmarket 48 inches, and Lowville 36 inches; Cayuga County: Fairhaven 36 inches, Wayne County: Wolcott 22 inches; and Jefferson County: Adams 47 inches.

2011: A winter storm settled four to six inches of snow over northern Texas, including Dallas, just days before the Super Bowl between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the CBS News in Dallas/Fort Worth.

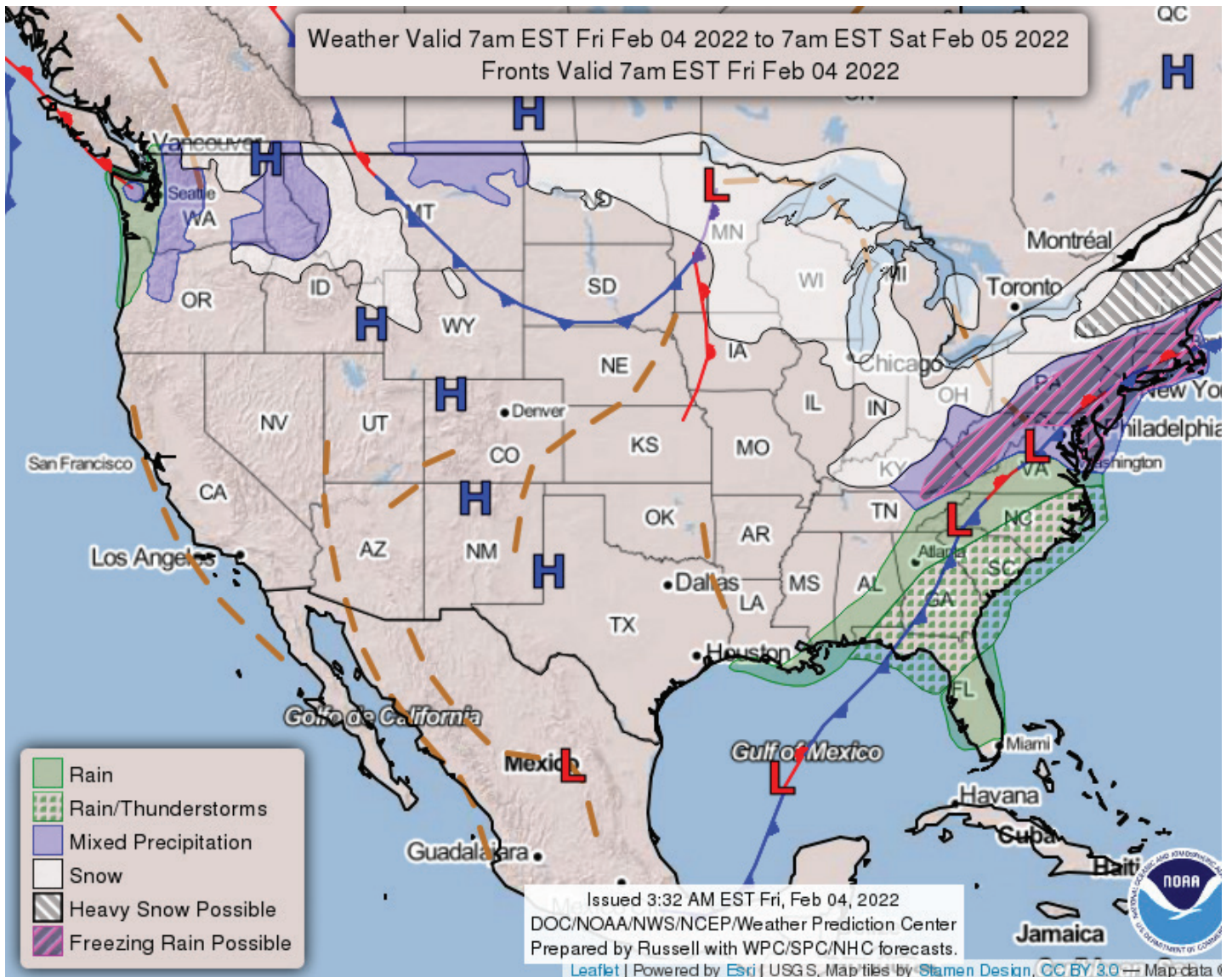
Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 7 of 81

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 12 °F at 3:06 PM
Low Temp: -11 °F at 5:07 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 4:16 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 55 in 2005
Record Low: -36 in 1893
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 3°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.08
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.63
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:45:07 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:46:12 AM





Constant Compliance

"I give up!" he shouted as loudly as he could.

Turning from my computer to the door of my office, I saw a student who had been struggling to live a godly life. He was faithful in reading and studying his Bible, had a solid prayer life, and did well in his classes. I was puzzled by his comment.

"What are you giving up?" I asked.

"Well, I was reading Psalm 119:3 and I just gave up. That verse is beyond the reach of everyone. I can't imagine who he is referring to – 'They do no wrong but follow His ways.' I do my best to follow His way but I still do wrong from time to time. I must not be a Christian."

"Why don't you sit where I am sitting and type this paragraph from this commentary? I need it for a class I'm teaching," I asked.

He sat and began to type the long paragraph. It was not long before he finished, and we went to the "spell checker" to see how well he had done.

"Oops – there's a mistake," I said. "Oh my – there's another. I wonder," I asked, "if you made two mistakes does that mean you do not know how to spell?"

"Of course not," came the reply. "I know how to spell. I just made two small mistakes that I didn't mean to make. But, that doesn't mean I can't spell."

"Well," I said, "it's also possible for one who is a Christian to commit an incidental sin from time to time and still remain a Christian. Besides, our God will forgive."

Prayer: Our Father, help us to keep focused on You and to follow Your ways. But if we fail, please forgive us. Then, would You help us to forgive ourselves? In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: They do no wrong but follow His ways. Psalm 119:3

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 9 of 81

2022 Community Events

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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 10 of 81

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 11 of 81

News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 55, Northwestern 33

Aberdeen Roncalli 53, Clark/Willow Lake 25

Bon Homme 56, Avon 41

Canton 54, Menno 42

Centerville 67, Flandreau Indian 9

Crow Creek 60, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 41

Dakota Valley 58, Elk Point-Jefferson 38

Deuel 44, Tiospa Zina Tribal 31

Groton Area 49, Faulkton 18

Hamlin 60, Redfield 29

Highmore-Harrold 58, Lyman 53

Hill City 54, Newell 24

Howard 68, Mitchell Christian 26

James Valley Christian 54, Iroquois/Doland 28

Jones County 52, New Underwood 35

Lennox 40, Baltic 28

McCook Central/Montrose 59, Garretson 58, OT

Miller 46, Ipswich 19

Mitchell 51, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 48

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 51, Hanson 38

Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 46, Freeman Academy/Marion 32

Philip 53, Lead-Deadwood 18

Pierre 57, Yankton 27

Pine Ridge 95, Takini 28

Platte-Geddes 37, Scotland 35

Sioux Falls Lincoln 60, Brookings 45

Sisseton 78, Webster 53

Sturgis Brown 50, Douglas 46

Tri-Valley 63, Dell Rapids 46

Wagner 74, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 46

Warner 52, Leola/Frederick 24

Wessington Springs 57, Lower Brule 52

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 48, Northwestern 44

Burke 78, Marty Indian 54

Castlewood 52, Wolsey-Wessington 42

Centerville 70, Flandreau Indian 26

Chamberlain 53, Stanley County 47

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 81, Crow Creek 64

Clark/Willow Lake 67, Aberdeen Roncalli 36

Custer 54, Hot Springs 48

Dakota Valley 68, Elk Point-Jefferson 54

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 12 of 81

DeSmet 65, Elkton-Lake Benton 45
Dell Rapids 71, Tri-Valley 63
Dell Rapids St. Mary 62, Lake Preston 31
Estelline/Hendricks 68, Colman-Egan 54
Ethan 53, Scotland 26
Faith 75, Dupree 39
Freeman Academy/Marion 76, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 49
Great Plains Lutheran 54, Wilmot 47
Groton Area 57, Faulkton 38
Harding County 82, Tiospaye Topa 29
Hill City 66, Newell 18
Howard 70, Mitchell Christian 46
Ipswich 61, Miller 45
James Valley Christian 86, Iroquois/Doland 64
Lemmon 73, McIntosh 24
Lower Brule 64, Wessington Springs 42
Madison 61, Beresford 31
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 53, Hanson 50
Pine Ridge 89, Takini 30
Platte-Geddes 68, Kimball/White Lake 47
Sioux Valley 55, Flandreau 47
Tea Area 68, West Central 62
Timber Lake 72, Bison 19
Wakpala 61, North Central Co-Op 51
Warner 55, Leola/Frederick 42
Waubay/Summit 60, Florence/Henry 47
White River 81, Wall 49

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

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem signs transgender athlete ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Thursday signed a bill that will ban transgender girls and college-age women from playing in school sports leagues that match their gender identity, making South Dakota the 10th state to enact such a law.

Noem is the first governor to sign such a ban this year.

The bill is set to take effect July 1 but faces potential legal challenges. Federal judges have halted enforcement of such laws in Idaho and West Virginia, while the Justice Department has challenged bans in other states as violations of federal law.

The Republican governor touted the ban at a bill signing ceremony in the Capitol, telling reporters: "We will ensure that we have fairness and a level playing field for female athletes here in the state of South Dakota, at the K-12 level and at the university level."

Opponents have decried the bill as bullying and say it sends a message that transgender people are not welcome in the state.

"At a time when young people are facing an unprecedented need for support, it is devastating to see politicians instead invent new ways to exclude them," said Sam Ames, the director of advocacy at The Trevor Project, which advocates for transgender youth.

Noem lobbied forcefully for the bill this year after shying away from signing a similar ban last year. She issued a "style and form veto" that led to its demise and argued that it contained flawed language that

put the state at risk of litigation and retribution from the NCAA.

But Noem, who has positioned herself for a 2024 run for the White House, seized on the momentum this year of a cause taking hold among Republicans

The NCAA did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the bill's passage or whether it would take any action as a result. The college athletics organization last month adopted a sport-by-sport approach for transgender athletes, allowing each sport's national governing body to determine its policy on transgender participation.

South Dakota AG insists no wrongdoing during crash probe

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg on Thursday insisted he had done nothing wrong in using his position overseeing the state's Division of Criminal Investigation to make inquiries about what out-of-state criminal investigators could find on his phone during the investigation of his 2020 fatal car crash.

The Republican attorney general is facing a House impeachment probe as lawmakers investigate his conduct surrounding the September 2020 crash in which he struck and killed a man walking near a rural highway.

North Dakota criminal investigators last month told lawmakers that Ravensborg, while under investigation, had made inquiries with staff at the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation about the possibility of taking a polygraph test as well as what could be uncovered in a forensic exam of his phones.

Ravnsborg spoke to reporters for the first time Thursday since lawmakers began their review of the investigation and said his inquiries with the Division of Criminal Investigation, which had been recused from investigating the crash, were an appropriate use of his position.

"I was just asking, inquiring factual information about how processes work and I did so on other occasions all the time," he told The Associated Press.

Ravnsborg initially reported the crash as a collision with an animal and has maintained he did not realize he killed the man, 55-year-old Joseph Boever, until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered his body.

But the North Dakota investigators didn't believe him, they told House lawmakers in January. The investigators testified that Ravensborg was untruthful about whether he was scrolling through his cellphone minutes before the crash. They also explained they decided not to give Ravensborg a polygraph test because they believed he was not a good candidate for it.

"I was willing to take a lie detector test. I was willing to go to North Dakota," Ravensborg said when asked to respond to the investigators' testimony. "I took their testimony to basically say that they didn't want me to because they knew I would tell the truth. So I think that speaks volumes."

The attorney general has adamantly resisted efforts from his fellow Republican, Gov. Kristi Noem, to remove him from office. Noem would get to name his replacement if he is impeached or resigns.

Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who has called for impeachment charges, said he would leave it up to the House committee to weigh Ravensborg's actions, but added, "Between the distracted driving, the misrepresentations to the authorities and this potential special treatment, I know they'll have plenty to consider."

Ravnsborg is also positioning for a reelection bid. He acknowledged that he had been making calls to the state Republican party's delegates, who in June will decide the party's nominee for attorney general, though he cast it as part of his regular order of business. Ravensborg would face Republican Marty Jackley, his predecessor, at the state convention.

Ravnsborg declined to specifically comment on whether he is running for reelection and what he believed happened during the crash.

He said he would make a statement "when the time is right, about what I believed happened with the accident."

South Dakota ethics board wants response from Noem by April

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota government accountability board on Thursday set an April deadline for Gov. Kristi Noem to respond to a pair of ethics complaints from the state's attorney general, signaling it believes the complaints might have merit.

Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, who like Noem is a Republican, asked the board to consider two issues. One is whether Noem's use of state airplanes broke the law, and the other is whether she improperly interfered with a state agency that was evaluating her daughter's application for a real estate appraiser license.

Noem has insisted she has done nothing wrong.

After meeting for roughly 10 minutes behind closed doors, the Government Accountability Board, which is made up of retired judges, decided to give Noem until April 15 — after the legislative session ends — to respond to the complaints. In December, it requested a response on one of the complaints, but the governor's office asked for more time.

"This is probably not the best time of the year," said retired judge Gene Kean, referring to the governor's busy work schedule.

Former state Supreme Court Chief Justice David Gilbertson, who was appointed to the board by Noem, has recused himself from considering the complaints.

The board keeps the details of the complaints secret unless it decides they warrant a public hearing. In the past, it has dismissed complaints without requiring the targeted officials to respond to them.

Ravnsborg declined to discuss the specifics of the complaints Thursday, but he explained that the board's process calls for a response from the subject of a complaint before the board decides whether to "dismiss it, move forward with it or seek an investigation."

If the board finds ethics violations, it can take a wide range of actions, from requesting a criminal investigation to issuing a private reprimand or requiring community service. But in the five years since it was created, the board has never considered taking action against a governor.

"The board has very broad discretion and we're all learning a little bit within the bounds of the statute because they have not had a lot of complaints," Ravnsborg said. "It's a fairly new board."

Although Ravnsborg and Noem are both Republicans, they are not allies. The governor has pushed to remove Ravnsborg from office after he struck and killed a pedestrian with his car in 2020.

Noem has faced scrutiny over her involvement in the state's Appraiser Certification Program since The Associated Press reported that Noem called a meeting with her daughter, the labor secretary and the then-director of the certification program, Sherry Bren, just days after the Department of Labor and Regulation moved to deny her daughter's appraiser license application in 2020.

Bren in December told a legislative committee looking into the episode that she felt intimidated at the meeting, and that afterward, Noem's daughter, Cassidy Peters, received an unprecedented extra opportunity to show her appraiser work could meet federal requirements.

Noem, who is running for reelection and has positioned herself for a 2024 White House bid, has repeatedly denied wrongdoing and said she was simply trying to solve a shortage of appraisers in the state.

Noem has also dismissed scrutiny of her state airplane use as a political attack after the news website Raw Story found that used state-owned planes to fly to 2019 events hosted by political organizations such as the National Rifle Association, Turning Point USA and the Republican Jewish Coalition. Noem has cast her trips as part of her work as "an ambassador" for the state.

South Dakota officials are not allowed to use the planes for anything other than state business, and Democratic state Sen. Reynold Nesiba asked the attorney general to investigate.

Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, said after the board announced its decision that her office "is focused on the work of the legislative session."

Corps: Missouri River power output below average in 2021

By JAMES MacPHERSON Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Electric power generation from the Missouri River's six upstream dams fell below average in 2021, forcing the federal agency that sells the power to buy electricity on the open market to fulfill contracts — a cost that may ultimately be passed on to ratepayers in a half-dozen states.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages dams and reservoirs along the 2,341-mile river. Mike Swenson, a Corps engineer in Omaha, Nebraska, said Thursday that energy production from the dams in the Dakotas, Montana and Nebraska was below average because water was kept in reservoirs to make up for drought conditions.

Energy production totaled 8.6 billion kilowatts of electricity in 2021, down from 10.1 billion kilowatts in 2020. A billion kilowatt-hours of power is enough to supply about 86,000 homes for a year.

The dams have generated an average of about 9.4 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity since 1967, including a high of 14.6 billion kilowatts in 1997. During the driest years this century, power plant output dwindled below 5 billion kilowatt-hours in 2007 and 2008, the Corps said.

The Western Area Power Administration sells power from 57 hydropower plants around the nation. The Missouri River dams are its second-largest producer of energy, which is sold to 350 customers that include rural electric cooperatives, municipal utilities, Native American tribes and others in the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska. The shortfall in electricity production from hydropower meant the agency had to get energy from other, more expensive sources, said spokeswoman Lisa Meiman.

The agency bought \$18 million of electricity on the open market in fiscal 2021 that ended Sept. 30, data show.

The cost to individual ratepayers likely would be minimal, Meiman said.

Purchasing power to fulfill contracts is not unusual. The Western Area Power Administration has spent \$1.5 billion since 2000 to fulfill contracts due to shallow river levels caused by drought, Meiman said.

Oahe Dam near Pierre, South Dakota, which holds Lake Oahe, and Garrison Dam, which creates Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota, are typically the biggest power producers in the Missouri River system.

Swenson said Oahe Dam generated 2.4 billion kilowatt-hours last year, down from the long-term average of 2.7 kilowatt-hours. Garrison Dam generated 2 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity last year, down from long-term average of 2.3 billion kilowatt-hours, he said.

The Corps is charged with finding a balance between upstream states, which want water held in reservoirs to support fish reproduction and recreation, and downstream states, which want more water released from the dams, mainly to support barge traffic.

Swenson said 2021 "started off close to normal" for Missouri River levels, but the Corps began holding back water in July because of dry weather.

The water storage level of the six upstream reservoirs is about 48 million acre-feet at present, or about 15% below the ideal level, Swenson said. An acre-foot is the amount of water covering one acre, a foot deep.

Based on runoff estimates for 2022, the Corps has forecast 7.4 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity this year, or about 15% below 2021.

Cause of explosion, fire investigated at Miller High School

MILLER, S.D. (AP) — Classes are canceled for the rest of the week at Miller High School where an explosion and fire caused heavy damage to the agriculture workshop.

All students and staff evacuated to nearby churches Wednesday morning. Authorities say six students and a staff member were in the shop at the time, but were not hurt.

"Something ignited, or something exploded in the ag shop," Charlene Crosswait, Miller School District Superintendent, said. "Just in one of the corners. They're not sure why or what really happened."

Officials said there is smoke damage throughout the entire school.

"First of all, as long as the kids are safe and the teachers are safe that's the main thing," Crosswait

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 16 of 81

said. "We're going to put a plan together so that we know we'll have a good place for kids to come back and it'll be safe. And at this point, we really don't know so we're waiting for the fire marshal to make a decision and then we'll go from there."

Officials said the evacuation went smoothly, KELO-TV reported.

"The high school, the grade school, they rehearse this stuff on a regular basis on evacuations no matter what the incident might be," Arlen Gortmaker, Hand County Emergency Management Director, said. "They have their policies and their meeting points and from what we can tell as emergency responders that went off without a hitch. Everything was right on cue."

An investigation into what caused the explosion and fire continues.

Aid to volcano-hit Tonga brings 1st COVID outbreak, lockdown

By DAVID RISING and NICK PERRY Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — For more than two years, the isolation of the Pacific archipelago nation of Tonga helped keep COVID-19 at bay.

But last month's volcanic eruption and tsunami brought outside deliveries of desperately needed fresh water and medicine — and the virus.

Now the country is in an open-ended lockdown, which residents hope will help contain the small outbreak and will not last too long.

"We have pretty limited resources, and our hospitals are pretty small," Tongan business owner Paula Taumoepeau said Friday. "But I'm not sure any health system can cope. We are lucky we've had two years to get our vax rate pretty high, and we had a pretty immediate lockdown."

Tonga is only one of several Pacific countries to experience their first outbreaks over the past month. All have limited health care resources, and there is concern that the remoteness that once protected them may now make helping them difficult.

"Clearly when you've got countries that have already got a very stretched, and fragile health system, when you have an emergency or a disaster and then you have the potential introduction of the virus, that's going to make an already serious situation immeasurably worse," said John Fleming, the Asia-Pacific head of health for the Red Cross.

Tonga was coated with ash following the Jan. 15 eruption of the massive undersea Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano, then hit with a tsunami that followed.

Only three people have been confirmed killed, but several small settlements in outlying islands were wiped off the map and the volcanic ash tainted much of the drinking water.

The nation of 105,000 had reported only one case of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic — a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints missionary returning to the island from Africa via New Zealand who tested positive in October — and authorities debated whether to let international aid in.

They decided they had to, but despite strict precautions unloading ships and planes from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Britain and China, two Tongan men who worked at the capital's Queen Salote Wharf handling shipments tested positive on Tuesday.

"Tonga is just out of luck this year," said Samieula Fonua, the chairman of Tonga Cable Ltd., the state-owned company that owns the sole fiber-optic cable connecting the nation to the rest of the world. "We desperately need some good news."

The two were moved into isolation, but in tests of 36 possible contacts, one's wife and two children also tested positive, while the others tested negative, the local Matangi Tonga news site reported.

It was not clear how many people might have come into contact with the dockworkers, but the government released a list of locations where the virus could have spread, including a church, several shops, a bank and a kindergarten.

Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni imposed an open-ended lockdown starting 6 p.m. on Wednesday. It could be particular arduous for Tongans because most have been without any internet connections since the volcanic eruption severed the fiber optic cable to the country.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 17 of 81

One of the infected dock workers has since tested negative, but remains in quarantine, and 389 others have been cleared of COVID-19, Sovaleni told reporters in Tonga. But he said Friday that a primary contact to one of the people infected had tested positive, and ordered the lockdown extended another 48 hours.

The government has been primarily communicating with residents by radio addresses, and Fonua said his crews estimate they may have to replace an 87-kilometer (54 mile) section of undersea cable. They were hoping to restore service by next week.

It is not yet known what variant of the virus has reached Tonga, nor who brought it in. Officials have stressed that the aid deliveries were tightly controlled, and that it is not yet proven the virus came in that way.

Sailors aboard the Australian aid ship HMAS Adelaide reported nearly two dozen infections after an outbreak on board, but authorities said it had been unloaded at a different wharf. Crew members aboard aid flights from Japan and Australia also reported infections.

"The people are OK with the lockdown because they understand the reason why, so the corona doesn't spread over our little country," Tulutulu Kalaniuvalu, a 53-year-old former police official who runs a business, told The Associated Press. He added that most Tongans depend on crops they grow on plantations and hope the lockdown is short-lived.

Experience from elsewhere, especially with the prevalence of the rapidly spreading omicron variant, suggests that Tonga faces an uphill battle in trying to contain the outbreak, Indonesian epidemiologist Dicky Budiman told the AP.

Some 61% of Tongans are fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data, but because the country has not yet seen any infections, there's no natural immunity and it is not clear whether the shots were given long enough ago that they may now be less effective, Budiman said.

He recommended that the government immediately start offering booster shots and open vaccinations to younger children.

"If we race with this virus we will not win," he said in an interview from Australia. "So we have to move forward by protecting the most vulnerable."

The October case of the missionary with COVID-19 prompted a wave of vaccinations, and 1,000 people already showed up for a first dose after the current outbreak was detected, Kalaniuvalu said.

Solomon Islands reported its first community outbreak on Jan. 19. With only 11% of its population fully vaccinated, the virus has been spreading rapidly with the Red Cross reporting that less than two weeks later, there are now more than 780 recorded cases and five COVID-19 related deaths.

Elsewhere, Fiji — still reeling from damage caused by Cyclone Cody in early January — has been battling an ongoing spike in cases, fueled by omicron, and cases have been reported for the first time in Kiribati, Samoa and Palau.

Palau has nearly its entire population fully vaccinated, while Fiji has 68% and Samoa 62%, but Kiribati is only at 33%.

The key to ensuring hospitals aren't overwhelmed is to make sure more people get shots, Budiman said.

"These countries that choose to have this COVID-free strategy, they are very vulnerable," he said.

Kalanieuvalu said some people have questioned the decision to let the ships carrying aid in to Tonga, but most feel it was necessary to help through the aftermath of the volcano and tsunami, and that the islanders now just had to do their best to minimize the impact of the outbreak.

"To be honest with you, we were one of the luckiest countries in the world for almost three years, now it's finally here in Tonga," he said.

"We, the people of Tonga, knew sooner or later the coronavirus would come to Tonga because the corona is here to stay."

In opening of Winter Olympics, chances at politicking abound

ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — For all the talk of a diplomatic boycott, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has managed to at-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 18 of 81

tract a globe-spanning roster of presidents, royals and other dignitaries to the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics.

The fact that most of them represent countries that are unlikely to win any medals — if they're even competing at all — doesn't seem to matter.

What does, from Beijing's perspective, is presenting an image that China has emerged as a global power whose authoritarian style of government can go head-to-head with a world dominated by the U.S. and its fellow democracies.

"There is a strong authoritarian tilt among the list of leaders attending," said Andrew Yeo, who heads the Asian Studies department at The Catholic University of America. "It's a much different list of global leaders when compared with the attendees of Biden's Summit for Democracy last December."

The guest list for Friday includes Russia's Vladimir Putin, whose tens of thousands of troops are poised for a possible invasion of Ukraine. Also here: the heads of a good chunk of the rest of the former Soviet Union and the unelected rulers of several energy-rich Gulf Arab states. That leaves plenty of room for diplomatic intrigue and backroom deal-making for those making the trip.

One side effect of the pandemic has been to make face time with Xi more valuable than ever — even if it must be done behind a mask. The Chinese leader hasn't been abroad in more than two years. His country has sharply limited international travel while pursuing a zero-tolerance policy in fighting the virus.

So anyone who wants to meet Xi, China's most powerful leader in decades, or other top officials like Premier Li Keqiang in person has to make the trip — no matter how powerful they are at home. And so they are coming, from Argentina and Egypt, from Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan.

Just as notable is who won't be there. The United States and several other like-minded democracies are not sending political delegations as part of stated or unstated diplomatic boycotts of the games.

India became the latest nation to join the boycott Thursday after it emerged that a Chinese military commander involved in deadly clashes with Indian forces along their shared border in 2020 was reportedly chosen to be a torchbearer ahead of the Games.

While the decisions to keep officials away have dented the "propaganda coup" that Xi might have hoped for, the number of leaders that China has managed to attract is nevertheless testament to the country's growing economic clout, according to Anthony J. Saich, a China expert at Harvard University's Kennedy School.

"They do not want to be seen as slighting China," he said. The mood this year, he added, has a very different feel from the 2008 Beijing Olympics, "when there was international and domestic enthusiasm for the games being held in China."

That means that the countries most likely to take home medals, aside from Winter Olympics powerhouse Russia, aren't among those gracing the Bird's Nest skyboxes.

At least eight of the roughly 20 countries sending high-level officials have no athletes competing. That includes steamy Cambodia, desert-covered Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which at least boasts an indoor ski slope in Dubai. Several others are fielding only a single competitor, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, both of whom have one male skier participating.

No leader aside from Xi himself is being as closely watched as Putin, a winter sports enthusiast who can use his visit to project a visage of business-as-usual statesman even as the U.S. and its allies fear he is preparing for war. His presence is also a reminder that Russia very much is at the Olympic Games even if the country's athletes can't compete under their own flag.

"This is more than a 'sideline' meeting," Yeo said. "It involves the leaders of two great powers who are looking to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations at a time when both countries feel emboldened to challenge the United States."

The Russian president met with Xi on Friday for their first in-person meeting since 2019. In his opening remarks, Putin said relations between the two nations are progressing in "a spirit of friendship and strategic partnership."

"They have indeed become unprecedented. It's an example of dignified relations that support mutual development," Putin said.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 19 of 81

The two countries issued a joint statement reflecting their shared views on global security and planned to ink more than dozen trade, energy and other agreements. Yuri Ushakov, Putin's foreign affairs adviser, noted that China supports Russia's demands for security guarantees that have underpinned the standoff over Ukraine.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call last week that Moscow's security concerns need to be taken seriously and addressed, a statement that marked a notable policy shift for Beijing.

Putin will have plenty of other leaders to talk to should he so choose. They include the heads of former Soviet states in Central Asia that Moscow sees, like Ukraine, as a natural part of its sphere of influence.

The region is also crucial for China's ambitious Belt and Road trade initiative, and trade has surged in recent years. Friday's attendees include the president of the region's largest economy, Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who enjoyed Xi's support when he faced a spike in political unrest last month.

But some of the guests don't fit into neat geopolitical categories. Take the tiny Gulf state of Qatar, for example.

Its powerful emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, is fresh off a meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden on Monday in which his country was designated a major non-NATO ally and hailed as a "good friend and reliable partner."

But as the world's second-biggest exporter of liquefied natural gas, the 2022 World Cup host is also eager to secure more sales of the fuel to China. And it could prove to be a useful backup option for European gas supplies in the event they are cut or curtailed in a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

And then there's Poland, the only European Union nation sending an elected leader to the Games. While he's not the main decision-maker in Polish politics, President Andrzej Duda's presence is noteworthy given the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott and concerns over a crisis in Ukraine, with which it shares a lengthy border.

Duda is scheduled to meet Xi, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach during his visit. His press office said the goal of those talks "is to encourage the interlocutors to play an active role in leading to Russia-Ukraine talks."

The Latest: No detail overlooked at Beijing opening ceremony

BEIJING (AP) — The latest on the Beijing Olympics:

At the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, no detail is overlooked.

Every nation is being led into the stadium by someone carrying a glowing snowflake-shaped placard bearing that country's name. And each of the snowflakes, when put back together, would form a larger snowflake.

The placard bearers' costumes has an ice-and-snow pattern, and their hats have a tiger motif — because this year is the year of the tiger in China.

The parade of athletes at the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics has started.

It's expected to take about an hour. Representatives from 91 nations are taking part, including about 80% of the U.S. delegation of athletes.

As always at an Olympics, Greece is the first nation to enter the stadium. From there, it goes alphabetically — but by the language of the host country.

That's why Greece will be followed by, in order, Turkey, Malta, Madagascar, Malaysia, Ecuador, Eritrea, Jamaica, Belgium and then Japan.

The U.S. is 56th in the order, which would be confusing to those thinking it'll go according to the English alphabet. The U.S. group will be between Bulgaria and American Samoa.

The team of Russian athletes will be the official midpoint of the parade. They're here competing under the Olympic emblem and not the Russian flag, part of the sanctions handed down to that nation's Olympic

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 20 of 81

committee for doping scandals such as the one that overshadowed the 2014 Sochi Games.

Tradition also dictates who the last two teams in the parade are. Italy — the host of the next Winter Games in 2026 — will enter next-to-last, and then China will close the parade with its delegation.

In China, Friday was “Lichun” — which translates to the beginning of spring.

And in this case, the start of the Winter Olympics.

“Beginning of Spring” is the first of the 24 solar terms of the year, and that number — 24 — carried significance in the early moments of the opening ceremony of these Beijing Games. Organizers say it reflects “the Chinese people’s understanding of time,” also noting that these were the 24th Winter Olympics.

The celebration of the lunar terms was punctuated by the first of what will be multiple pyrotechnic displays at the Bird’s Nest — including using fireworks to spell out the word “Spring.”

It’s also a Chinese belief that extreme cold breeds new life. Temperatures were expected to fall into the low 20s as the ceremony goes along; perhaps not extreme cold, but certainly a chilly start to the Beijing Games.

The opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics is set to begin, with Chinese President Xi Jinping and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach now having entered the Bird’s Nest.

The Chinese officially refer to the place as National Stadium — it’s the ‘Bird’s Nest’ because of its design, the web of steel resembling the way branches would be turned into a nest. It becomes the first facility to ever play host to the opening of both a summer and winter games, after it also was where the 2008 Olympics began.

Track and field was contested at the Bird’s Nest then, those games being the ones where Usain Bolt’s reign as the greatest Olympic sprinter began with his world-record times in both the 100- and 200-meter dashes.

Athletes from 91 nations are expected to march in the ceremony, including four from the island of Taiwan — which, for the Olympics and most international sporting events, is referred to as Chinese Taipei.

Nordic combined superstar Eric Frenzel and teammate Terence Weber have tested positive for COVID-19 twice in Beijing, landing them in an isolation hotel.

Frenzel won gold on the normal hill at the 2018 Olympics — as he did at the Sochi Games — and also earned gold in the team competition as well as a silver on the large hill, giving him six Olympic medals in his career.

Frenzel is one medal away from matching the Nordic combined record of seven set by Felix Gottwald of Austria. He is tied for the all-time lead in the sport with three golds, matching Gottwald, Finland’s Samppa Lajunen and Ulrich Wehling of Germany.

Frenzel is No. 5 in World Cup standings, and Weber is seventh. “Both still have the chance to come back!” team spokesman Florian Schwarz wrote in an email Friday night.

Norway’s Jarl Magnus Riiber, ranked No. 2 in the world, also tested positive for COVID-19 and seemed to indicate he was out for the Beijing Games. Riiber posted on Instagram “the (gold) is yours guys.”

The first Nordic combined event at the Beijing Games is Wednesday.

Finland women’s hockey coach Pasi Mustonen is leaving the Beijing Winter Games to return home and attend to a family emergency.

General manager Tuula Puputti tells The Associated Press that assistant coach Juuso Toivola will assume head-coaching duties. The switch comes a day after Finland opened the tournament with a 5-2 loss to the United States.

Finland is scheduled to play Canada on Saturday.

Mustonen took over in 2014 and coached the Finns to a bronze medal at the 2018 Winter Games. The nation then won its first silver medal at the 2019 world championships on home soil following a 2-1 shootout loss to the Americans.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 21 of 81

Russian President Vladimir Putin has arrived in Beijing for the opening of the Olympic Games. He'll also hold talks with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping as the two leaders look to project themselves as a counterweight to the U.S. and its allies.

The Russian leader's visit comes amid growing Chinese support for Moscow in its dispute with Ukraine that threatens to break out into armed conflict.

Putin's presence makes him the highest-profile guest at the event following the decision by the U.S., Britain and others not to send officials in protest over China's human rights abuses and its treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

The discussions mark the first in-person meeting between Putin and Xi since 2019.

The U.S. leads after the opening day of the team figure skating event at the Beijing Games, with winning performances from Nathan Chen and ice dancers Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue helping them edge the heavily favored Russians.

Alexa Knierim and Brandon Fraizer did their part, too. They had a season-best score in their pairs short program, helping the Americans amass 28 points. That leaves them two clear of the Russians and seven ahead of third-place China.

The Chinese were helped by a record score in the pairs short program by Sui Wenjing and Han Cong.

The team event resumes Sunday with the women's short program. The top five nations after that will advance to the round of free skates later Saturday and concluding Monday night.

U.S. women's hockey star Brianna Decker will miss the rest of the Olympics after injuring her left leg in the Americans' tournament-opening victory against Finland.

Decker is expected to remain in Beijing rather than fly back to the U.S. immediately.

The forward was hurt when she was tripped from behind by Ronja Savolainen midway through the first period Thursday night. Decker was unable to put any weight on her left leg. She was taken off the ice on a stretcher.

Decker's injury was the second to a key player on the first day of women's hockey in Beijing. Canadian forward Melodie Daoust was injured after being checked hard into the boards by Switzerland's Sarah Foster.

The third round of training for women's ski jumpers at the Beijing Olympics has been cancelled due to windy conditions.

Wind gusts were measured at 7 meters per second (16 mph.) To make the conditions even more brutal, it was minus 9 degrees Celsius (16 degrees Fahrenheit) on the sunny afternoon. The 40 women in the field had two jumps each, a day after having three rounds of training.

Practice for the men's ski jumpers later in the day started on time.

Defending Olympic champion Maren Lundby of Norway and top-ranked Marita Kramer of Austria will not vie for medals on Saturday, creating a wide-open competition.

Lundby is taking the season off after gaining weight and refusing to stress her body and mind enough to jump in a sport plagued by eating disorders. Kramer tested positive for COVID-19, knocking her out of the Beijing Games.

Germany's Katharina Althaus and Japan's Sara Takanashi are among the contenders to win gold after finishing second and third behind Lundby at the 2018 Olympics.

High winds delayed the start of men's downhill training earlier in the day and about 100 kilometers (60 miles) away.

The U.S. men's hockey team has held its first pre-Olympic practice in Beijing without two top defensemen and a veteran forward because they tested positive for the coronavirus.

Defenseman Jake Sanderson remains in Los Angeles. Defenseman Steven Kampfer and forward Andy

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 22 of 81

Miele are isolating in the Olympic Village in Beijing.

USA Hockey hopes all three players will be available for the tournament, which begins Wednesday. The U.S. opens against host China on Thursday.

Players and coaches arrived just after midnight. Three goaltenders and 23 skaters were on the ice for practice with coach David Quinn and his assistants.

Canada canceled practice for a second consecutive day. No reason was given.

Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue have delivered a season-best performance in rhythm dance at the Beijing Olympics, giving Team USA a second straight win on the opening day of figure skating.

Nathan Chen won the men's short program with a dynamic, high-flying program that featured a pair of quads. Hubbell and Donohue followed up with a near-flawless performance to music from Janet Jackson at Capital Indoor Stadium.

In the team event, 10 points are awarded to first place in each discipline, which means the Americans have a perfect 20 so far. The Russian Olympic Committee is second with 17 after Mark Kondratiuk's third-place finish and a shaky second-place performance by ice dance world champions Victoria Sinitsina and Nikita Katsalapov.

Italy is in third place with 14 points heading into the pairs discipline later Friday.

The second men's downhill ski training session is underway at the Beijing Olympics after a delay due to strong winds.

Overall World Cup leader Marco Odermatt of Switzerland was first to set off down the slope an hour after originally scheduled Friday.

The world's best skiers only got the chance to see the Rock course up close for the first time on Thursday. There is a third training session scheduled Saturday before the men's downhill opens the Alpine competition the following day.

Three-time men's figure skating world champion Nathan Chen has delivered a strong short program to open the team competition at the Beijing Games. That gets the Americans off to a good start in their pursuit of a third straight medal in the event.

Chen, who struggled in the team event in Pyeongchang, opened with a big quad flip and hit his difficult quad lutz-triple toe loop combination to deliver the highest score among the men Friday and give the U.S. the maximum 10 points.

Reigning Olympic silver medalist Shoma Uno was second to give Japan nine points. Eighteen-year-old Mark Kondratiuk was third for the Russian Olympic Committee, which is favored to win the team event.

The short program for ice dance and pairs are later Friday, then the teams get a day off before the women's short program on Sunday. The top five teams after that advance to free skates for the medals Sunday and Monday.

Organizers say nine more athletes and officials tested positive for COVID-19 in cases confirmed on Thursday, raising the total to 111 since the Beijing Olympic period started on Jan. 23.

Seven cases were detected at the Beijing airport, making it 77 out of 5,255 athletes and officials who arrived through Thursday. The other two cases came from daily PCR testing that all people inside the Olympic bubbles must undergo.

Organizers say 12 more positive cases were detected among "stakeholders" — mostly workers at the Games including media. Seven of those were at the airport and five in daily tests.

The overall total of positive cases is 308 through Thursday. Almost 12,000 people have arrived in Beijing from outside China.

Organizers have delayed the start of the second men's downhill training session at the Beijing Olympics

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 23 of 81

due to strong winds.

The session had been scheduled to start at 11 a.m. Beijing time, but organizers will only make a decision then whether it can start at the new scheduled time of noon.

The world's best skiers only got the chance to see the Rock course up close for the first time on Thursday. There is a third training session scheduled Saturday before the men's downhill opens the Alpine competition the following day.

Weather is yet another source of stress for competitive skiers who can do nothing to control changing conditions on the slopes.

Chinese figure skating judge Huang Feng, who was suspended in 2018 for biased judging at the Pyeongchang Olympics, was among the three officials on the technical panel for the team event to start the Beijing Games.

Huang served a one-year suspension after he was accused of biased judging in the pairs event in Pyeongchang.

The International Skating Union, which assigns the judges and technical panel, said in a statement that Huang was cleared to work the Olympics after serving his suspension provided he continues to abide by the organization's code of ethics. The technical panel is responsible for identifying all the elements that skaters execute during their programs.

Huang received a round of applause from the several hundred fans, all Chinese citizens, who were allowed into Capital Indoor Stadium for the start of Friday's program. He stood and gave a brief wave before sitting back down.

French, German leaders to visit Russia, Ukraine amid tension

By ANGELA CHARLTON, GEIR MOULSON and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The French president and the German chancellor will head to Moscow and Kyiv in the coming weeks, adding to diplomatic efforts to try to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from launching an invasion of Ukraine and find a way out of the growing tensions.

France's Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday, while Germany's Olaf Scholz will travel to Kyiv on Feb. 14 and Moscow on Feb. 15.

The high-level visits come as China has backed Russia's demand that NATO be precluded from expanding to Ukraine, and after the U.S. accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action. The U.S. has not provided detailed information backing up the claims, which Moscow has vehemently denied.

While France is a major player in NATO and is moving troops to Romania as part of the alliance's preparation for possible Russian action, Macron has also been actively pushing for dialogue with Putin and has spoken to him several times in recent weeks. The two will hold a one-on-one meeting Monday, Macron's office said Friday.

Macron is following a French tradition of striking a separate path from the United States in geopolitics, as well as trying to make his own mark on this crisis and defend Europe's interests.

Germany has emphasized the importance of various diplomatic formats in tackling the tensions and has refused to send weapons to Ukraine, irking some allies. Scholz also has faced criticism at home lately for keeping a low public profile in the crisis.

After weeks of talks in various diplomatic formats have led to no major concessions by Russia and the U.S., it's unclear how much impact the trips will have. But Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Friday that "top-level visits seriously reduce challenges in the sphere of security and upset the Kremlin's plans."

In a call Wednesday with U.S. President Joe Biden, Macron filled him in on his diplomatic efforts. In talks with the Russian and Ukrainian leaders Thursday night, Macron's office said they discussed ways to "identify elements that could lead to de-escalation," and "conditions for strategic balance in Europe,

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 24 of 81

which should allow for the reduction of risks on the ground and guarantee security on the continent.”

Scholz has a previously planned meeting with Biden in Washington on Monday.

Moscow has been signaling an apparent readiness for more talks with Washington and NATO in recent days. Some experts say that as long as Russia and the West keep talking, that’s a reason for cautious optimism.

Russia has amassed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine’s northern and eastern borders, raising concern that Moscow might invade again, as it did in 2014. The troop presence and uncertainty have unnerved Ukrainians and hurt the country’s economy.

The Kremlin has denied that an invasion is planned and has demanded guarantees from the West that Ukraine will never join the bloc, deployment of NATO weapons near Russian borders will be halted and the alliance’s forces will be rolled back from Eastern Europe.

China lent its support to the demands Friday after Putin met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing before the opening of the Winter Olympics. After the talks, the two leaders issued an elaborate joint statement, declaring their opposition to any expansion of NATO.

“The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe,” the statement read.

Separately from Macron and Scholz, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has offered to mediate talks between Russia and Ukraine. Erdogan visited Kyiv this week and upon returning to Turkey charged that Western leaders have failed to make a positive contribution toward the resolution of tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Erdogan also said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy strongly supports a Turkish proposal for mediation to reduce tensions between the two nations.

“Unfortunately, the West has not contributed anything toward a solution of this issue,” Erdogan said. “They are just creating obstacles.”

Meanwhile in Washington, U.S. officials said a plan for a fake attack on Russian territory or Russian-speaking people was described in declassified intelligence shared with Ukrainian officials and European allies in recent days. It was the latest example of the Biden administration divulging intelligence findings as a tactic to stop Russian disinformation efforts and foil what it says is Putin’s attempt to lay the groundwork for military action.

Russian officials have rejected the allegations. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Friday spoke about the “absurdity” of the claims, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov recommended reporters “not to take anyone’s word for it, especially the (U.S.) State Department’s, when it comes to these issues.”

Ukraine’s foreign minister said Friday that Washington shared the information with Kyiv and that it did not surprise Ukrainian authorities. “Since 2014, we have seen many insidious actions by Russia. We have seen that nothing stops them from fabricating something and accusing Ukraine of something,” Kuleba told reporters.

In recent weeks, the White House has said that U.S. intelligence shows Russia has launched a malign social media disinformation campaign against Ukraine and has dispatched operatives trained in explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia’s own proxy forces. Britain has divulged intelligence findings that it says show Russia plotting to install a

Storm expected to glaze Pennsylvania, New England in ice

By KATHLEEN FOODY and JILL BLEED Associated Press

A major winter storm that already cut electric power to about 350,000 homes and businesses from Texas to the Ohio Valley was set to leave Pennsylvania and New England glazed in ice and smothered in snow Friday, forecasters said.

The storm disrupted flights at major hubs in the U.S. on Friday morning, including airports in New York City, Boston and Dallas.

More snow was forecast, but it was the ice that threatened to wreak havoc on travel and electric service

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 25 of 81

in the Northeast before the storm heads out to sea late Friday and Saturday, said Rick Otto, meteorologist for the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

"Snow is a lot easier to plow than ice," he said.

Even after the storm pushes off to sea late Friday and Saturday, ice and snow were expected to linger through the weekend because of subfreezing temperatures, Otto said.

Parts of New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont had snowfall reports of a foot or more Friday morning, according to the weather service.

About 350,000 homes and businesses lost power from Texas to Ohio on Thursday as freezing rain and snow weighed down tree limbs and encrusted power lines, part of a winter storm that caused a deadly tornado in Alabama, dumped more than a foot of snow in parts of the Midwest and brought rare measurable snowfall to Texas.

The icy weather is blamed for widespread power outages in the Memphis, Tennessee, area, where more than 125,000 homes and businesses were without power Friday morning, according to the website poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports. Nearly 85,000 homes and businesses in Ohio were without electricity.

Many schools and businesses remained closed Friday in areas hit by the wintry weather a day earlier because roads remained icy and temperatures never rose above freezing.

Along the warmer side of the storm, in western Alabama, Hale County Emergency Management Director Russell Weeden told WBRC-TV a tornado that hit a rural area Thursday afternoon killed one person, a female he found under rubble, and critically injured three others. A home was heavily damaged, he said.

Tornadoes in the winter are unusual but possible, and scientists have said the atmospheric conditions needed to cause a tornado have intensified as the planet warms.

The flight-tracking service FlightAware.com showed more than 9,000 flights in the U.S. scheduled for Thursday or Friday had been canceled, on top of more than 2,000 cancellations Wednesday as the storm began.

For a second straight night, Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport officials mobilized to accommodate travelers stranded at the American Airlines hub overnight by flight cancellations. Wednesday night, the airport provided pillows, blankets, diapers and infant formula to an estimated 700 marooned travelers and were ready Thursday night "to provide assistance in anticipation of customers who may need to stay in the terminals," according to an airport statement.

The Ohio Valley was especially affected Thursday, with 211 flight cancellations at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport on Thursday. Nearly all Thursday afternoon and evening flights were canceled at the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport. UPS suspended some operations Thursday at its Worldport hub at the airport, a rare move.

Hundreds of flights were canceled or delayed Friday at LaGuardia Airport in New York, Boston's Logan Airport and Newark Liberty Airport.

In Memphis, crews worked Friday to remove trees and downed power lines from city streets, while those who lost electricity spent a cold night at home, or sought refuge at hotels or homes of friends and family. Public works and utility officials in Memphis said it could take days for power to be restored in the city.

Freezing rain and sleet that caused ice accumulation on trees — making them sag and lose heavy limbs that dropped onto streets, homes and cars — stopped Thursday evening. But banging sounds from falling tree limbs continued through the night in residential neighborhoods.

Freezing temperatures meant the ice would remain a problem for days, making driving dangerous, officials said. Robert Knecht, Memphis' public works director, said Thursday evening that there were 225 downed trees on city streets and crews were working 16-hour shifts to clear them.

"We do foresee, though, that it's going to take multiple days, given the inclement weather conditions, to clear the public right of way," Knecht said during an online news conference.

In Texas, the return of subfreezing weather brought heightened anxiety nearly a year after February 2021's catastrophic freeze that buckled the state's power grid for days, leading to hundreds of deaths in

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 26 of 81

one of the worst blackouts in U.S. history.

Facing a new test of Texas' grid, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said it was holding up and on track to have more than enough power to get through the storm. Texas had about 15,000 outages on Friday morning, and earlier totals came nowhere close to the 4 million outages reported in 2021.

Abbott and local officials said Thursday's outages were due to high winds or icy and downed transmission lines, not grid failures. Power had been restored by the end of the day to more than half of those who lost power.

The 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.

China's pandemic Olympics begins, with lockdown and boycotts

By SARAH DiLORENZO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The country where the coronavirus outbreak emerged two years ago launched a locked-down Winter Olympics on Friday, proudly projecting its might on the most global of stages even as some Western governments mounted a diplomatic boycott over the way China treats millions of its own people.

The opening ceremony began just after the arrival of Chinese President Xi Jinping and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach at the same lattice-encased National Stadium that hosted the inaugural event at the 2008 Olympics.

With the dimming of the lights and a countdown in fireworks, Beijing became the first city to host both winter and summer Games. And while some are staying away from the second pandemic Olympics in six months, many other world leaders planned to attend the opening ceremony. Most notable: Russian President Vladimir Putin, who met privately with Xi earlier in the day as a dangerous standoff unfolds at Russia's border with Ukraine.

The Olympics — and the opening ceremony — are always an exercise in performance for the host nation, a chance to showcase its culture, define its place in the world, flaunt its best side. That's something China in particular has been consumed with for decades. But at this year's Beijing Games, the gulf between performance and reality will be particularly jarring.

Fourteen years ago, a Beijing opening ceremony that featured massive pyrotechnic displays and thousands of card-flipping performers set a new standard of extravagance to start an Olympics that no host since has matched. It was a fitting start to an event often billed as China's "coming out."

Now, no matter how you view it, China has arrived — and is putting on another show at the stadium known as the Bird's Nest, built in consultation with Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei.

But the hope for a more open China that accompanied those first Games has faded.

For Beijing, these Olympics are a confirmation of its status as world player and power. But for many outside China, particularly in the West, they have become a confirmation of the country's increasingly authoritarian turn.

Chinese authorities are crushing pro-democracy activism, tightening their control over Hong Kong, becoming more confrontational with Taiwan and interning Muslim Uyghurs in the far west — a crackdown the U.S. government and others have called genocide.

The pandemic also weighs heavily on this year's Games, just as it did last summer in Tokyo. More than two years after the first COVID-19 cases were identified in China's Hubei province, nearly 6 million human beings have died and hundreds of millions more around the world have been sickened.

The host country itself claims some of the lowest rates of death and illness from the virus, in part because of sweeping lockdowns imposed by the government that were instantly apparent to anyone arriving to compete in or attend the Winter Games.

In the lead-up to the Olympics, China's suppression of dissent was also on display in the controversy surrounding Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai. She disappeared from public view last year after accusing a former Communist Party official of sexual assault. Her accusation was quickly scrubbed from the internet,

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 27 of 81

and discussion of it remains heavily censored.

Concerned for her safety, tennis greats and others outside China demanded on social media to know, "Where is Peng Shuai?" A surreal cat-and-mouse game has since unfolded, with Peng making a brief appearance at a youth tennis event and speaking by video link with the IOC's Bach as part of efforts to allay concerns about her.

In the shadow of those political issues, China put on its show. As Xi took his seat, the performers turned toward him and repeatedly bowed. A simultaneous cheer went up from them, and they raised and waved their pom poms toward their president — China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. A barrage of fireworks, including some that spelled out "Spring," announced that the festivities were at hand.

A line of people dressed in costumes representing China's varied ethnicities passed the national flag to the pole where it was raised — a show of unity that the country often puts on as part of its narrative that its wide range of ethnic groups live together in peace and prosperity.

Earlier, dancers, in a variety of colorful white snowsuits, entertained the crowd, including some who boogied with Bing Dwen Dwen, the chubby panda mascot for the Games. The stadium was relatively full — though by no means at capacity — after authorities decided to allow a select group to attend events. Many got into the groove, holding up their phones with the light shining.

Once the cauldron is lit, as with any Olympics, attention will shift Saturday — at least partially — from the geopolitical issues of the day to the athletes themselves.

All eyes turn now to whether Alpine skiing superstar Mikaela Shiffrin, who already owns three Olympic medals, can exceed sky-high expectations. How snowboard sensation Shaun White will cap off his Olympic career — and if the sport's current standard-bearer, Chloe Kim, will wow us again. And whether Russia's women will sweep the medals in figure skating.

And China is pinning its hopes on Eileen Gu, the 18-year-old, American-born freestyle skier who has chosen to compete for her mother's native country and could win three gold medals.

As they compete, the conditions imposed by Chinese authorities offer a stark contrast to the party atmosphere of the 2008 Games. Some flight attendants, immigration officials and hotel staff have been covered head-to-toe in hazmat gear, masks and goggles. There is a daily testing regimen for all attendees, followed by lengthy quarantines for all those testing positive.

Even so, there is no passing from the Olympic venues through the ever-present cordons of chain-link fence — covered in cheery messages of a "shared future together" — into the city itself, another point of divergence with the 2008 Games.

China itself has also transformed in the years since. Then, it was an emerging global economic force making its biggest leap yet onto the global stage by hosting those Games. Now it is a burgeoning super-power hosting these. Xi, who was the head of the 2008 Olympics, now runs the entire country and has encouraged a personality-driven campaign of adulation.

Gone are the hopeful statements from organizers and Western governments that hosting the Olympics would pressure the ruling Communist Party to clean up what they called its problematic human rights record and to become a more responsible international citizen.

Today, three decades after its troops crushed massive democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds and perhaps thousands of Chinese, the government has locked up more than 1 million members of minority groups, mostly Muslim Uyghurs from its far-western Xinjiang region, in mass internment camps. The situation has led human rights groups to dub these the "Genocide Games."

China says the camps are "vocational training and education centers" that are part of an anti-terror campaign. It denies any human rights violations and says it has restored stability to Xinjiang, a region it insisted in the months after the 9/11 attacks was rife with extremism, often with little evidence.

Such behavior was what led leaders of the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada, among others, to impose a diplomatic boycott on these Games, shunning appearances alongside Chinese leadership while allowing their athletes to compete.

Outside the Olympic "bubble" that separates regular Beijingers from Olympians and their entourages, some expressed enthusiasm and pride at the world coming to their doorstep. Zhang Wenquan, a collec-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 28 of 81

tor of Olympic memorabilia, showed off his wares Friday while standing next to a 2008 mascot. He was excited, but the excitement was tempered by the virus that has changed so much for so many.

"I think the effect of the fireworks is going to be much better than it in 2008," he said. "I really look forward to the opening ceremony. I actually wanted to go to the venue to watch it. I have been trying so hard to watch it at the scene. But because of the epidemic, there may be no chance."

Russia, China push back against US in pre-Olympics summit

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The leaders of Russia and China pushed back against U.S. pressure on Friday, declaring their opposition to any expansion of NATO and affirming that the island of Taiwan is a part of China, as they met hours before the Winter Olympics kicked off in Beijing.

Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping issued a joint statement highlighting what it called "interference in the internal affairs" of other states, as both leaders face criticism from Washington over their foreign and domestic policies.

"Some forces representing a minority on the world stage continue to advocate unilateral approaches to resolving international problems and resort to military policy," it read, in a thinly veiled reference to the U.S. and its allies.

The two leaders are looking to project themselves as a counterweight to the U.S.-led bloc, as China growingly shows support for Moscow in its dispute with Ukraine that threatens to break out into armed conflict.

China and Russia are committed to "deepening back-to-back strategic cooperation," Xi was quoted as telling Putin.

"This is a strategic decision that has far-reaching influence on China, Russia and the world," Xi said, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Faced with a "complex and evolving international situation," the two sides "strongly support each other" in confronting what Xi called "regional security threats" and "international strategic stability," without directly naming the U.S.

Putin is the highest-profile guest at the Beijing Games following the decision by the U.S., Britain and others not to send officials in protest of China's human rights abuses and its treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

Putin praised "unprecedented" close relations with China, in his opening remarks to Xi carried by Russian television.

Relations "are developing in a progressive way with a spirit of friendship and strategic partnership," Putin said. "They have indeed become unprecedented."

Putin highlighted close economic ties, including a new contract to supply China with 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year from eastern Russian.

"For our meeting today, our oilmen have prepared very good new solutions for the supply of hydrocarbons to the People's Republic of China, and another step forward has been taken in the gas industry," Putin said.

Russia has long been a key supplier of oil, gas and coal for China's massive economy, now the world's second largest, along with food stuffs and other raw materials.

China's state-run news agency reported the two leaders met at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse Friday afternoon, but gave no details. They did not appear to shake hands when greeting each other due to COVID-19 precautions.

Putin also recalled his presence in Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics, and the Chinese delegation's attendance at Russia's 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, calling such exchanges "to a certain extent a tradition."

The discussions mark their first in-person meeting since 2019 and come as China and Russia increasingly align their foreign policies bilaterally and in world bodies such as the United Nations, in opposition to the Western bloc and other major powers.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 29 of 81

Leaders of the five ex-Soviet Central Asian nations, which have close ties with both Russia and China, all followed Putin's lead in attending the Olympics opening, along with other states that have political and economic interests with Beijing.

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 — demands firmly rejected by the West.

Putin and Xi accused both NATO and the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy of building closer military ties with other countries in Asia as destabilizing and threatening regional security.

"The parties oppose the further expansion of NATO, (and) call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon the ideological approaches of the Cold War," the joint statement said.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call last week that Moscow's security concerns need to be addressed, a statement that marked a notable policy shift for Beijing.

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.

The U.S. is Taiwan's main supplier of fighter aircraft and defensive arms and is legally bound to treat threats to the island democracy as matters of "grave concern."

The joint statement said that Russia reaffirms that Taiwan is an integral part of China and opposes Taiwan's independence in any form. China claims the self-governing island as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

Economic and diplomatic cooperation has expanded into the military field in recent years, as 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.

Putin has also noted that Russia has been sharing highly sensitive military technologies with China that helped significantly bolster its defense capability.

As economy collapses, some young Lebanese turn to militancy

By BASSEM MROUE and FAY ABUEL GASIM Associated Press

WADI NAHLEH, Lebanon (AP) — Two weeks before he was supposed to get married, Bakr Seif told his mother he was going out to see his fiancée and would be back for lunch. When he did not show up by nighttime, his mother called the fiancée, who said he had not been to visit her.

That day, Dec. 8, was the last time Seif's mother saw him. Last week, he was among nine people killed in an Iraqi army airstrike targeting suspected militants in eastern Iraq. At least four of them were Lebanese, all from this small, impoverished village near the northern city of Tripoli.

As Lebanon slid deeper into economic misery over recent months, dozens of young men have disappeared from the country's marginalized north and later surfaced in Iraq, where they are believed to have joined the Islamic State group. The migration has stoked fears of a new wave of radical recruitment, taking advantage of frustration and despair fueled by the economic meltdown and sectarian tensions.

Many Lebanese have plummeted into poverty as the local currency has collapsed, the value of salaries and bank accounts has evaporated, and prices have soared. Even before the crisis, Tripoli was Lebanon's poorest city — and things have only gotten worse with scores of young, seemingly unemployed men in the streets.

But it's not just poverty driving some young men to join IS. Tripoli and its surrounding areas are also a center for many of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community, who resent what they say is neglect from the government in Beirut. Security forces have targeted Sunni youth in crackdowns over militancy, and activists have said for years that thousands have been detained without trial because of suspicions of militant links.

Seif's mother believed her son was being detained by the Lebanese intelligence. But five or six days

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 30 of 81

before he was killed, he called, the first she'd heard from him since his disappearance. He wouldn't say where he was, telling her only, "I have been wronged, I have been wronged," without explanation, she said.

Seif had spent seven years in jail on suspicion of "acts of terrorism" and was released in June without trial. The family maintains his innocence and opened a grocery for him to work in, since no one else would employ him after his release.

"He was living in constant fear. He used to tell me, 'I trust no one but my family,'" his mother said.

IS's top leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was killed in a U.S. raid on his safehouse in north-west Syria on Thursday. Experts believe that while his elimination may cause some short-term disruption, the group can replace him and continue its campaign of violence in Iraq and Syria.

The numbers of Lebanese apparently joining IS is nowhere near the hundreds who went to neighboring Syria to join rebels there, including ones linked to al-Qaida, at the height of that country's civil war. Since that war waned several years ago, the flow of Lebanese to join dried up.

The migration to join IS in Iraq appears to be new. Lawyer Mohammed Sabloun, who heads the Center for Prisoners Rights, said it is believed that between 70 to 100 young men disappeared from the Tripoli area in past months, though the exact number is not known.

They were from the poorest districts in and around Tripoli, and some may have been lured by the promise of jobs, not realizing they were joining IS, he said. Others were afraid of being swept up in crackdowns.

"These men are being manipulated by dark forces led by those who benefit from the revival of Daesh and want to harm the image of Tripoli," Sabloun said, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

Besides the deaths in Sunday's strike, at least two other Lebanese have been killed in Iraq since December.

Tripoli has been the scene of militant violence in the past — the most serious in 2014, when militants inspired by the Islamic State group carried out attacks against Lebanon's army.

Disappearances of young men began to rise in late August, not long after a former military intelligence member, Ahmad Murad, was shot and killed in Tripoli.

In the subsequent search, the military said it arrested an IS cell that included six militants involved in Murad's killing. It appears the capture of the cell led other IS cells in the north to go on the run.

Remnants of IS have been waging a campaign of frequent hit-and-run attacks in Syria and Iraq ever since the group lost its last shred of territory in Syria in March 2019.

They recently launched two of their boldest operations yet.

On Jan. 20, about 200 IS militants attacked a prison in Syria's northeastern city of Hassakeh and were joined by rioting inmates. It took more than a week for Kurdish-led U.S.-backed fighters to fully regain control over the prison in fighting that killed nearly 500, including several hundred militants, according to Kurdish officials.

On Jan. 21, IS gunmen in Iraq broke into a barracks in a mountainous area in Diyala province, killed a guard and shot dead 11 soldiers as they slept.

On Sunday, Iraq's military carried out airstrikes on an IS cell it said was behind the barracks attack, killing nine militants, including the Lebanese.

Iraqi officials said four Lebanese were killed. Families and the mayor of Wadi Nahleh, Fadel Seif, said they were five — Bakr Seif, his cousin Omar Seif and three friends, Youssef Shkheidem, Omar Shkheidem and Anas Jazzar. The extended Seif family is the largest in the village.

"There are several factors making the youth flee, and the main one is lack of jobs," the mayor said.

Omar Seif's mother said he disappeared on the last day of 2021 and called her days later from a number she didn't recognize. She informed Lebanese authorities, who told her Omar was in Iraq, using an Azeri telephone number. "I said, he is dead (to me). I did not raise him in order to send him to Iraq or ... Syria or any other place," she said.

On Sunday, she received a call from another unknown number, telling her her son had been killed.

Omar's mother said he had long been harassed by Lebanese security officials. He spent years in prison,

even while still a juvenile, also on terrorism suspicions, she said. After his release, he was repeatedly detained for short periods, when police would beat him up and give him electrical shocks, she said.

"Prison destroyed us. It burned our children, our reputation and dignity. It burned our money. Even his father died while he was in jail," she said, speaking in the sitting room of her small, ground floor apartment with peeling walls, as friends and relatives dropped in to offer condolences.

She said Omar could not live a normal life or work because authorities officially revoked his civil rights, meaning he could not vote or get a government job.

"When a young man who is between 15 and 30 cannot get married or buy anything or enter a restaurant to have a meal like all people, of course he will choose death and will be an easy target."

EXPLAINER: Why India won't send diplomat to China Olympics

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India won't be sending its top diplomat in Beijing to the Winter Olympics after the honor of carrying the Olympic torch went to a Chinese soldier wounded in a deadly border clash between the countries two years ago.

What is this border dispute, and why has it riled up the Indian government?

THE DIPLOMATIC BOYCOTT

Until this week, India was considering having its top diplomat at its embassy in Beijing attend the games even as several countries like the U.S., Australia, Britain and Canada will engage in a diplomatic boycott, citing China's human rights violations, while allowing their athletes to compete.

In fact, in November, India had joined Russia in expressing support for the Beijing Games during the BRICS summit — a meeting of large emerging economies.

But Beijing's move to pick Col. Qi Fabao, a People's Liberation Army regimental commander who was seriously wounded in the 2020 clash between Indian and Chinese troops, as an Olympic torchbearer riled up New Delhi's anger. China's state-owned Global Times showed Qi on Wednesday jogging while holding the torch, drawing criticism from India's former diplomats and defense experts.

The decision to field Qi as a torchbearer was swiftly denounced by the Indian government, which accused Beijing of politicizing the games.

India's foreign ministry said it was "regrettable that the Chinese side has chosen to politicize an event like the Olympics," adding that the Indian Embassy in Beijing would not send its representative to the opening and closing ceremonies.

Beijing did not immediately respond to India's announcement.

THE DEADLY BORDER CLASH

India's anger and the diplomatic boycott of the games stem from a border clash nearly two years ago.

China and India share a disputed border, called the Line of Actual Control, that separates Chinese- and Indian-held territories from the high cold-desert region of Ladakh to India's eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1962, this dispute resulted in an armed conflict that ended with a fragile truce. Since then, troops from opposing sides have guarded the undefined mountain border area but agreed not to attack each other with firearms.

A confrontation in June 2020 — their deadliest in decades — sharply changed relations. The rival troops fought with rocks, clubs and their fists in hand-to-hand combat in Galwan Valley along the undemarcated border in Ladakh. At least 20 Indian troops and four Chinese soldiers were killed.

THE PROTRACTED STANDOFF

The high-altitude standoff dramatically altered the already fraught relationship between the nuclear-armed neighbors. Tensions have since persisted despite talks at military, diplomatic and political levels.

The rivals have stationed tens of thousands of soldiers backed by artillery, tanks and fighter jets along their fiercely contested de facto border and upgraded several strategic roads and bridges. Their militaries have also publicized large combat-readiness drills.

Politically, the tensions have been equally simmering, and top diplomats from both countries have often

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 32 of 81

traded barbs.

WHAT'S NEXT?

India will, however, participate in the games. Its sole sportsperson at the Winter Olympics, Arif Khan, is a skier from Indian-controlled Kashmir, and he is reportedly taking part in the opening ceremony.

"It's a diplomatic boycott, and not an athlete boycott," he was quoted as saying by the Indian magazine Outlook on Friday.

But New Delhi's diplomatic boycott and Beijing's decision to spotlight military commander Qi — he received the title of "hero regiment commander for defending the border" last year — is expected to raise more tensions.

And it appears New Delhi has already sent another message: India's public broadcaster, Doordarshan, announced late Thursday evening that it would not broadcast the opening or closing ceremonies.

A hopeful sign? Despite Russian warning, Ukraine talks go on

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — When the U.S. and NATO rejected the Kremlin's security demands over Ukraine last week, fears of an imminent Russian attack against its neighbor soared.

But instead of sending armored armadas across the Ukrainian border as the U.S. and its allies worried, Moscow bombarded Western capitals with diplomatic letters about an international agreement that the Kremlin sees as a strong argument for its position in the standoff.

Even though President Vladimir Putin said a month ago that he wanted a quick answer to the Russian demands and warned that Moscow would not accept "idle talk," earlier this week he signaled an apparent readiness for more talks with Washington and NATO.

And that offers a glimmer of hope. Although more than 100,000 Russian troops still hover near Ukraine and weeks of talks have led to no major concessions by either side, at least Russia and the West keep talking, and for some experts that's a reason for cautious optimism.

"On the one hand Putin did fire rhetorical barbs against the West and emphasized perceived slights; on the other hand he also did leave open the possibility of talking in more detail about at least some of the issues where the West has been willing to engage," said Jeff Rathke, a former U.S. diplomat and president of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

"We're kind of where we were a few weeks ago," Rathke said. "Putin has kept his options open. He's not ruled out talks but also not reduced his strident rhetoric."

Russia and the West remain far apart on the most critical issues and it's unclear how a compromise could be reached. But the Kremlin's recent emphasis on diplomacy appears to reflect Putin's hope to achieve his goals through negotiations while using the deployment of the troops near Ukraine as leverage.

"Russia will maintain a tough stand while indicating that it's not shutting the door to talks," said Fyodor Lukyanov, who heads the Moscow-based Council for Foreign and Defense Policies and closely follows the Kremlin thinking. "Such complex agreements aren't reached in a relaxing atmosphere over a cup of tea, so all methods of persuasion are being used, including the demonstration of force."

Russia maintains it has no intention to attack its neighbor, but it demands that NATO bar membership to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations and pledge not to deploy weapons there. It also wants NATO deployments in Eastern Europe rolled back.

The U.S. and its allies flatly rejected those demands as "nonstarters" during a series of talks last month, but Moscow demanded a written reply, fueling suspicions that it wanted a formal rejection of its demands to use as an argument for sending troops into Ukraine.

The U.S. and NATO handed their response to Moscow on Jan. 26, ruling out any concessions on Russia's main demands but holding the door open for talks on other issues, including limits on offensive missile deployments, greater transparency of military drills and other confidence-building measures.

Putin has yet to formulate his response to the Western proposals, but his diplomats have warned it will be difficult to achieve any progress on those issues if the West continues to stonewall Moscow's main

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 33 of 81

demands.

The deadlock has fueled fears of imminent hostilities, and in a phone call last week U.S. President Joe Biden warned Ukraine's president that there is a "distinct possibility" Russia will invade in February.

Moscow appears to have opted for a diplomatic track for now and U.S. officials in recent days have toned down their rhetoric about "imminence." But the U.S. has not backed away from the urgency of its concerns.

On Monday, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent new letters to his Western counterparts, countering NATO's argument that every country has the right to choose alliances. He charged that the alliance's expansion contradicts its obligation not to strengthen its security at Russia's expense.

Lavrov said the U.S., and its allies have pledged to respect the "indivisibility of security" in documents signed at summits of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the main trans-Atlantic security grouping.

"There must be security for all or there will be no security for anyone," Lavrov wrote, noting that his ministry would now wait for formal replies to his letter before advising Putin on next moves.

The exchange of letters could set the stage for a long series of arcane arguments about conflicting interpretations of the OSCE documents, and Putin expressed readiness for such discussions.

In his first public remarks on the standoff since late December, the Russian leader noted Tuesday that while the West rejects Russia's key demands, diplomatic efforts should continue. "I hope that we will eventually find a solution, although we realize that it's not going to be easy," Putin said.

The patient stand contrasted with Putin's statement in December that he wants a quick Western reply and could order unspecified "military-technical measures" if the U.S. and its allies continue to ignore Moscow's concerns.

Putin made no mention of any such measures in his comments this week, saying that "we need to find a way to ensure interests and security of all parties, including Ukraine, European nations and Russia."

Along with the talks with the U.S. and NATO, Russia also engaged in separate negotiations on a stalled 2015 peace deal for eastern Ukraine. A four-way meeting in Paris between presidential envoys from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany didn't produce immediate progress, but they will meet again in Berlin this month.

French President Emmanuel Macron, who has spoken to Putin three times since last Friday, said he's open to visiting Russia to help defuse tensions, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz also announced his plans to travel to Moscow soon.

Lukyanov said Russia will likely keep flexing its military muscle to demonstrate its resolve. He noted that Russia could easily afford keeping troops near Ukraine for a long time and will continue a series of drills to maintain pressure on the West.

"Troops may come and go," Lukyanov said. "It's relatively cheap and within the funds already earmarked for combat training."

The drills include sweeping joint war games with Russia's ally Belarus, which borders Ukraine to the north, and Lukyanov predicted that Russia could further beef up its defense ties with the country.

Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has edged closer to Moscow after being hit with Western sanctions over his crackdown on dissent, already has offered to host Russian nuclear weapons.

"Belarus will be an important element in the game," Lukyanov said.

Elizabeth the Steadfast: Queen marks 70 years on throne

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor wasn't born to wear the crown. But destiny intervened.

The woman who became Queen Elizabeth II will mark 70 years on the throne Sunday, an unprecedented reign that has made her a symbol of stability as the United Kingdom navigated an age of uncertainty.

From her early days as a glamorous young royal in glittering tiaras to her more recent incarnation as

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 34 of 81

the nation's grandmother, the queen has witnessed the end of the British Empire, the advent of multiculturalism, the rise of international terrorism, and the challenges posed by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. In a world of relentless change, she has been a constant — representing the U.K.'s interests abroad, applauding the nation's successes and commiserating in its failures, and always remaining above the fray of politics.

That constancy should earn Elizabeth a royal epithet like those of her predecessors such as William the Conqueror, Edward the Confessor and Alfred the Great, said royal historian Hugo Vickers.

"I've always thought she should be called Elizabeth the Steadfast," Vickers told The Associated Press. "I think it's a perfect way of describing her. She wasn't necessarily expecting to be queen, and she embraced that duty."

As the elder daughter of King George V's second son, Elizabeth, now 95, was expected to live the life of a minor royal when she was born on April 21, 1926. Dogs and horses, a country house, a suitable match — a comfortable but uneventful life — seemed her future.

But everything changed a decade later when her uncle, King Edward VIII, abdicated so he could marry the American divorcee Wallis Simpson. Elizabeth's father became King George VI, making the young princess heir apparent.

George VI, whose struggles to overcome a stutter were portrayed in the 2010 film "The King's Speech," endeared himself to the nation when he refused to leave London as bombs fell during the early months of World War II.

Elizabeth followed her father in leading by example, joining the Auxiliary Territorial Service in early 1945, becoming the first female member of the Royal Family to join the armed services as a full-time active member. On her 21st birthday, she dedicated her life to the nation and the Commonwealth, the voluntary association of states that grew out of the British Empire.

"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong," she said in a radio address broadcast around the world.

In 1952, the young princess embarked on a tour of the Commonwealth in place of her ailing father. She was at a remote Kenyan lodge, where she and her husband Prince Philip watched baboons from the treetops, when she heard her father had died.

She immediately returned to London, disembarking the plane in black mourning clothes, to begin her life as queen. She has reigned ever since, with crown and scepter on big occasions, but more commonly wearing a broad-brimmed hat and carrying a simple handbag.

In the intervening seven decades, the queen has shared confidences with 14 prime ministers and met 13 U.S. presidents.

Once a year, she travels the mile or so from Buckingham Palace to the House of Lords for the ceremonial opening of Parliament. And when world leaders come to call she hosts state banquets during which her diamonds flash under the TV lights and presidents and prime ministers worry about whether to bow and when to offer a toast.

But it is the less lavish events that give the queen a link to the public.

At the garden parties that honor the service of everyone from soldiers and charity workers to long-serving school librarians and crossing guards, guests wear festive hats and drink tea as they try to catch a glimpse of the queen on the lawn outside Buckingham Palace. The honorees can spot her at a distance, as it is said she favors bright colors so the public can spot her in a crowd.

Then there is the annual wreath laying at the memorial to those who have died during conflicts around the world, as well as the numerous school openings, hospice visits and tours of maternity wards that have filled her days.

Britain's longest-serving monarch, the only sovereign most Britons have ever known, has been a constant presence from the Suez Crisis of 1956, when Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal underscored Britain's declining might, through the labor strife of the 1980s and the 2005 terror attacks in London..

When Prince Philip died during the pandemic, she donned a black face mask and sat alone during his

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 35 of 81

socially distanced funeral, silently demonstrating that the rules applied to everyone — particularly her.

"She's not beholden to the electorate. She's not dependent on her latest hit or her latest movie," said Emily Nash, royal editor of HELLO! magazine. "She's just there. She does what she does. She carries out her duties without ever complaining or making any personal drama. And people respect her for that."

Not that there haven't been controversies.

In the early 1990s, criticism of the monarchy increased amid reports of the queen's private wealth and concerns about the expense of the monarchy. In 1992, the queen agreed to pay the expenses of most of her family and become the first monarch to pay income taxes since the 1930s.

Tensions flared again in 1997 when the royal family's silence after the death of Princess Diana, the ex-wife of Prince Charles, fueled the resentment of Diana's many fans.

Even now, the monarchy is struggling to distance itself from the scandal caused by a sex abuse lawsuit filed against Prince Andrew, the queen's second son, and the fallout after two of the royal family's most popular members, Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, ditched their royal duties and departed for California.

But the queen has transcended scandal and remained popular throughout it all, said Kelly Beaver, the CEO of polling firm Ipsos UK, which has tracked her popularity for decades.

"Part of this because she is so synonymous with ... the monarchy, which is something the British people are proud of," Beaver said.

Still, Tiwa Adebayo, a social media commentator and writer who inherited a fascination with the monarchy from her grandmother, believes younger people want "more transparency" — to see the royal family move beyond the adage of "never complain, never explain" that has typified the queen's reign.

For the queen, Sunday is likely to be bittersweet, marking both her long reign and the 70th anniversary of her father's death.

"I've always thought that one of her philosophies really was that, you know, she just wanted to be a really good daughter to her father and fulfill all his hopes for her," Vickers said. "And, you know, assuming that there is an after-life and they meet again, my goodness he will be able to thank her for doing just that."

Olympics a sweet, complex homecoming for Chinese diaspora

By SALLY HO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — When Madison Chock looks outside here in the Chinese capital, the U.S. Olympic ice dancer sees glimpses of herself.

"Every time I'm on the bus, I'm just looking out and studying the city and just imagining my roots are here, my ancestors are here," says Chock, whose father is Chinese-Hawaiian, with family ties to rural China. "And it's a very cool sense of belonging in a way, to just be on the same soil that your ancestors grew up on and spent their lives on."

She adds: "It's really special, and China holds a really special place in my heart."

At the Beijing Winter Games, opening Friday, it's a homecoming of sorts for one of the world's most sprawling diasporas — often sweet and sometimes complicated, but always a reflection of who they are, where they come from and the Olympic spirit itself.

The modern Chinese diaspora dates to the 16th century, says Richard T. Chu, a history professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Its members have ranged from the drivers of the colonial economy and laborer workforces on land and sea, to the highly educated who moved away for a chance at greater prosperity, to the unwanted baby girls adopted internationally during the government's one-child policy.

"The Chinese diaspora is really very diverse, to the extent to that they maintain their Chinese-ness," Chu says. "There's no one kind of Chinese identity because each country has a unique kind of history."

The question of ethnic Chinese identity is an especially delicate one for athletes with roots in Hong Kong and Taiwan. U.S. women's singles figure skater Karen Chen, whose parents immigrated from Taiwan, says she identifies as both Taiwanese and Chinese, and uses those labels loosely and interchangeably.

Taiwan, which split from the mainland after a 1949 civil war that propelled the current Chinese government into power, 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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 36 of 81

countries recognize Taiwan as a nation. Most nations of the world, including the United States, have official ties with China instead.

Chen's self-identification is not uncommon among the Taiwanese, as many trace their heritage back to mainland China. Some 32% of the islanders identify themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese, according to an annual survey by National Chengchi University in Taipei.

While in Beijing, she's pledged to speak as much Mandarin as possible and is proud to give a nod to her heritage on the ice.

"My free program is to 'Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto,' which is such a famous and classical piece that came from China ... it's kind of a Chinese version of Romeo and Juliet," Karen Chen says. "It definitely relates to my background."

The many athletes of Chinese descent here at the Beijing Games represent the many variations of the diaspora: some are one, two or many generations removed; others are biracial and multicultural.

And even similar backgrounds can diverge on the Olympic stage. For example, Nathan Chen and Eileen Gu are two superstar athletes fronting the Winter Games. While both were born and raised in the U.S. by Chinese immigrants and have fond memories of spending time in their ancestral homeland, Chen is competing for the U.S. team as a medal contender in men's singles figure skating, and Gu is the hotshot freestyle skier competing for China.

Gu has raised eyebrows for switching to the China team after training with the U.S. team, but the San Francisco native — who speaks fluent Mandarin and makes yearly trips to China with her mom — is clear-eyed about how she defines herself.

"When I'm in China, I'm Chinese," Gu told the Olympic Channel in 2020. "When I'm in the U.S., I'm American."

For some, the Olympics in Beijing is the first time they'll set foot in China, an unforgettable professional accomplishment on top of a very personal milestone.

That's the case for U.S. women's singles figure skater Alysa Liu, whose father Arthur Liu also longs to visit China. The elder Liu left his home country in his 20s as a political refugee because he had protested the Communist government following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

"I so much want to go to the Games and go back to China to visit my hometown," says Arthur Liu in a phone interview from his home base in California. "I so much want to go back to the village I grew up in, to go to the high school that I went to, the college I went to. I so much want to go and have the spicy noodles on the side of the street."

Arthur Liu eventually settled in the Bay Area, put himself through law school and nurtured one of America's most promising athletes. Now his Chinese-American daughter is set to make her Olympic debut in the women's singles competition. He has no qualms about her competing in the Olympics in China, and no resentment toward a home country he still loves.

Like many biracial children, Alysa Liu used to wonder why she didn't look like her parents though she has always identified as ethnically Chinese. Arthur Liu and his then-wife, who is also Chinese, decided to have children via surrogacy and sought white egg donors because Arthur Liu saw himself as a citizen of the world and wanted biracial children.

In a culture that can be xenophobic, Arthur Liu says his daughter is warmly embraced by his home country, as Chinese fans and media consider Alysa Liu to be one of their own.

"I'm super happy the Chinese people welcome her and think highly of her," Arthur Liu says.

The Olympics will also be the first time Josh Ho-Sang, the multiracial, multicultural Canadian ice hockey player, will visit China.

His paternal great-grandfather moved from mainland China to what is modern-day Hong Kong for business opportunities, then fell in love on vacation in Jamaica, which makes the Canadian hockey team forward one-eighth Chinese. From his mother's side, Ho-Sang's heritage is rooted in European, South American and Jewish cultures. For him to represent Canada as a "melting pot poster boy" is a testament to how inclusive the Olympic spirit has become.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 37 of 81

"It really shows how far we've come as a society, to have these different faces representing home for everyone," Ho-Sang says. "A hundred years ago, you would never see such diversity in each country that you see now. It's a sign of hope and progress."

Seattle-based AP journalist Sally Ho is on assignment at the Beijing Olympics, covering figure skating. Follow her on Twitter at http://twitter.com/_sallyho.

EXPLAINER: Biathlon combines physical demands, mental calm

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — One analogy often used to describe how it feels to compete in a biathlon race goes like this: "Run up 20 flights of stairs as fast as you can and then try to thread a needle."

Biathlon is the marriage of "two totally unrelated things," says U.S. biathlete Jake Brown of Saint Paul, Minnesota. "One is totally physical, and the other is part physical but mostly mental. Having to combine that mental exertion on the range when you're under physical duress from skiing is really the difficulty of our sport."

Here's a glimpse into what it is, what makes it tick and how it unfolds.

GREAT FOR SPECTATORS

A biathlete skis several kilometers and arrives at the shooting range with a heart rate as high as 180 beats per minute. Next they shoot at five targets within 25 to 35 seconds.

"Shooting with a high heart rate is really difficult," says Armin Auchentaller of Antholz, Italy who coaches the U.S. women's biathlon team.

They're penalized for each missed target. It usually involves skiing a 150-meter loop but in one race format, the individual, one minute gets added to their time for each mistake. It can mean the difference between a podium finish and 20th place.

Lowell Bailey, a retired four-time U.S. Olympic biathlete and the team's high-performance coach, says the combination of fast skiing and high-pressure shooting makes biathlon an "exceptionally good spectator sport."

Most people know the drama that can build during a cross-country ski race, "but with biathlon you kind of double or triple that drama, because you add in the addition of shooting."

As the race develops, the lead can shift depending on how the racers are shooting that day.

"It can really come down to that last shooting stage," he says. "And it can put people on the edge of their seats as spectators, where they're really hanging on every shot in that last stage. And oftentimes, you know, you'll have a lead switch there and then the final loop is this dog race to the finish."

SKIS AND RIFLE

Biathletes use the skate method of cross-country skiing to travel around trails that run between 1.5 kilometers and 3.5 kilometers (0.9 to 2.2 miles), depending on race format.

They carry a .22 caliber biathlon rifle that weighs between 3.5 and 7.5 kilograms (7.7 to 16.5 pounds) unloaded. Special slots built into the rifle stock allow them to carry two to four magazines that hold five bullets each.

The rifle has a sight on the end of the barrel and another just above the bolt; they allow the athlete to line up the rifle for aiming. The sights don't contain any magnification.

Biathletes have a 45-minute period before every race to "zero" their rifle — align their sights — to ensure they're set for the weather of the day. During this process, coaches watch through a spotting scope as they shoot five bullets into one paper target. If their group of shots hit on the left, and the wind is from the left, they'll adjust their sights to the right to account for the wind.

Coaches watch through scopes during the race, too, to see if racers need to make additional adjustments. They can radio shooting information to team support out on the course who will racers know what's needed. Coaches are not allowed to speak to athletes on the range during races.

Biathletes carry the rifle on their backs with a harness that attaches to the rifle stock, allowing them to

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 38 of 81

quickly swing into the shooting position, which alternates between prone and standing.

The rifle also has a strap with an elastic cord and hook that clips into a D-ring on a band that the biathlete wears around their upper arm. This allows them to create a tripod with their elbows and body while in the prone position.

Since prone is the more stable, the targets are small – about the size of a golf ball. Standing shooting targets are bigger – the size of a DVD. The shooting distance is 50 meters (54.7 yards).

THE PROCESS

Each biathlon race begins with a ski loop. The distance depends on the race format. The first shooting bout is in the prone position.

As biathletes enter the range, they slow their pace to get their heart rate down. They arrive at a mat, drop to their knees and swing the rifle to the side of their body to insert a loaded magazine, hook into the sling, drop to their stomachs and line up the sights.

In this position, breathing makes the rifle barrel go up and down, so the athlete will center the rifle, take a breath or two and then hold it as the target slides into the center of the sight. A gentle squeeze on the trigger releases the shot. They use their thumb and index finger to move the bolt action that loads the next bullet.

They repeat this process on all five targets and put the rifle back on their backs. If they hit all five, they can head out on the next ski lap, but if they missed targets, they must ski the 150-meter (164 yard) penalty loop for each miss.

After skiing the lap, they'll come back in for another shooting.

RACE FORMATS

In sprint races, biathletes start at 30-second intervals, ski three lap laps with one prone and one standing shooting in between. It's a race against the clock and the shortest biathlon race format.

Sprint races are often followed by the pursuit where biathletes start based on where they finished in the sprint, with the fastest going first. The pursuit has five skiing loops and four shooting bouts, two prone and two standing.

A mass start race has a similar format but everyone starts at the same time. Only the top 30 biathletes on the World Cup rankings start this race.

The individual race has interval starts with four shooting bouts and five ski loops. But instead of skiing a penalty loop for each miss, a minute is added for each missed shot.

Teams of four men and four women race relays. Each biathlete skis three loops with one prone and one standing shooting bout. The racers are allowed to use three extra bullets for each shooting bout during relay races.

Yemen rebel attack on UAE brings tragedy to Indian families

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — First, there was a pop, like firecrackers, then the world itself seemed to splinter.

Ramjan Rath felt a sharp pain. He looked down, and realized he was on fire.

Rath, whose fuel tanker blew up in a fatal attack on Abu Dhabi last month claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels last month, was standing by his truck filling out forms when the drones hit.

"I saw my vehicle burning right in front of my eyes. ... There was fire on my feet," he told The Associated Press on Wednesday from an Indian canteen in Mussafah, the industrial district of Abu Dhabi where the explosion occurred at a nearby state-owned oil facility. "I shook with terror. ... It wasn't clear what had happened, it all happened so fast."

He remembers blood gushing from his leg as he ran for his life. Sirens howled. Hours later, he was in a hospital room.

The 24-year-old had come a long way to the industrial side of the Emirati capital, where Yemen's brutal war reached for the first-known time on Jan. 17. He grew up in a tiny village in the northwestern Indian

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 39 of 81

state of Rajasthan, the youngest son of a farmer.

Rath knew nothing of the yearslong civil war that has riven Yemen, killed thousands of civilians and spawned the world's worst humanitarian disaster. He'd never heard of the Iran-backed Houthis who seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in 2014, and have been battling a Saudi-led coalition that includes the UAE since 2015.

Like the millions of other low-paid expats who make up the vast foreign labor force powering the UAE's economy, he had come to the country four years ago for work — the chance to carve out a bit of security for his parents and four older sisters in rural India.

It was a relentless life as a truck driver, working up to 12 hours a day to send money home. But it was a safe one.

Unlike in India, he said, the police were honest, the roads well-paved. He never feared for his life in the federation that is home to oil-rich Abu Dhabi and glitzy Dubai — a refuge in a Middle East mired in conflict and economic collapse.

Yet that changed in a single, violent instant.

"There's pain, physical and mental. When I sleep at night, or whenever I'm alone, I remember the blast," Rath said.

He recalls being consumed by guilt in the hospital bed, thinking the inferno must have been his fault, the result of some safety mishap he'd overlooked.

His leg wound required 10 stitches. The ache lingers, causing him to limp. His truck is gone. He can't work until he heals. He will never tell his family what happened to him, he said. It's a burden they cannot bear.

But he is alive, and for that he said, he is grateful. Three of his colleagues from India and Pakistan were killed — years of work and accumulated opportunities put to an abrupt end.

One of them was Hardeep Singh. Newly married at 29, he had a bachelor's degree in computing, enviable skills in the ancient Indian sport of Kabbaddi and dreams of joining his young wife in Canada.

"The house is empty," Hardeep's cousin Gagandeep Singh, who called him a brother, said from their village in the northern Indian state of Punjab. "He was our light, our loveable one."

Hardeep, known to his family as Appu, was the only child of a widow, saddled with the unyielding obligations of a breadwinner. After his wedding last spring, he returned to work in the UAE as a tanker driver for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Co.

He drove night shifts in the emirate of Sharjah. But that bright Monday morning, a fellow driver in the Mussafah district went on leave. Hardeep was sent to replace him. His family never spoke to him again.

His wife, 21-year-old Kanupriya Kaur, has come undone.

"I have no words," she said by phone, her voice ragged. "There is no future and my memories are full of pain."

Darkness has settled over the village of Mehsampur Khurd, where Hardeep's remains returned last month for a massive memorial. Children who knew him as the "fun one" in the village wept, attendees said.

It has been a shock, that the trail of Yemen's devastating war has been profoundly felt not only at an Abu Dhabi fuel depot but also an ocean away, in an Indian town home to golden temples.

The Saudi-led coalition has bombarded Yemen for years, drawing international criticism for hitting non-military targets like markets, schools, hospitals and wedding parties. The attack on Abu Dhabi that wounded Rath and killed Hardeep triggered a fierce wave of Saudi and Emirati airstrikes on Yemen.

The deadliest one struck a Houthi-run prison in the northern city of Saada, killing some 90 people. Another strike took the entire country off the internet for days.

Meanwhile, residents of the UAE have witnessed a steady drumbeat of missile and drone interceptions over the past weeks, mostly claimed by the Houthis.

The relentless rhythm of interceptors had been far more familiar to residents of Saudi border towns than the gleaming cities of the UAE, where expats outnumber locals nearly nine to one and beaches are bustling this time of year with tourists soaking up the winter sun.

The puncturing of the illusion of safety, Gagandeep said, is another reason for mourning.

"I can't accept this. ... In this war between two countries, our son is lost. Our family is damaged," he said. "Never have such things happened in the past."

Arbery defendant set to stand trial again in man's killing

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — One of the men convicted of murder in the chase and fatal shooting of Ahmaud Arbery says he plans to stand trial for a second time in the killing rather than plead guilty to a federal hate crime.

Greg McMichael reversed course late Thursday on a planned guilty plea, days after a U.S. District Court judge rejected terms of a plea deal that he and his son, Travis McMichael, had negotiated with prosecutors. That deal was met with passionate objections by Arbery's parents.

Travis McMichael was scheduled to appear in court Friday morning to announce his decision after being warned by the judge that she would not guarantee their sentence if they chose to plead guilty.

The McMichaels and a neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, were convicted of murder in a Georgia state court last fall and sentenced to life in prison. Separate from that case, the three white men were also indicted in U.S. District Court on charges that they violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he was Black.

The McMichaels armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after spotting the 25-year-old man running past their home just outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. Bryan joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael blasting Arbery with a shotgun.

Both men had planned to plead guilty to a hate crime charge earlier this week after prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed on a 30-year sentence that would include a request to transfer the McMichaels from Georgia's state prison system to federal custody. The deal would have required the McMichaels to admit to racist motives and forfeit the right to appeal their federal sentence.

U.S. District Judge Lisa Godbey Wood rejected the deal Monday after Arbery's parents objected, arguing conditions in federal prison wouldn't be as harsh. Wood said she ultimately denied the deal because it would have locked her into a specific sentence.

Prosecutors asked the judge to approve the plea deals despite the objections from Arbery's family. Prosecutor Tara Lyons said that attorneys for Arbery's parents told the U.S. Justice Department that the family wouldn't object to the plea deals.

Lee Merritt, an attorney for Arbery's mother, said the slain man's family had previously rejected the same terms and "no longer wanted to engage" prosecutors, who "took that as a deferral."

During the murder trial in state court, defense attorneys argued the McMichaels were justified in pursuing Arbery because they had a reasonable suspicion that he had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Travis McMichael testified that he opened fire with his shotgun after Arbery attacked him with fists and tried to grab the weapon.

Lethal US raid on IS encounters a doll, crib, bomb, bullets

By GHAITH ALSAYED, ZEKE MILLER, LOLITA C. BALDOR and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

When helicopters carrying some 50 U.S. commandos thumped onto the ground in Syria an hour after midnight, the raiders confronted a houseful of extremists and children.

Baby comforts were inside — a stuffed bunny, a blue plastic swing, a crib. So was the paraphernalia of violence — such as the bomb Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi is said by U.S. officials to have used to blow up himself, his family and perhaps others in his immediate proximity.

It was an audacious raid in an extremist stronghold of northwest Syria, months in the works and executed with the understanding that children might die as well as the hunted IS chief if the building's occupants did not get out when given the chance to leave.

The apparent suicide bombing came before or early in a two-hour gun battle Thursday. First responders said 13 people died, six of them children. No U.S. commandos were wounded, military officials said.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 41 of 81

President Joe Biden, who ordered the raid, said the world is rid of a man he described as the driving force behind the “genocide of the Yazidi people in northwestern Iraq in 2014,” when slaughters wiped out villages, thousands of women and young girls were sold into slavery and rape was used as a weapon of war.

“Thanks to the bravery of our troops, this horrible terrorist leader is no more,” Biden said.

THE PREPARATION

Over months of planning, U.S. intelligence first had to locate al-Qurayshi’s whereabouts and understand his movements — or lack thereof. They concluded he rarely, if ever, left his family’s third-floor quarters except to bathe on the building’s roof.

Anticipating that al-Qurayshi could well choose death by self-detonation if cornered by U.S. forces, U.S. officials commissioned an engineering study-from-afar of the three-story, cinder-block building to see if it would collapse in that event and kill everyone inside.

They concluded that enough of the building was likely to survive such a blast to spare those not near him.

They constructed a tabletop model of the house and in December set it up in the Situation Room, the ultra-secure White House command and communications post where presidents and their national security aides manage crises.

The second floor of the Syrian house, also white, was occupied by a lower-ranking Islamic State leader and his family. The ground floor, partly a basement, housed a family unconnected to the Islamic State and unaware of al-Qurayshi’s presence or significance, U.S. officials said.

Biden was first briefed in depth more than a month ago by operational commanders after U.S. forces were satisfied they would find al-Qurayshi — also known as Haji Abdullah — where they did.

The Islamic State, which once controlled most of the territory in Iraq and parts of Syria, has been attempting to regenerate, and staged its most ambitious operation in years when it seized a prison in northeast Syria last month holding at least 3,000 IS detainees.

For all his brinkmanship with Russia as it amasses its forces for a possible new invasion of Ukraine, Biden could not afford to take his eyes off IS.

On Tuesday morning, he met Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the Oval Office and gave the go-ahead. Wednesday evening in Washington, Biden was in the Situation Room, monitoring a live feed of the mission as it unfolded.

THE MISSION

At his refugee camp near the raid, Jamil el-Deddo heard aircraft and an explosion ripping through the night and thought at first it might be the notorious barrel bombs “that used to be dropped on us.” President Bashar Assad’s forces used the explosives-packed barrels against opponents during the Syrian conflict, inflicting indiscriminate death and injury.

“The first moments were terrifying,” el-Deddo told AP. “No one knew what was happening.”

The U.S. launched the raid from a unidentified base in the region after having “deconflicted” the mission with “a range of entities.” That’s jargon for giving certain other military forces or interests in the region — perhaps Russia — notice of a U.S. operation underway.

At the outset, the building’s occupants were told to get out.

“If you don’t leave, we have orders,” a man speaking with Iraqi dialect could be heard saying through a loudspeaker. “We will fire missiles toward the house. There are drones overhead.”

Ten people left the building, said Pentagon spokesman John Kirby — a man and woman from the first floor and eight children in all from the first and second.

Not long after came the explosion that collapsed much of the third story and blew bodies out of the house, al-Qurayshi’s among them. Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said the blast was more massive than one that would be expected from a suicide vest.

From the second floor, the barricaded IS lieutenant, whom officials did not identify, and a woman thought to be his wife exchanged sustained gunfire with the commandos, U.S. officials said. Both died in

the firefight, U.S. officials said, and one child with them was also found dead, McKenzie said.

The special operations forces conducting the mission faced danger from outside the building as well.

While the commandos were clearing the second floor, a number of foreign fighters linked to al-Qaida in Syria "began maneuvering with weapons toward U.S. forces" at the scene, McKenzie said. Gunfire from a U.S. helicopter killed at least two of them, he said.

Another helicopter developed a significant malfunction, McKenzie said. After landing it safely, away from the scene, the Americans rigged it to explode, then struck it with munitions from the air to be doubly sure "no sensitive equipment would remain in Syria."

Videos released by the Syrian opposition group Syrian Civil Defense, also known as White Helmets, showed a paramedic rushing a little girl from the house into an ambulance. A photo of a girl circulated on social media later showing a girl who appeared to be about five with blood on her face.

When the commandos safely departed, Biden uttered "God bless our troops," according to a U.S. official who briefed the press on condition of anonymity. Biden was kept abreast of their long flight out of Syria overnight by Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser.

AFTERMATH

In images afterward, blood could be seen on the walls and floor in what remains of the structure. A wrecked bedroom had a wooden crib and the stuffed rabbit doll. On one damaged wall, the baby swing was still hanging.

In the fog-of-war aftermath, there was no immediate accounting from the U.S. of how many children died in all, and how. The White House attributed the deaths of three of the children to al-Qurayshi's blast while the Pentagon spoke of two, both leaving unexplained, for now, how many might have been killed in the firefight.

Biden said U.S. forces chose a riskier commando raid instead of an attack from the air so as to minimize civilian casualties.

Yet the U.S. launched the operation knowing the IS leader might respond by killing innocent people around him as well as himself. McKenzie said the U.S. "as always" will look into whether innocent people were killed by its forces.

US strike framed to spare civilians after mounting criticism

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing criticism for civilian deaths in U.S. airstrikes, President Joe Biden targeted the leader of the Islamic State group on Thursday in an approach — a ground raid by special forces — that was riskier for American troops but intended to be safer for the innocent.

Dozens of U.S. commandoes landed outside Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi's Syrian hideout and warned people in nearby homes to stay inside, U.S. officials said. As one of their first moves, they called out to families living inside the same building as al-Qurayshi. By the time the operation ended, the officials said, 10 civilians had been led to safety.

But the U.S. raid still brought the deaths of women and children. Al-Qurayshi's wife and two children were killed along with the militant leader when he detonated a suicide bomb. A lieutenant of the militant leader and that man's wife also died along with a child, after the pair fired upon U.S. forces, officials said. The deaths from the high-stakes mission highlight the challenge U.S. forces face in targeting violent militants, while bound by ethics and international laws and treaties to try to avoid killing non-combatants.

Biden, speaking from the White House, said he directed the military to take "every precaution possible to minimize civilian casualties."

"Knowing that this terrorist had chosen to surround himself with families, including children, we made a choice to pursue a special forces raid at a much greater risk to our own people rather than target him with an airstrike," he said. Biden described al-Qurayshi's decision to blow himself up while surrounded by family members as "desperate cowardice."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 43 of 81

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon would review the operation.

"We know that al-Qurayshi and others at his compound directly caused the deaths of women and children last night. But, given the complexity of this mission, we will take a look at the possibility our actions may also have resulted in harm to innocent people," he said in a statement.

U.S. officials reported no American injuries.

California Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, called for an investigation of the civilian deaths in Thursday's strike, "while keeping in mind the history of ISIS leaders using civilians as human shields."

By one estimate, that of Brown University's Costs of War project, close to 400,000 civilians have died in fighting since the United States and its allies launched what Americans called their war on terror, in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks.

Military strikes of all kinds have declined dramatically under Biden, according to Airwars, which tracks U.S. attacks.

The number of strikes dropped 54% from 2020 to 2021, a period when the Biden administration was moving toward with what in August became a complete U.S. withdrawal from the 20-year Afghanistan conflict, according to Airwars.

However, the Biden administration has come under criticism for civilian casualties, including during the withdrawal from Kabul in August.

After a bombing claimed by the Islamic State's Afghanistan branch killed U.S. service members and Afghans at the gate to the city's airport, the Pentagon responded with airstrikes against suspected Islamic State members.

Although U.S. officials defended the actions, it eventually became clear that a final drone strike as Americans completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan killed 10 civilians, including seven children, but no militants. The U.S. has not punished any American for what the Pentagon described as a tragic mistake.

Modern laws and rules of war broadly require militaries to distinguish between combatants and civilians and try to minimize the loss of civilian lives.

Rights advocates and legal experts have faulted successive Republican and Democratic U.S. administrations for their heavy reliance on airstrikes in the fight against the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere. Opponents argue that attacks by air, while minimizing risk to American forces, increases the risks of civilians with the misfortune to be near a U.S. target.

Priyanka Motaparthi, who works on counterterrorism issues at Columbia University's Human Rights Institute, was heartened that Biden emphasized efforts to limit civilian casualties in his remarks.

Given how details about previous strikes have trickled out over time, she said she's "cautious about accepting the initial picture as the final one." But the decision by U.S. forces to warn people in the building "definitely speaks to their work to prevent civilian casualties."

"Their obligation is to take all feasible precautions," Motaparthi said.

She said Biden should continue to be outspoken about the need for safeguards in military operations.

"As the commander in chief, he should not just be claiming successes, but he should also be leading reforms," she said.

Senior administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to give details of the military operation, described what they depicted as painstaking efforts in the leadup to Thursday's strike to reduce the risk to civilians. That included weeks of preparation, including rehearsals of the raid.

Al-Qurayshi lived in a house that also housed multiple families, going outside only to bathe on the roof occasionally, one official said. That meant any airstrike would have all but unavoidably killed women and children and other noncombatants as well.

Given another Islamic State leader's last act in 2019 of blowing himself up with a suicide belt when confronted by U.S. commandoes, planners for Thursday's raid made a point of analyzing whether al-Qurayshi's house would collapse upon all the people inside if he did similar, as he did.

They decided the building would stand.

Luke Hartig, a former senior director for counterterrorism in President Barack Obama's National Security Council, said ground raids aren't always safer, given that civilians can be caught in the crossfire.

However, months of preparation, like what took place before Thursday's raid, can help limit the danger. "Traditionally when we've had time to properly plan operations, that's when you see the greatest precision, the greatest care for civilian harm," Hartig said.

Surging omicron cases and worker shortage likely hurt hiring

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Last month's huge wave of omicron infections is thought to have weakened hiring in January, though the pullback is considered all but sure to prove a temporary one.

Economists have forecast that the Labor Department will report Friday that employers added just 170,000 jobs last month, according to data provider FactSet. They expect the unemployment rate to remain unchanged at 3.9%.

If the forecast is accurate, January would mark the lowest monthly job gain in about a year. Some economists fear that the government's report will show that the economy actually lost jobs last month, mostly because omicron infections forced so many workers to call in sick and stay home. In some cases, the government will count those absent workers as having lost jobs.

The COVID-19 surge also likely caused many workers to suspend their job searches, exacerbating a labor shortage that has kept many people on the sidelines of the workforce and led employers to raise pay to try to draw them back in. And with so many employees out sick, some companies likely suspended their hiring, even as employers overall have millions of jobs they want to fill.

Reported omicron infections peaked at above 800,000 a day during the second week of January — precisely the period when the government measured employment for the month. A dismal jobs figure would be a stark reminder that nearly two years after it began, the pandemic retains a tight grip on the economy.

Still, most economists expect a relatively quick rebound in hiring as soon as this month. Nationally, reported omicron infections are tumbling. And the overall outlook for the job market remains bright, with many businesses still desperate to hire: The number of job openings in late December reached nearly 11 million, just below a record set in July. The pace of layoffs and the unemployment rate are both near pre-pandemic lows.

Last month, a survey by the Census Bureau found that nearly 8.8 million people didn't work in early January because they were either sick with COVID-19 or had to care for someone who was. That was more than triple the corresponding number in early December. A majority of those workers likely benefited from employer-paid sick leave, and their staying home would not have affected the job count.

But about one-fifth of workers — particularly lower-paid service employees, who are most likely to contract the virus — have no paid leave. If they missed a full pay period for sickness, their jobs would be counted as lost for the month, even though they were still employed. That would shrink the government's job count for January.

The Labor Department uses a different method to calculate the monthly unemployment rate. With this method, even workers who were home sick during last month would be counted as employed if they have a job to return to.

The differences in the ways the numbers are calculated account for why even economists who expect a job loss for January also expect the unemployment rate to stay at 3.9% or perhaps even decline slightly.

Any hiring slowdown or job loss would come after the U.S. gained more jobs last year, adjusted for the size of the workforce, than in any year since 1978. The unemployment rate fell by nearly 3 percentage points — from 6.7% to 3.9% — the sharpest yearly decline on records. Much of that improvement represented a rebound from record job losses in 2020, driven by the pandemic.

But the economy's strong growth and hiring last year were accompanied by the highest inflation rate in four decades, spurred by brisk consumer spending on furniture, electronics, appliances and other goods.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 45 of 81

Snarled supply chains limited the availability of many items, forcing up prices. High inflation has wiped out many Americans' pay gains.

Omicron infections are likely slowing the economy in the January-March quarter, particularly compared with the rapid expansion that occurred in the final three months of 2021, when it grew at a robust 6.9% annual rate. Some analysts have forecast that growth will weaken to an annual rate as low as 1% in the first three months of this year.

One reason for the slowdown: Americans cut their spending in January as the spread of the coronavirus discouraged some people from eating out, traveling and going to movies and other entertainment venues.

Yet as omicron fades, there are signs that consumers are ready to spend again. Auto sales jumped in January after several months of declines. Carmakers have been able to slowly ramp up production. And Americans' incomes rose at a solid pace last month, providing fuel for future spending.

Turmoil worries Peru as president again overhauls Cabinet

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Turmoil in Peru's government boiled this week as President Pedro Castillo overhauled his Cabinet for a third time in six months and then it quickly emerged his new prime minister has faced domestic violence claims, highlighting doubts about the political neophyte's ability to lead a nation.

Castillo, a rural schoolteacher in a poor Andean district, was an underdog when he entered the race for the presidency last year and initially campaigned on promises to nationalize Peru's crucial mining industry and rewrite the constitution to end the historical discrimination against Indigenous people and vulnerable populations. He softened his rhetoric when he advanced to a runoff and shocked everyone when he came out victorious.

Critics immediately warned about his nonexistent political experience. Just months into the job, which he assumed as the country suffered like few others from the coronavirus pandemic, some of his decisions have validated the criticism. But they have also highlighted Peru's long-dysfunctional political system in which no party holds a majority and it is difficult to push through new programs or make changes.

Castillo on Tuesday appointed a new prime minister and replaced half of the 18-member Cabinet, including the ministers of finance and foreign relations. And as Peru grapples with a big oil spill from a refinery on its Pacific coast, the raised questions by naming a geography teacher and member of the president's party as minister of the environment.

The changes came after the previous interior minister and prime minister resigned and accused Castillo of not acting swiftly against corruption, an endemic problem in Peru. They also complained that the 52-year-old leader listens to dubious advisers.

"Once in office, inexperience and bad advice do come into play," said Cynthia Sanborn, political science professor at Peru's Universidad del Pacifico and a fellow at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center. "Not only was Castillo unprepared for national political office, he also did not have a political or social base to count on for support, nor was he able to bring in capable advisers and experts in the various sectors any president needs to govern."

Sanborn said Peru was long overdue for social change when Castillo took office last July, but he and his party and allies on his left lacked the political and technical skills to deliver. As a result, she said, various groups are "surrounding the president and taking advantage of the situation to advance private and illicit interests."

Every Peruvian president of the past 36 years has been ensnarled in corruption allegations, with some imprisoned. One killed himself before police could arrest him.

Finishing first among 18 presidential hopefuls in April's election, Castillo advanced to a runoff ballot with less than 20% of the overall vote. He then defeated a member of the country's political elite by just 44,000 votes, becoming Peru's fifth president since 2016. He succeeded Francisco Sagasti, who was appointed by Congress in November 2020 as the South American nation cycled through three heads of

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 46 of 81

state in one week.

A revolving door of Cabinet members has plagued previous administrations in Peru, but Castillo "is certainly hitting some records," said Claudia Navas, an analyst with the global firm Control Risks.

Interior Minister Avelino Guillén resigned last week alleging Castillo had not supported him to make changes in the police so authorities could more efficiently fight corruption and organized crime. On Monday, Prime Minister Mirtha Vásquez quit, also saying that Castillo was not addressing corruption.

"What the government lacks is a direction, to define a direction," Guillén said after resigning.

By Tuesday, Castillo was already reshuffling his Cabinet. He appointed fellow Peru Libre party member and teacher Wilber Supo the environment minister amid the country's worst environmental disaster in recent years, from the coastal spill of nearly 500,000 gallons of oil in mid-January.

But a bigger problem may be selecting Héctor Valer as prime minister. Shortly after the announcement, it became public that authorities in 2017 granted a protection order to Valer's wife, who alleged domestic violence, and that a year earlier his daughter reported him to police for allegedly hitting her.

Valer denied the accusations Thursday during an interview with a radio station. He invited psychologists to publicly analyze him, which he said would clear him. "I am not afraid," he said. "I'm not a perpetrator, I'm not one that hits (others)."

Castillo has not commented on the situation.

Previous members of his Cabinet have also been accused of wrongdoing. So has his former private secretary, whose corruption investigation led the prosecutor's office to find \$20,000 in a bathroom of the presidential palace.

"Castillo is facing growing pressures from the unions and social organizations that supported him who want to have increased participation in his government," said Navas, the Control Risks analyst. "Some of his Cabinet appointments reflect that pressure — also how he is seeking to strike a balance between responding to the demands of his constituents and improving relations with Congress."

The analyst added that "this practice is not particularly unique to Castillo, but a reflection of the structural flaws of the political system regardless of who is in power."

Peru's 130-seat, unicameral Congress is deeply fragmented among 10 political parties and rarely can come to any consensus on passing legislation. Castillo's party is the biggest faction, but it has only 37 seats, and opposition members lead key committee.

The divisions make it highly unlikely that Castillo will find sufficient support for passing yet-to-be defined proposals to implement his promise to create a Peru where there are "no more poor in a rich country."

Analysts say the factionalism also might help keep Castillo in office.

"With local and regional elections coming up later this year, the parties will scramble to get ready and may not want to attempt to win national office at this point," said Sanborn, the university professor. "A lot depends on how strong public outrage will be — if there are sustained protests — and, also, what position the media take."

Asian shares shrug off tech-led selloff on Wall Street

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Asian shares were mostly higher Friday after a historic plunge in the stock price of Facebook's parent company helped yank other tech stocks lower on Wall Street.

Hong Kong jumped 2.6% after reopening from Lunar New Year holidays. Shanghai remained closed. Tokyo and Seoul advanced while Sydney was lower. Other regional markets were higher.

Thursday's retreat in New York ended a four-day winning streak for the market.

The 26.4% wipeout in Meta Platforms, as Facebook's owner is now known, erased more than \$230 billion in market value, easily the biggest one-day loss in history for a U.S. company. The stocks of other social media companies including Twitter and Snap also fell.

Because Meta is valued so highly, a big swing in its stock price can also sink or lift broader market indexes. The S&P 500 fell 2.4%, its biggest drop in nearly a year, to 4,477.44.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 47 of 81

The tech-focused Nasdaq composite gave up 3.7%, its biggest loss since September 2020, closing at 13,878.82. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which does not include Meta Platforms, fell 1.5% to 35,111.16.

Small company stocks also fell. The Russell 2000 index lost 38.48 points, or 1.9%, to 1,991.03. But Asian markets were little affected.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng rose 607 points to 24,391.85. The Nikkei 225 in Tokyo edged less than 0.1% higher, to 27,269.22. South Korea's Kospi advanced 0.8% to 2,728.00. In Sydney, the S&P/ASX 200 declined 0.1% to 7,068.30.

Trading has been muted this week, with Chinese markets closed and coronavirus cases still surging in Asia, especially in Japan and Hong Kong,

Investors are watching for the latest update on the recovering U.S. jobs market. The Labor Department will release its monthly report for January on Friday.

On Wall Street, Meta sank after forecasting revenue well below analysts' expectations for the current quarter following privacy changes by Apple and increased competition from TikTok. It was a disappointment for a company that investors have become accustomed to delivering spectacular growth. Meta also reported a rare decline in profit due to a sharp increase in expenses as it invests in transforming itself into a virtual reality-based company.

The steep drop weighed on fellow social media company Twitter, which fell 5.6%. Snapchat's parent company Snap sank 23.6% and Pinterest lost 10.3%. Snap soared 54% and Pinterest vaulted 28% in after-market trading after each reported better-than-expected results. Amazon.com jumped 18% in after-hours trading after reporting strong fourth-quarter results despite supply chain snags.

Big technology and communications companies played a big role in driving gains for the broader market throughout the pandemic and much of the recovery in 2021. But investors have been shifting money in expectation of rising interest rates, which make shares in high-flying tech companies and other expensive growth stocks relatively less attractive.

Bond yields rose sharply on Thursday. The yield on the 10-year Treasury note, which is used as a benchmark to set interest rates on mortgages and many other kinds of loans, rose to 1.84% from 1.76% late Wednesday.

The Federal Reserve is planning its first interest rate hike in March, aiming to tamp down inflation that has surged to 40-year highs. Those higher costs will likely persist until supply chains loosen and help ease costs for businesses and perhaps lower prices for consumers.

In Europe, the Bank of England raised interest rates for the second time in three months on Thursday, moving more quickly to tame inflation than the Fed and the European Central Bank. Meanwhile, the head of the ECB said record inflation could linger for "longer than expected" and appeared to open the door ever so slightly for a rate increase this year. Stock markets in Europe fell.

Spotify slumped 16.8% after the leading music-streaming service gave investors a weak forecast for a closely watched measure of its earnings. The company has come under pressure after Neil Young pulled his music from its platform to protest the spreading of COVID-19 misinformation by Spotify's star podcaster, Joe Rogan. Other musicians have followed.

Wall Street's major indexes are still on track for weekly gains, helped by strong earnings reports from companies like Apple, Exxon, UPS and Google's parent Alphabet.

In other trading, U.S. benchmark crude oil picked up 56 cents to \$90.83 per gallon after surging \$2.01 to \$90.27 per gallon on Thursday.

Brent crude, the basis for pricing international oils, added 39 cents to \$91.50 per gallon.

The U.S. dollar slipped to 114.95 Japanese yen from 114.96 yen late Thursday. The euro rose to \$1.1469 from \$1.1437.

GOP now looks to censure Cheney and Kinzinger, not oust them

By SAM METZ and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Republican officials meeting in Utah advanced a watered-down resolution

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 48 of 81

Thursday that would formally censure GOP Reps. Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their perceived disloyalty to former President Donald Trump but not seek to expel them from the party.

The resolution's passage through a subcommittee followed hours of hand-wringing over language that initially would have called on the House Republican Conference to oust Cheney and Kinzinger, the only Republicans on the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol. The censure resolution is expected to be voted on Friday by all 168 Republican National Committee members at their winter meeting in Salt Lake City.

"We want to send a message that we're disapproving of their conduct. It's a middle ground," RNC member Harmeet Dhillon said, noting that the vote was unanimous.

"This is not about being anti-Trump. There are many anti-Trump Republicans that are not included in this resolution. These two took a specific action to defy party leadership," she added.

The effort to punish Cheney, of Wyoming, and Kinzinger, of Illinois, comes as party officials juggle preparation for this year's midterm elections, when control of Congress and 36 governorships are at stake, with planning for the 2024 presidential election. In Salt Lake City this week, they've discussed where to host their 2024 party convention and whether to compel their candidates not to participate in presidential debates, a cause important to Trump.

But the last-minute change to the resolution puts in question Trump's overarching influence on a party apparatus that has largely acquiesced to his wishes. The former president and other GOP members were incensed when Kinzinger and Cheney agreed to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's invitation to join the Democratic-led House committee investigating the insurrection, giving the panel a veneer of bipartisan credibility.

The draft censure resolution accuses Kinzinger and Cheney of "participating in a Democrat-led persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse" and of "utilizing their past professed political affiliation to mask Democrat abuse of prosecutorial power for partisan purposes."

It says the RNC will "immediately cease any and all support" of Kinzinger and Cheney as members of the party and says the RNC denounces "those who deliberately jeopardize victory in November."

Republican Party Chair Ronna McDaniel did not respond to request for comment Thursday on the resolution changes, but Dhillon said RNC resolutions are routinely revised.

Not every RNC member was supportive of the initial draft resolution for expulsion.

"It's distracting from what should be our main objective: winning back the House and the Senate. We should be focused on taking on Democrats and not each other. This is not time well spent," Bill Palatucci, a committee member from New Jersey, said of the effort to punish Cheney and Kinzinger.

The resolution to expel Cheney and Kinzinger was spearheaded by David Bossie, a Maryland committee member who previously served as a Trump campaign adviser, and Frank Eathorne, chair of Wyoming's Republican Party. Eathorne declined to comment on the revised resolution after its passage.

The initial draft, obtained by The Associated Press, had accused Cheney and Kinzinger of serving as "pawns to parrot Democrat talking points" on the Jan. 6 House committee and chided them for deposing their colleagues and "pursuing what amounts to a third political impeachment of President Trump."

"The Conference must not be sabotaged by Rep. Liz Cheney and Rep. Adam Kinzinger who have demonstrated, with actions and words, that they support Democrat efforts to destroy President Trump more than they support winning back a Republican majority in 2023," it said.

The RNC has no formal power over the party's congressional members, so how much weight a resolution to expel them from the House Republican Conference would have carried in Congress if passed is unclear.

Kinzinger released a statement after the vote saying "conspiracies and toxic tribalism" were hindering Republicans' "ability to see clear-eyed."

"Rather than focus their efforts on how to help the American people, my fellow Republicans have chosen to censure two lifelong members of their party for simply upholding their oaths of office," he said.

Cheney has already been censured by the Wyoming Republican Party, but the voters who will determine her fate are less conservative than party insiders. Wyoming allows voters to change party affiliation at

the polls, meaning Cheney could draw enough independent and even Democratic support to prevail in the Republican primary Aug. 16.

Cheney over the past year has raised \$7.2 million, ranking ninth among all U.S. House candidates, according to the Federal Election Commission. That included over \$2 million over the last three months of 2021, more than four times as much as her leading primary opponent raised, and Cheney finished the year with over 10 times as much campaign money.

Cheney said in a tweet Thursday night that she didn't recognize those she felt had abandoned the U.S. Constitution in service of Trump.

"The leaders of the Republican Party have made themselves willing hostages to a man who admits he tried to 'overturn' a presidential election and suggests he would pardon Jan. 6 defendants, some of whom have been charged with seditious conspiracy," she said.

Greg McMichael won't plead to hate crime in Arbery death

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — The man who initiated the deadly chase that ended in the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery has reversed course and decided to plead not guilty to a federal hate crime in the 2020 killing of the unarmed Black man, according to a legal filing late Thursday.

Greg McMichael's decision came days after a U.S. District Court judge rejected terms of a plea deal that he and his son, Travis McMichael, had negotiated with prosecutors. That deal was met with passionate objections by Arbery's parents. McMichael's defense attorney said in a legal notice filed jointly with prosecutors that McMichael now plans to stand trial for a second time in Arbery's death.

The McMichaels and a neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, were convicted of murder in a Georgia state court last fall and sentenced to life in prison. Separate from that case, the three white men also were indicted in U.S. District Court on charges that they violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he was Black.

The McMichaels armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after spotting the 25-year-old man running past their home just outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. Bryan joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael blasting Arbery with a shotgun.

Travis McMichael was scheduled for a plea hearing Friday morning to announce whether he would move forward with a guilty plea in the federal case. Jury selection in that case is set to begin Monday.

Both men had planned to plead guilty to a hate crime charge earlier this week after prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed on a 30-year sentence that would include a request to transfer the McMichaels from Georgia's state prison system to federal custody. The deal would have required the McMichaels to admit to racist motives and forfeit the right to appeal their federal sentence.

U.S. District Judge Lisa Godbey Wood rejected the deal Monday after Arbery's parents objected, arguing conditions in federal prison wouldn't be as harsh. Wood said she ultimately denied the deal because it would have locked her into a specific sentence.

The judge told the men that if they still decided to plead guilty she would not guarantee their sentence.

Prosecutors asked the judge to approve the plea deals despite the objections from Arbery's family. Prosecutor Tara Lyons said that attorneys for Arbery's parents told the U.S. Justice Department that the family wouldn't object to the plea deals.

Lee Merritt, an attorney for Arbery's mother, said the slain man's family had previously rejected the same terms and "no longer wanted to engage" prosecutors, who "took that as a deferral."

During the murder trial in state court, defense attorneys argued the McMichaels were justified in pursuing Arbery because they had a reasonable suspicion that he had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Travis McMichael testified that he opened fire with his shotgun after Arbery attacked him with fists and tried to grab the weapon.

CNN exec's ouster rattles prominent staff at pivotal time

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The abrupt ouster of CNN chief executive Jeff Zucker because of a workplace relationship has left some prominent employees feeling angry and uncertain about the direction of their network at a pivotal moment.

The company is about to undergo a corporate ownership change, launch a paid streaming service and replace its most popular on-air host at a time of slumping ratings.

It became clear Thursday that Zucker's exit after nine years as CNN's leader was anything but voluntary.

Zucker said he was leaving for violating corporate policy by not disclosing the nature of his relationship with his second-in-command, Allison Gollust. But he was reportedly given no choice by WarnerMedia CEO Jason Kilar, who characterized the change as his decision at an emotional meeting with CNN Washington staff members Wednesday night. The Associated Press obtained an audio recording of that meeting.

The nature of that meeting, coupled with the fact that Zucker's exit became a watercooler issue — former President Donald Trump released two statements on it — speaks to his unusual influence as a media executive.

"He was a larger-than-life figure in the political ecosystem, the media ecosystem and at CNN," said Mark Lukaszewicz, dean of Hofstra University's School of Communication and a former colleague of Zucker's at NBC News.

Kilar was peppered with questions by CNN's Washington staff. They wondered whether he sought advice from other executives, why Zucker wasn't given a transition period and whether rumored antipathy between the two men played a role in the decision, according to the recording.

"Given that these are two consenting adults ... why is that a fireable offense?" asked White House reporter Kaitlan Collins.

TV host Jake Tapper said that there is a perception that Chris Cuomo — fired in December as a CNN host because he'd been privately advising his brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo — had essentially succeeded in a threat to embarrass the company by revealing the relationship if it didn't pay a settlement fee.

"How do we get past the perception that this is the bad guy winning?" Tapper asked at the meeting.

Even some of the people named to temporarily replace Zucker — veteran CNN executives Michael Bass, Amy Entelis and Ken Jautz — spoke to his impact on the organization and said they would be following the direction he set.

Jautz said during the staff meeting that after CNN founder Ted Turner, "Jeff had more impact on this place than anybody, certainly any more than any executive."

CNN's John King described Zucker's hands-on influence in what went on the air and a fear of the unknown without him.

"You may not agree with every decision," King said at the meeting. "But you knew someone is going to make a decision, you're going to know which way you're going. And this company has had long periods of time where that didn't exist and those are unpleasant times."

The selection of a new leader will ultimately rest with David Zaslav, named as head of the new company created by the pending merger of Discovery, Inc. and WarnerMedia.

But it means CNN is suddenly without its point person as it prepares to launch the CNN+ streaming service this spring. Zucker has been active in building its features and recruiting talent like former Fox News host Chris Wallace, and he was set to become a public cheerleader for it.

Kilar, in the Washington meeting, described the launch of CNN+ as every bit as important as the beginning of CNN itself. Adding to the challenge is that it will be a paid service at a time there are others in the industry, with the exception of Fox Nation, that are offering access for free.

CNN also needs to replace Cuomo in its primetime lineup, and is going with a series of substitutes. Zucker recently approached Gayle King for the job before she decided to re-sign with CBS News.

The television network's viewership has dropped dramatically in the past year. News ratings have always

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 51 of 81

been cyclical, and the 2020 election brought record numbers of people in, but there's always the question of when, or if, they will come back.

CNN is also coming off a contentious period where Trump frequently referred to the network as "fake news." In the meeting with Kilar, CNN's Jim Acosta said Zucker had stood strong against the attacks and worried whether anyone else would do the same.

CNN on-air personnel under Zucker, like Acosta, have become much more opinionated and that hasn't always been popular.

"It's interesting to see if that culture is going to shift with new leadership," said Jennifer Thomas, a Howard University journalism professor who worked at CNN as a producer in the 2000s.

Some people, like Thomas, have called for a reset. One is influential cable executive John Malone, a top stockholder in Discovery, who said on CNBC in November that "I would like to see CNN evolve back to the kind of journalism that it started with."

Lukasiewicz said he didn't see any reason to think that shift is going to happen. What's most interesting is what the emergence of streaming as a news platform with a different audience will mean for the industry, he said.

It's a tough time for CNN to enter a period with interim leadership, Lukasiewicz said. But not all such times of turmoil end up being negative.

"Sometimes the change of leadership, while not welcome at the moment, can lead to good things down the line," he said.

World leaders: Who's coming, who isn't to Beijing Olympics

BEIJING (AP) — The U.S., Britain and a handful of others aren't sending dignitaries to the Beijing Winter Games as part of a diplomatic boycott, but the Chinese capital is still attracting an array of world leaders for Friday's opening ceremony.

A look at who is attending, who is staying away and why:

ATTENDING

— RUSSIA: President Vladimir Putin is meeting Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping ahead of the opening ceremony, underscoring closer ties between Beijing and Moscow as they both face Western criticism and pressure.

— EGYPT AND SERBIA: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic have growing frictions with the West over their authoritarian policies and human rights records. Both leaders have gravitated toward China. Vucic called Xi his "brother" for supplying Serbia with respirators and vaccines.

— SAUDI ARABIA, QATAR, UAE: Beijing's Gulf relations are above all about energy. China is Saudi Arabia's largest buyer of oil and a major customer for Qatar's natural gas. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto leader, is appearing at the Winter Games as investors and some governments signal warming relations after the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

— CENTRAL ASIA: The leaders of all five former Soviet republics in Central Asia are heading to Beijing, highlighting the region's increasingly close ties with China. Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Zhaparov pushed last month for the revival of a long-delayed project to build a railroad from China through his country to Uzbekistan. China is Turkmenistan's only reliable major buyer of natural gas.

— ARGENTINA AND ECUADOR: Argentina is set to become the first major Latin American country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. President Alberto Fernández is also expected to discuss China's help building Argentina's first nuclear power plant since 1981. President Guillermo Lasso is seeking to renegotiate Ecuador's \$4.6 billion debt with China.

— UNITED NATIONS: Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus will attend. The IOC is a close partner of the U.N., Guterres said, and the Olympics bring together people with a message of solidarity and peace. "This is ... a message that, in my opinion, is more relevant than the political circumstances that exists in the countries where the Olympics take place," he

told The Associated Press.

NOT ATTENDING

— **BOYCOTTS:** The United States announced a diplomatic boycott while allowing its athletes to compete. Major U.S. allies followed including Britain, Australia and Canada, whose Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said: "We are extremely concerned by the repeated human rights violations by the Chinese government." Kosovo and Lithuania, whose relations with China have nosedived over their ties with Taiwan, are also taking part in the boycott. India said it won't send any officials following reports that a Chinese military commander who was involved in deadly clashes with Indian border forces in 2020 had been chosen as one of the Olympic torchbearers in Beijing.

— **NON-BOYCOTTERS:** The Norwegian and Swedish royals, who normally attend the Winter Olympics, aren't going. Neither are any leaders from Germany, Austria or Switzerland, all big winter sports nations. Officially they're citing the pandemic, rather than any diplomatic protest. Others such as Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand have cited COVID-19 restrictions while also expressing concern over China's human rights situation.

Goodell pressured by Congress to release Washington report

By BEN NUCKOLS AP Sports Writer

Former Washington Commanders employees and members of Congress pressured the NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell on Thursday to release a report about the team's history of sexual harassment and its sexist, hostile workplace culture. They said the team and owner Dan Snyder have not been held accountable for their misdeeds.

One of the six former employees who spoke before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform also came forward with a new allegation that she was sexually harassed by Snyder himself, which Snyder denied.

Complaints about the team's treatment of female employees first surfaced in 2020. Snyder commissioned an investigation into the team's workplace environment that was taken over by the NFL. The probe by attorney Beth Wilkinson's firm led the league to fine Washington \$10 million, and Snyder temporarily ceded day-to-day operations of the team to his wife, Tanya.

But the league did not release any details of the Wilkinson investigation's findings, and former employees who spoke Thursday noted the contrast to the way the NFL handled an investigation into allegations that quarterback Tom Brady deflated footballs.

"When the investigation of the air pressure of Tom Brady's football concludes with a 200-plus-page report, but the investigation into two decades of sexual harassment concludes with nothing, it shows the NFL's complete lack of respect towards women, their employees and for the culture of our country," said Emily Applegate, who worked in the team's marketing department and said she was sexually harassed daily by her direct superior.

In 2020, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and widespread protests about systemic racism, the team dropped its longtime name "Redskins" amid pressure from sponsors to get rid of a moniker that was criticized for decades for being offensive to Native Americans. The franchise was known as the Washington Football Team until Wednesday, when Snyder announced its new name, the Commanders.

"Just yesterday, Mr. Snyder tried to rebrand his team as the Commanders. With due respect, it's going to take more than a name change to fix that broken culture," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., the committee chairwoman.

Tiffani Johnston, who worked for the team for eight years starting in 2002 as a cheerleader and marketing manager, told the committee on Thursday that Snyder placed his hand on her thigh without her consent at a team dinner, and that he pushed her toward his limousine with his hand on her lower back. She had not previously disclosed those allegations to the media or investigators.

"He left his hand on the middle of my thigh until I physically removed it," Johnston said.

Describing the incident outside Snyder's limousine, she said: "The only reason Dan Snyder removed his

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 53 of 81

hand from my back and stopped pushing me towards his limo was because his attorney intervened and said, 'Dan, Dan, this is a bad idea.' ... I learned that I should remove myself from Dan's grip while his attorney was distracting him."

Maloney read from a letter by another former team employee, Jason Friedman, corroborating Johnston's account. In a statement released by the Commanders, Snyder denied Johnston's allegations.

"While past conduct at the team was unacceptable, the allegations leveled against me personally in today's roundtable — many of which are well over 13 years old — are outright lies," Snyder said. "I unequivocally deny having participated in any such conduct, at any time and with respect to any person."

In a statement, league spokesman Brian McCarthy said: "The NFL is reviewing and will consider Ms. Johnston's allegations as we would any other new allegations regarding workplace misconduct at the Washington Commanders. We will determine any further action as appropriate."

Among the allegations repeated at Thursday's roundtable discussion: that women working for the team were repeatedly subjected to unwanted touching and crude comments; that cheerleaders were ogled by team executives and clients and fired by Snyder because of their looks; and that the team's video production department, at Snyder's behest, secretly edited an explicit video of cheerleaders using surreptitious footage from a calendar shoot.

It was unclear whether pressure from Congress would prompt Goodell, who has cited former employees' privacy for not releasing the report of the investigation, to change his mind or take further action against Snyder or the team. McCarthy's statement did not address the possibility of releasing the report, but he said the former employees "demonstrated courage by sharing their painful experiences."

Congressional Republicans said it was outside the scope of the committee to push a legislative solution to the team's treatment of employees and said the roundtable was a distraction from more urgent issues.

"The witnesses here have begged for us to do something, and nothing is going to happen as a result of this committee," said Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C. "That's cruel to these people."

Lisa Banks, an attorney representing the former employees who spoke Thursday and more than 30 others, said she expects Congress to continue pursuing an end to what she called a "cover-up" by the NFL. She also criticized Republicans for what she described as "a willingness only to stand with Dan Snyder."

Asked about the scrutiny from Congress by philanthropist David Rubenstein during an appearance at the Economic Club of Washington, Commanders President Jason Wright said the team's workplace problems occurred before his arrival. Wright is the only Black team president in the NFL and highlighted the diversity of the staff he has built.

"The period of this rebrand and the time we've been here has coincided with a period of very fast, very deep and irreversible change within the organization," Wright said.

US says new intel shows Russia plotting false flag attack

By AAMER MADHANI, LORNE COOK and SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action against its neighbor.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the scheme included production of a graphic propaganda video that would show staged explosions and use corpses and actors depicting grieving mourners.

The U.S. has not provided detailed information backing up the claims.

The plan for a fake attack on Russian territory or Russian-speaking people was described in declassified intelligence shared with Ukrainian officials and European allies in recent days. It was the latest example of the Biden administration divulging intelligence findings as a tactic to attempt to stop Russian disinformation efforts and foil what it says is Russian President Vladimir Putin's effort to lay the groundwork for military action. If Russia does invade, administration officials say they want to make clear Russia had always sought to create a pretext.

In recent weeks, the White House has said that U.S. intelligence shows Russia has launched a malign social media disinformation campaign against Ukraine and has dispatched operatives trained in explosives

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 54 of 81

to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces. Britain has divulged intelligence findings that it says show Russia plotting to install a pro-Russian puppet government in Ukraine.

"We've seen these kinds of activity by the Russians in the past, and we believe it's important when we see it like this and we can, to call it out," Kirby told reporters at the Pentagon.

The administration has repeatedly declined to detail evidence underlying its intelligence findings. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Thursday the administration needed to protect sensitive sources and intelligence gathering methods.

He added "we declassify information only when we're confident in that information."

Meanwhile on Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered to mediate talks between Russia and Ukraine, and NATO warned that Moscow's military buildup continues, with more troops and military equipment deployed to neighboring Belarus than at any time in the last 30 years.

Erdogan, who has close but sometimes difficult ties with Putin, said Turkey was "prepared to undertake its part in order to end the crisis between two friendly nations that are its neighbors in the Black Sea."

"I have stressed that we would be happy to host a summit meeting at a leadership level or technical level talks," Erdogan said after about three hours of talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "Instead of fueling the fire, we act with the logical aim of reducing the tensions."

Russia has amassed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's northern and eastern borders, raising concern that Moscow might invade again, as it did in 2014. The troop presence and uncertainty have unnerved Ukrainians and hurt the country's economy. Russian officials deny that an invasion is planned.

Zelenskyy welcomed Erdogan's offer and thanked him for his "firm and consistent" support.

The crisis has put Turkey in a fix, leaving it in a position where it has to balance its growing partnership with Ukraine with its difficult relations with Moscow. Ankara, which has historic ties to Ukraine and ethnic bonds with its Crimean Tatar community, strongly opposed Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.

At the same time, Turkey would be reluctant to join in any sanctions against Russia. With a struggling economy, the country has pinned its hopes on tourism revenue, especially from visitors from Russia. It also relies on Russia for much of its natural gas.

The U.S. said the new intelligence indicates that the Russians would stage military equipment used by Ukraine, including a key weapon supplied by Turkey, a NATO member, to bolster the credibility of a fake attack.

Russia would possibly use Turkish-made Bayraktar drones as part of the fake operation, according to a senior administration official who was not authorized to comment and spoke on the condition of anonymity. The drones have been used by Ukraine against pro-Russia separatists in the Donbas region, a move that angered Moscow, which has made clear it is strongly opposed to Ukraine being equipped with the technology.

Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron spoke again Thursday, their third call in less than a week. The Kremlin said in a statement that they continued a "detailed dialogue about the situation around Ukraine" and added that Putin drew Macron's attention to "provocative statements and actions" by the Ukrainian leadership.

At NATO headquarters, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that Russian troop numbers in Belarus are likely to climb to 30,000, with the backing of special forces, advanced fighter jets, Iskander short-range ballistic missiles and S-400 ground-to-air missile defense systems.

"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.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was in Minsk on Thursday, checking on preparations for major Russia-Belarus war games scheduled for Feb. 10 to Feb. 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, Ukraine's defense minister sought again to project calm, saying the probability of an invasion was "low," and he welcomed a change by U.S. officials, who have stopped using the term "imminent" when describing the risk of a Russian attack.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 55 of 81

Oleksii Reznikov said "the threat exists, the risks exist, but they have existed since 2014, ever since Russia has become an aggressor." He said "there are no grounds for panic, fear, flight or the packing of bags." The minister put the number of Russian troops near Ukraine at 115,000.

Still, Stoltenberg renewed his call for 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.

In Helsinki, Finnish leaders held talks with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen about a letter that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent to several countries on the "indivisibility of security" in Europe.

Lavrov argues that the U.S. and NATO misunderstand the concept — which essentially means that the security of one European country is linked to the security of them all — and he has demanded replies from countries that signed a key security document encompassing it to clarify the issue.

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said there was no "big news" in the letter but that it warranted a reply. Von der Leyen said the commission, the EU's executive branch, will coordinate a response, even though Lavrov insisted that only countries and not organizations should answer.

Aldrich sexual assault scandal hits home far from Blackhawks

By JAY COHEN AP Sports Writer

When Brad Aldrich brought the Stanley Cup home to northern Michigan, it was front-page news in a community that proudly calls itself the birthplace of professional hockey.

Standing in the bleachers of a high school gym, the former assistant coach of the Chicago Blackhawks hoisted the championship trophy overhead as dozens of students looked on. If they just worked hard, he promised that day in the fall of 2010, they could achieve the same kind of success.

Three years later, after Aldrich pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting one of the high school hockey players he had volunteered to coach, the anger and embarrassment stirred by the case left many in Houghton County anxious to forget.

But weeks after the Blackhawks resolved a pair of lawsuits accusing the franchise of covering for Aldrich after a similar allegation by player Kyle Beach in 2010, ugly questions raised by the scandal live on, not only in Chicago, but well beyond.

"It's one of the biggest black eyes in NHL history and it's because of a kid from our home area," said Corey Markham, Houghton High School's longtime hockey coach.

Hockey and community life are closely intertwined in Houghton County, and Aldrich hailed from one of its most well-known families. His father, Mike Aldrich, was the longtime equipment manager for the NHL's San Jose Sharks, and his uncle was a principal and an assistant hockey coach at Houghton. Before the Blackhawks, Brad Aldrich, himself, had been a youth hockey coach.

In the end, though, none of that mattered.

"If we had known that (was) the reason he was let go with the Blackhawks, he wouldn't have been working with our high school kids and stuff like that," Markham said. "So that's very disappointing that they didn't notify anyone."

Attempts by the AP to reach Brad Aldrich, now 39, were unsuccessful.

After he resigned his position with Chicago, Aldrich worked or volunteered for USA Hockey, the University of Notre Dame and Miami University in Ohio before returning to his native Michigan.

Spokesmen for USA Hockey and Notre Dame said the organizations had not received any complaints about Aldrich. But trouble surfaced again at Miami.

Aldrich worked three one-week hockey camps at Miami before he was hired as director of hockey operations in July 2012, according to a report by an outside law firm that was commissioned by the school.

Aldrich did not provide any references on his résumé, according to the report. Then-coach Rico Blasi recalled that he and his staff received "favorable information" from coaches at Notre Dame.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 56 of 81

The law firm's report detailed two sexual assault allegations against Aldrich at Miami. The first, in November 2012, led to his resignation. The second was not lodged until August 2018, when a former student said he had been sexually assaulted by Aldrich at about the same time. Neither allegation was prosecuted.

The man who made the 2018 allegation is one of three people now weighing lawsuits against the Blackhawks for the team's handling of the matter, said Christopher Cortese, a Chicago attorney representing the men.

They include a onetime player in the Blackhawks' organization who told investigators he received two sexually explicit text messages from Aldrich during the 2010 playoffs. Cortese said he also represents Paul Vincent, a former skills coach with the Blackhawks who has said he encouraged team leadership to take the players' allegations to the police. Vincent and the player believe they were blacklisted by the franchise after the allegations against Aldrich were brought to the team's attention, the lawyer said.

Cortese told the AP on Thursday his firm is preparing lawsuits while maintaining talks with the team. The Blackhawks did not immediately respond to a message left by the AP seeking comment. The potential litigation was first reported by TSN.

Soon after the first allegation at Miami, Blasi held a team meeting to announce Aldrich was gone.

"He said just if any of you have his numbers, delete his numbers, don't be in contact with him. He's not part of our team anymore," said Taylor Richart, a former defenseman on the Miami team.

Blasi, now the coach at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, did not return messages seeking comment.

"No one's happy about what happened with the Blackhawks," said Bryon Paulazzo, who played for the Miami squad and recalls Aldrich's brief tenure and mysterious departure. "This is a terrible situation and it shouldn't have happened."

In Houghton, a close-knit and remote community on a bay that feeds into Lake Superior, the hurt lingers.

Hockey is a big deal in Houghton. On the downtown waterfront, Dee Stadium bills itself as the site where pro hockey began in the early 1900s, with a hockey history museum documenting the sport's local roots. A mile away, the nationally ranked Michigan Tech University men's team averages more than 2,500 fans for its games.

"It's like a religion," said John Ryyanen, a 50-year-old father of seven who grew up in the area.

"You can imagine a small community like this, a very well-known family. Something like this happens, it's a shock," he said.

Aldrich returned home in September 2010 with the newly won championship trophy loaned to him by the Blackhawks.

"Success is not easy but it's fun," he told students at Hancock Central High School, across a canal from Houghton. "With hard work and a lot of dedication, which is probably the biggest thing, you can do it."

When he returned again in late 2012, his uncle, an assistant coach at Houghton High, asked Markham if he'd be interested in having Brad Aldrich work with the players.

The younger Aldrich had worked as a substitute teacher while a student at Northern Michigan University, simultaneously coaching youth travel hockey teams. He also had worked as a video intern for San Jose's NHL franchise, before joining the Blackhawks.

"I had known Brad since he was a little kid," Markham said, "So I figured how awesome for us that we have a Stanley Cup-winning coach that's going to be in town and will help us out."

Months after his return, Brad Aldrich was charged with sexually assaulting one of Houghton's players after a party where teens had been drinking alcohol. He pleaded guilty to fourth-degree criminal sexual assault and was sentenced to nine months in jail.

The Michigan Amateur Hockey Association said Aldrich was a volunteer coach with Marquette Junior Hockey Corp. from 2001 to 2005. MAHA said it had not received any complaints or reports of misconduct by Aldrich.

A former Houghton player, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation, said many people in the community "just want to move on from it, pretend it didn't happen, because it's embarrassing."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 57 of 81

The lawyer who brought the suits against the Blackhawks put part of the blame on the NHL franchise. "The Blackhawks gave Mr. Aldrich the actual Stanley Cup to take to Houghton to show it off," attorney Susan Loggans wrote in a letter to the team's lawyers. "The Cup was inscribed with Mr. Aldrich's name. Standing alone, this communication vouches for Mr. Aldrich's suitability as a coach."

Aldrich's name on the Cup was marked over last year after Blackhawks owner Rocky Wirtz wrote to Hall of Fame chairman Lanny McDonald, calling Aldrich's behavior "unforgivable" and saying the team made a mistake by submitting his name.

The law firm hired by the Blackhawks found that franchise leaders largely ignored Beach's allegations. Aldrich told investigators that the encounter was consensual.

Facing questions Wednesday for the first time since the firm's report was published in October, an angry Wirtz refused to address the team's handling of the sexual assault allegations.

"We're not going to talk about Kyle Beach," he said. "We're not going to talk about anything that happened. Now we're moving on. What more do I have to say?"

Wirtz, 69, ended up apologizing for his reaction later in the night.

Looking back, Michael Makinen, who prosecuted the Michigan case, still puzzles over his community's willingness to trust Aldrich.

"Leaving the Chicago Blackhawks and turning up as a volunteer coach in a county of 35,000 people doesn't make sense," Makinen said.

"There's a lot of local people who believe our area is the best area in the world. They accept someone saying, 'I want to come here because the way of life is so good.' ... In my position, I'm a little more skeptical."

Biden in NYC: Nation must come together to end gun violence

By JOSH BOAK, COLLEEN LONG and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Running through a grim tally of recent gun deaths, President Joe Biden pledged to New Yorkers and the nation on Thursday that the federal government would step up its fight against gun violence by working more closely with police and communities to stop the surging bloodshed.

"It's enough. Enough is enough," Biden told police, law enforcement officials and lawmakers gathered at the city's police headquarters. "We can do something about this."

But Biden's crimefighting strategy relies heavily on buy-in from state and local officials as he suggests ways to spend federal dollars and expands on initiatives already under way. The modest initiatives demonstrate the limits to what he can do when there is no appetite in Congress to pass gun legislation.

Biden came to New York a day after the funeral for the second of two New York City cops shot and killed during a domestic violence call on Jan. 21. Officials wrapped up the event to get to the hospital, where another officer was being released after an injury in yet another shooting.

The visit gave the president a chance to push back against Republicans who claim he's soft on crime, and to distance himself from those in the left flank of his Democratic Party who want to shift funding away from police departments to social spending programs.

"The answer is not to defund the police," Biden said. "It is to give you the tools, the training, the funding to be partners, to be protectors and know the community."

Biden ticked through how 316 people are shot every day and 106 killed, including 26 children who died in gun violence so far this year. In New York last month, an 11-month-old girl was wounded by a stray bullet and a teenage fast-food cashier was shot to death. Thirty-two officers have been shot in the line of duty so far this year nationwide, seven of them killed.

Biden is navigating complex politics: He's working to find ways to combat crime while also pushing for greater accountability after high-profile killings of Black people by police.

"The answer is not to abandon our streets," Biden said. "The answer is to come together, policing communities, building trust and making us all safer."

Most of the talk Thursday was centered on better policing. Efforts to take stronger legislative action in recent years have failed, even after 20 children and six adults were killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook school

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 58 of 81

shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.

Like Democratic presidents before him, Biden called on Congress to pass a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. But he also spoke of the powerful gun lobby that has been effective at curbing any effort to rein in guns and that points to the Second Amendment right to bear arms.

"There's no amendment that's absolute," Biden insisted. "When the amendment was passed, it didn't say anybody can own a gun — any kind of gun — and any kind of weapon."

The president was joined by New York lawmakers, Attorney General Merrick Garland, Gov. Kathy Hochul and Mayor Eric Adams, a former police captain. Once an outspoken critic of his own department and someone who was beaten by police as a teenager, Adams portrayed himself during his campaign as someone who could bridge the divide between the New York Police Department and activists pushing for major change.

"We understand how serious this moment is," Adams said, telling Biden, "Mayor Adams, reporting for duty, ready to serve."

Biden listened in on a gun violence strategic partnership meeting, a daily get-together for local, state and federal leaders who share intelligence and information on specific cases. He then headed to a school in Queens to hear firsthand from a frontline violence intervention community group about efforts to prevent violence.

Guns are at the center of the debate as the nation grapples with homicides that spiked nationally in 2020, the final year of the Trump administration. Even before the spike, 75% of all homicides in the U.S. were due to firearm injuries and guns were responsible for 91% of youth homicides, according to a January report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control on gun violence and suicides over 2018-19.

This comes as Americans purchased a record number of firearms in 2020. Law enforcement officers recovered historically high numbers of firearms last year and are coming across more firearms stripped of serial numbers, making them impossible to trace. And early data suggests that the period between when a gun was purchased and used in a crime and recovered by police has shortened, compared with earlier years.

To combat this, the Biden administration is clamping down more on traders of "ghost guns," homemade firearms that lack serial numbers used to trace them and that are often purchased without a background check.

The Justice Department is working to stop the movement of guns north along the "iron pipeline" on the Interstate 95 corridor from Southern states with lax gun laws. Federal prosecutors will prioritize cases of those who sell or transfer guns used in violent crime and, if Biden's budget is enacted, get specific agents dedicated to the effort.

Federal strike forces are deployed to New York and other cities, aimed at cracking down on gun trafficking. Federal agents are embedded in homicide units in police departments around the country, and the U.S. Marshals Service regularly conducts fugitive sweeps to arrest people with outstanding state or federal warrants.

In May, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives will host police executives from across the country to collaborate on solutions to gun violence. But the agency has been without a permanent leader since 2013. Biden's first nominee, a former ATF agent who had advocated for stricter gun control, was withdrawn in September amid opposition from Republicans and some moderate Democrats. There's no sign of a new nominee.

Biden has also proposed a large increase in dollars for local community policing programs, and if his social spending agenda were to pass, even more funds would be made available — but that effort is stalled in Congress, too.

And he encouraged cities to invest some of their COVID-19 relief money into policing and pushed alternative crime reduction steps such as increased community support and summer jobs for teenagers, and better resources for those coming out of prison.

"When someone finishes their time in prison ... you can't give them \$25 bucks and a bus ticket," he said. "They need to be able to train for and get a job, find stable housing, reenter society and have a

second chance at life.”

IS leader blows up self, family as US attacks Syria hideout

By GHAITH ALSAYED, LOLITA C. BALDOR, BASSEM MROUE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press
ATMEH, Syria (AP) — The leader of the Islamic State group blew himself up along with members of his family as American forces raided his Syria hideout Thursday, the U.S. said — the second time in three years the United States has taken out a leader of the violent group that has been struggling for resurgence with deadly attacks in the region.

President Joe Biden announced the overnight raid by American special operations forces, which U.S. officials called a “significant blow” to the radical militant organization.

The IS group at the height of its power controlled more than 40,000 square miles stretching from Syria to Iraq and ruled over 8 million people. Its attacks in the region included a major assault last month to seize a prison in northeast Syria holding at least 3,000 IS detainees.

The raid targeted Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who took over as head of the group on Oct. 31, 2019, just days after leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died during a U.S. raid. Al-Qurayshi, unlike his predecessor, was far from a household name, a secretive man who presided over a far diminished version of the group and didn’t appear in public.

Biden said al-Qurayshi died as al-Baghdadi did, by exploding a bomb that killed himself and members of his family, including women and children, as U.S. forces approached.

“Thanks to the bravery of our troops this horrible terrorist leader is no more,” Biden said at the White House. He said al-Qurayshi had been responsible for the prison assault, as well as genocide against the Yazidi people in Iraq in 2014.

About 50 U.S. special operations forces landed in helicopters and attacked a house in a rebel-held corner of Syria, clashing for two hours with gunmen, witnesses said. Residents described continuous gunfire and explosions that jolted the town of Atmeh near the Turkish border, an area dotted with camps for internally displaced people from Syria’s civil war.

Biden said he ordered U.S. forces to “take every precaution available to minimize civilian casualties,” the reason they did not conduct an airstrike on the home.

First responders reported that 13 people had been killed, including six children and four women.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said U.S. forces were able to evacuate 10 people from the building: a man, a woman and four children from the first floor and four children from the second floor. He said when al-Qurayshi detonated the bomb, he also killed his wife and two children. Kirby said that U.S. officials were working to determine whether American action resulted in any civilian deaths.

There were no U.S. casualties, Kirby said. U.S. forces took fingerprints and DNA, which confirmed al-Qurayshi’s death, he said.

Biden, along with Vice President Kamala Harris and senior national security aides monitored a live-feed of the operation from the White House Situation Room according to an official. In December, a tabletop model of the three-floor house had been brought to the high-security room.

The raid marked a military success for the United States at an important time after setbacks elsewhere — including the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal — had led allies and opponents to conclude U.S. power globally was weakening.

The house, surrounded by olive trees in fields outside Atmeh, was left with its top floor shattered and blood spattered inside. A journalist on assignment for The Associated Press, and several residents, said they saw body parts scattered near the site. Most residents spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 60 of 81

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 explosives-filled containers used by President Bashar Assad's forces against opponents during the Syrian conflict.

The top floor of the low house was nearly destroyed, sending white bricks tumbling to the ground below. A wrecked bedroom had a child's wooden crib and a stuffed rabbit doll. On one damaged wall, a blue plastic baby swing was still hanging. Religious books, including a biography of Islam's Prophet Mohammad, were in the house.

Al-Qurayshi had kept an extremely low profile since he took over leadership of the Islamic State. U.S. officials said he never left his apartment except to bathe on the building's roof. It is difficult to gauge how his death will affect the group. U.S. officials claimed he was directly overseeing operations in Syria, including last month's attack on the prison.

"They're leaderless today, and that's a significant blow," Kirby said. "This not something we believe ISIS is going to be able to get over real quickly or real easily."

The second floor of the house was occupied by a lower-ranking Islamic State leader and his family, but the first floor contained civilians who were unconnected to the terrorist group and unaware of al-Qurayshi's presence, according to U.S. officials, who described them as unwitting human shields.

Biden gave "the final go" on the mission on Tuesday morning during his daily national security briefing in the Oval Office, where he was joined by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley.

In the first stages of the operation, residents and activists said, U.S. commandos staged a large ground assault, using megaphones urging women and children to leave the area.

Much to the relief of U.S. officials, the family on the first floor exited the building unharmed.

The IS lieutenant, who officials did not name, who lived on the second floor barricaded himself inside along with his wife and engaged in combat with the commandos who entered the home after the explosion. After a firefight, in which both were killed, officials said four children were removed from the second floor alive by U.S. forces. Kirby said that it appeared that a child on the second floor also died, though the circumstances were not clear.

The special operations forces spent about two hours on the ground, longer than usual for such an operation — indicative, U.S. officials said, of caution to minimize civilian casualties.

Another firefight erupted with a local extremist group with "hostile" intent, Kirby said. Two people were killed outside the house and "their compadres left," he said.

U.S. troops launched the airborne raid from a base in the region, but officials would not specify the precise location due to operational security concerns. They added that the U.S. "deconflicted" the operation with a "a range of entities" but did not specify whether those included Russia, which has supported the Assad government in Syria.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command and the commander of the operation, said the mission goal was to capture al-Qurayshi. He said the blast set off by the IS leader was larger than would have been expected from a suicide vest, and that al-Qurayshi's body was found on the ground outside the building, thrown from the third floor by the force of the blast.

There was no comment from the Syrian government, which rarely acknowledges or comments on attacks by foreign countries targeting areas outside its control.

A U.S. official said one of the helicopters in the raid suffered a mechanical problem and was redirected to a site nearby, where it was destroyed.

Through slickly engineered propaganda, including brutal beheading videos, IS emerged as a dominant global extremist threat in the past decade. Its clarion call to followers in the West to either join its self-described caliphate in Syria, or to commit acts of violence at home, inspired killings in the U.S. as well as thousands of travelers determined to become foreign fighters.

Last month's attack on the prison in Hasaka marked the group's biggest military operation since it was defeated and its members scattered underground in 2019. 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.

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.

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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 62 of 81

"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 International 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 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 late last year, 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."

Meta, formerly Facebook, faces historic drop as stock tanks

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Meta is putting a lot of virtual eggs — and billions of dollars — into the metaverse basket, and Wall Street is pretty anxious about it.

Shares of the company formerly known as Facebook saw a historic plunge Thursday after the social media giant reported a rare profit decline due to a sharp rise in expenses, shaky ad revenue growth, competition from TikTok and fewer daily U.S. users on its flagship platform.

At the same time, it invested more than \$10 billion in CEO Mark Zuckerberg's ambitious plan to transform Meta Platforms Inc. into a virtual reality — actually, make that "metaverse-based" — company.

Meta's shares fell more than 26% to \$237.76 in afternoon trading Thursday, lopping more than \$230 billion off the company's overall value, or market capitalization. That's the largest single-day decline for a company on record.

"Meta is sacrificing its core business model for its fascination with the metaverse," said Rachel Jones, an analyst with the research firm GlobalData. "Betting big on the metaverse isn't a bad thing — the technology is set to be huge and provide a multitude of opportunities — but it will take at least another decade to really get going."

While tech companies are accustomed to making big bets on futuristic-sounding ideas that sometimes become reality — and come with a huge payoff — Wall Street doesn't like uncertainty. There's also the inconvenient fact of Facebook's continued difficulty in dealing with toxic real-world effects on its existing platform.

There's "continued concern that Facebook's past challenges will follow Meta into the metaverse," said Mike Proulx, research director at Forrester Research. "The company has work to do to convince consumers that Meta's expression of the metaverse is a good thing,"

Since Meta took on its new name last fall, the company has been shifting resources and hiring engineers — including from competitors like Apple and Google — who can help Zuckerberg realize his vision.

Think of the metaverse as the internet brought to life, or at least rendered in 3D. Zuckerberg has described it as a "virtual environment" in which you can immerse yourself instead of just staring at a screen. Theoretically, the metaverse would be a place where people can meet, work and play using virtual reality headsets, augmented reality glasses, smartphone apps or other devices.

It might sound like science fiction, but then again, not long ago so were computers that fit in your pocket, driverless cars and microwaves that talk to you. Technology barrels ahead whether we like it or not and, to quote a vintage Facebook motivational poster in the company's headquarters, "fortune favors the bold." Despite an enormous backlash to Facebook's problems ranging from misinformation and privacy mishaps to teen mental health and hate speech, Zuckerberg continues to believe that bold bets to steer the company in new directions have generally paid off.

In a Wednesday conference call, Zuckerberg said the company's investments this year will focus on Reels — a TikTok-esque short form video service on Instagram — as well as messaging, ads, commerce, privacy, artificial intelligence "and, of course, the metaverse."

"Making meaningful progress across all seven of these areas is going to improve the services we offer today and will help power a social, intuitive, and entertaining metaverse," he said. But he acknowledged that "this fully realized vision is still a ways off, and although the direction is clear, our path ahead is not perfectly defined."

But while Wall Street's metaverse optimism appears to fall well short off Zuckerberg's, Meta's rivals are ramping up their own metaverse projects. This includes Apple, Google and Microsoft, which recently bought the video game company Activision Blizzard with the hopes of accelerating its ambitions for the metaverse.

But it's not just the big companies. According to app analytics company SensorTower, 86 apps added "metaverse" to their title or description from November 2021 through January of this year. To date, 552 mobile apps include the term "metaverse" in their title or description.

Stifel analyst Mark Kelley sought to calm investors, noting that Zuckerberg outlined not one but seven investment priorities for the company this year. He said he doesn't think Meta's initial goal of reaching 1 billion metaverse users is a stretch — and importantly, he believes only 40% would be gamers, signaling its broader appeal.

Meta's stock plunge doesn't discourage metaverse enthusiast and venture capitalist Matthew Ball, who months before Facebook's renaming started an index fund of metaverse-related companies. Meta the company is one of the 45 stocks in Ball's index.

"Mark's focus on the next-generation internet is actually justified by the fact they can see in their core business that growth is slowing, that users are shifting elsewhere, and in particular, young users are shifting to these virtual and immersive worlds where they're a small participant and where their investments are focused," he said.

US strike framed to spare civilians after mounting criticism

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing criticism for civilian deaths in U.S. airstrikes, President Joe Biden targeted the leader of the Islamic State group on Thursday in an approach — a ground raid by special forces — that was riskier for American troops but intended to be safer for the innocent.

Dozens of U.S. commandoes landed outside Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi's Syrian hideout and warned people in nearby homes to stay inside, U.S. officials said. As one of their first moves, they called out to families living inside the same building as al-Qurayshi. By the time the operation ended, the officials said, 10 civilians had been led to safety.

But the U.S. raid still brought the deaths of women and children. Al-Qurayshi's wife and two children were killed along with the militant leader when he detonated a suicide bomb. A lieutenant of the militant leader and that man's wife also died along with a child, after the pair fired upon U.S. forces, officials said. The deaths from the high-stakes mission highlight the challenge U.S. forces face in targeting violent militants, while bound by ethics and international laws and treaties to try to avoid killing non-combatants.

Biden, speaking from the White House, said he directed the military to take "every precaution possible to minimize civilian casualties."

"Knowing that this terrorist had chosen to surround himself with families, including children, we made a choice to pursue a special forces raid at a much greater risk to our own people rather than target him with an airstrike," he said. Biden described al-Qurayshi's decision to blow himself up while surrounded by family members as "desperate cowardice."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon would review the operation.

"We know that al-Qurayshi and others at his compound directly caused the deaths of women and children last night. But, given the complexity of this mission, we will take a look at the possibility our actions may also have resulted in harm to innocent people," he said in a statement.

U.S. officials reported no American injuries.

California Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, called for an investigation of the civilian deaths in Thursday's strike, "while keeping in mind the history of ISIS leaders using civilians as human shields."

By one estimate, that of Brown University's Costs of War project, close to 400,000 civilians have died in fighting since the United States and its allies launched what Americans called their war on terror, in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks.

Military strikes of all kinds have declined dramatically under Biden, according to Airwars, which tracks U.S. attacks.

The number of strikes dropped 54% from 2020 to 2021, a period when the Biden administration was moving toward with what in August became a complete U.S. withdrawal from the 20-year Afghanistan conflict, according to Airwars.

However, the Biden administration has come under criticism for civilian casualties, including during the

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 65 of 81

withdrawal from Kabul in August.

After a bombing claimed by the Islamic State's Afghanistan branch killed U.S. service members and Afghans at the gate to the city's airport, the Pentagon responded with airstrikes against suspected Islamic State members.

Although U.S. officials defended the actions, it eventually became clear that a final drone strike as Americans completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan killed 10 civilians, including seven children, but no militants. The U.S. has not punished any American for what the Pentagon described as a tragic mistake.

Modern laws and rules of war broadly require militaries to distinguish between combatants and civilians and try to minimize the loss of civilian lives.

Rights advocates and legal experts have faulted successive Republican and Democratic U.S. administrations for their heavy reliance on airstrikes in the fight against the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere. Opponents argue that attacks by air, while minimizing risk to American forces, increases the risks of civilians with the misfortune to be near a U.S. target.

Priyanka Motaparthi, who works on counterterrorism issues at Columbia University's Human Rights Institute, was heartened that Biden emphasized efforts to limit civilian casualties in his remarks.

Given how details about previous strikes have trickled out over time, she said she's "cautious about accepting the initial picture as the final one." But the decision by U.S. forces to warn people in the building "definitely speaks to their work to prevent civilian casualties."

"Their obligation is to take all feasible precautions," Motaparthi said.

She said Biden should continue to be outspoken about the need for safeguards in military operations.

"As the commander in chief, he should not just be claiming successes, but he should also be leading reforms," she said.

Senior administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to give details of the military operation, described what they depicted as painstaking efforts in the leadup to Thursday's strike to reduce the risk to civilians. That included weeks of preparation, including rehearsals of the raid.

Al-Qurayshi lived in a house that also housed multiple families, going outside only to bathe on the roof occasionally, one official said. That meant any airstrike would have all but unavoidably killed women and children and other noncombatants as well.

Given another Islamic State leader's last act in 2019 of blowing himself up with a suicide belt when confronted by U.S. commandoes, planners for Thursday's raid made a point of analyzing whether al-Qurayshi's house would collapse upon all the people inside if he did similar, as he did.

They decided the building would stand.

Luke Hartig, a former senior director for counterterrorism in President Barack Obama's National Security Council, said ground raids aren't always safer, given that civilians can be caught in the crossfire.

However, months of preparation, like what took place before Thursday's raid, can help limit the danger.

"Traditionally when we've had time to properly plan operations, that's when you see the greatest precision, the greatest care for civilian harm," Hartig said.

IS leader stayed hidden as he rebuilt his group from defeat

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The leader of the Islamic State group, killed in a U.S. raid overnight in northwest Syria, was a veteran insider and top ideologue of the extremist movement, believed to have played a key role in one of its most horrific atrocities: the enslavement of thousands of women from Iraq's Yazidi religious minority.

Known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, he kept himself wrapped in mystery during his more than two years as the group's "caliph." Almost no public photos of him exist, he never appeared in public or in IS videos.

From hiding, he led the group's remnants as they regrouped following the downfall of their caliphate

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 66 of 81

and shifted underground to wage an insurgency in Iraq and Syria.

He met his end in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province in a house he had rented only about 24 kilometers (15 miles) from the safehouse where his predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was hunted down by the Americans in a similar raid in October 2019.

His death comes as IS militants, after years of low-level hit-and-run ambushes, had begun to carry out bolder, higher-profile attacks. Last month, IS attacked a prison in northeast Syria to free jailed comrades, leading to a 10 day battle with Kurdish-led forces that left some 500 dead.

Al-Qurayshi's death may disrupt the group's momentum in the short term, but is unlikely to hurt its operations in the long term.

"It's an organization not focused on charismatic leadership, but ideas, which is why its leaders have been pretty low-profile," Aaron Y. Zelin, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. "I think the IS machine will continue with whoever the new leader is."

Al-Qurayshi's real name was Amir Mohammed Saeed Abdul-Rahman al-Mawla. He was an Iraqi in his mid-40s, born in 1976 and believed to be an ethnic Turkman from the northern Iraqi town of Tel Afar. He held a degree in Islamic law from the University of Mosul.

He took the al-Qurayshi nom de guerre after being elevated to IS leader following al-Baghdadi's death — suggesting that he, like his predecessor, claimed links to the tribe of Islam's Prophet Muhammad.

Like his predecessor, al-Qurayshi spent his last days in Idlib province, an area held by insurgent groups hostile to IS some distance from the main theaters of war in eastern Syria and Iraq where the group once held vast swaths of territory in a self-declared "caliphate."

He was staying in a three-story house in the town of Atmeh, near the border with Turkey. During the early morning raid Thursday, he blew himself up, killing a number of women and children along with him, according to U.S. officials. First responders at the scene said 13 people, including four women and six children, were killed during the raid, during which U.S. forces battled gunmen in and around the house.

Idlib, the last major rebel stronghold in Syria, is home to 3 million people, many of them displaced by the civil war, making it easy for strangers to blend in. The house, surrounded by olive trees, appears to have been chosen by al-Qurayshi to be as far away as possible from the eyes of onlookers.

Neighbors said the man who lived on the top floor with his family had earlier identified himself as Abu Ahmad, a Syrian who was displaced by war from Aleppo province, according to journalists at the scene. Arabiya TV said three of the women killed in the raid might have been al-Qurayshi's wives.

Since taking command of IS, al-Qurayshi has topped the wanted list of the U.S. and other regional governments fighting the extremists. He did not appear in public, and rarely released any audio recordings. His influence and day-to-day involvement in the group's operations is not known, and he has no known successor.

Al-Qurayshi began his militant work shortly after former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was removed from power. A year after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, al-Qurayshi joined al-Qaida in Iraq, run by Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Following al-Zarqawi's death in a U.S. strike in 2006, al-Qurayshi became a senior official with the al-Qaida affiliate's successor group, the Islamic State in Iraq. He soon became the group's top Islamic Sharia law official in Mosul, according to a report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Al-Qurayshi was also known by other noms de guerre, Abu Omar al-Turkmani, Abdullah Qaradash and Hajji Abdullah.

He was arrested by U.S. troops in Mosul in 2008 and was detained for two years.

Al-Baghdadi, meanwhile, transformed the organization into the Islamic State group, breaking with al-Qaida. In 2014, ISIS overran much of northern and eastern Syria and northern Iraq and declared its caliphate.

Al-Qurayshi was a member of the Delegated Committee, the senior IS executive body, and served as the group's senior judge and Sharia official in Iraq, "exercising religious authority over all IS activity" there, according to the Center for International Justice and Accountability, which investigated him as part of its effort to compile cases against senior IS figures on war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 67 of 81

In that role, he was central to the group's massacre of Yazidi men and boys and enslavement of thousands of Yazidi women kidnapped when IS overran the heartland of the minority group in northwest Iraq. He oversaw the distribution of enslaved women and children to IS members and was responsible for forced conversions of children, CIJA said in a statement.

Al-Qurayshi "had enormous power to persecute and punish IS's enemies as far back as 2014. Not only was he one of the key architects of the Islamic State slave trade in Yazidi women and children, he personally enslaved and raped captive women," Nerma Jelacic, CIJA's deputy director.

President Joe Biden said al-Qurayshi was directly responsible for last month's prison strike in Syria, as well as the mass killings of the Yazidi people in Iraq.

"He was the driving force behind the genocide of the Yazidi people," Biden said Thursday. "We all remember the gut-wrenching stories, mass slaughters that wiped out entire villages, thousands of women and young girls sold into slavery, rape used as a weapon of war."

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.

"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," and 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 about that at the time. All he knew, as a 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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 68 of 81

"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 to 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."

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 U.K. 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."

How to prevent early birth? Study explores sugarless gum

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Healthy mouth, healthy baby? For years, scientists have been exploring the link between poor oral health and giving birth too early. Now, new research presented Thursday raises the possibility that something very simple and inexpensive might make a difference: chewing sugarless gum.

The improvements seen in the study in the African country of Malawi were modest: The rates of premature birth were slightly lower in the pregnant women who chewed the gum, compared to those who didn't.

Still, experts welcome the idea of an easy way to attack this huge and costly problem. While gum is cheap, an early birth can lead to a host of health problems in babies and tens of thousands of dollars in medical costs.

"If we could find an intervention as simple as chewing gum to stop preterm births, I would be absolutely elated," said Dr. Zsakeba Henderson with the March of Dimes, adding that she's "guardedly optimistic" about the findings.

For many years, studies have shown that gum diseases are tied to premature birth. Scientists believe bacterial infections in the mouth can increase inflammation in the body, which could lead to early birth.

Researchers tested whether chewing gum made with the sweetener xylitol could help. Xylitol is a sugar substitute found in small amounts in fruits and vegetables. It has been shown in past research to gradually change the makeup of bacteria in the mouth so that fewer decay-causing bacteria survive on

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 69 of 81

tooth surfaces and less plaque forms. Plaque buildup can lead to gum disease.

The study in Malawi enrolled more than 10,000 women over six years. Some joined before they got pregnant, others in the first half of their pregnancy. At four centers, participants received oral health education and chewed the gum twice daily. At four others, a control group received only the education.

There was a lower rate of preterm births before 37 weeks in the group that chewed xylitol gum: 13% compared with 17% in the control group. The biggest difference was in "late" preterm births between 34 and nearly 37 weeks. Though giving birth earlier is potentially worse for the baby, experts say late preterm infants are at risk for such things as respiratory problems, feeding difficulties and developmental issues.

Researcher Dr. Kjersti Aagaard, an OB-GYN at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine, said the team chose Malawi because they had a physician colleague there and the country has high rates of gum disease and preterm birth. About a fifth of infants are born prematurely, twice the rate in the U.S. Aagaard said there's a wide range of dental practices in both countries – from frequent tooth brushing and regular dental visits to a complete lack of access to dental care.

Researchers don't know exactly how the xylitol may prevent preterm birth, but they believe it has "pre-biotic" properties, meaning it stimulates the growth of healthy bacteria in the mouth.

Xylitol is also used in candies, foods and dental products such as toothpaste. Aagaard said they don't know if xylitol in other forms would make a difference, or whether the same results might hold elsewhere.

During a presentation Thursday before the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, she invited others to study it.

"In fact, I have some gum here right now that I'm happy to send anybody who wants it," she said.

Other studies have suggested more traditional steps to improve oral health also help prevent preterm birth. For example, a review of clinical trials last year found that the treatment of gingivitis, which involves dental visits and cleanings, may reduce prematurity. And a 2012 study found that mothers who didn't get dental care or have a teeth cleaning during pregnancy were at slightly higher risk for preterm birth.

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."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 70 of 81

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-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 2020, 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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 71 of 81

— 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."

ESPN to have all-woman crew for Warriors-Jazz game next week

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Beth Mowins made ESPN history in 2017 when she was the first woman to call a "Monday Night Football" game. She will again be part of a network first on Wednesday when ESPN produces an NBA game announced and directed by all women.

Mowins will work the Golden State Warriors-Utah Jazz game with analyst Doris Burke and reporter Lisa Salters. In addition, 33 other women will handle production roles on site in Salt Lake City and in the control room from ESPN headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut.

"I think it's exciting to kind of celebrate," Mowins said. "There are a lot of the women that have been around the league for a while, and then others like me that are kind of new to it."

Mowins believes the time is coming when having a game called and produced by a majority crew of women will be routine.

"I think it's important to still celebrate some of these big milestones, but I really do believe we're getting closer to the day where it won't be such a big deal and it will be very natural and very comfortable," she said.

Mowins has been with ESPN since 1994. She has mostly worked on college football, basketball and the Women's College World Series, but started calling NBA games this season. Burke is one of ESPN's top NBA analysts and has worked the last two NBA Finals on ESPN Radio. Salters will be the lead sideline reporter for ABC's coverage of the NBA Finals.

"To work alongside these women and see the depth of talent we have in a variety of roles on this NBA property is incredibly rewarding," coordinating producer Sara Gaiero said. "Each of these women make regular, valuable contributions to our NBA productions. I am so excited to watch them do what they do best — document an NBA game at the highest level."

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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 72 of 81

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 will be handling the short program duties, while 2018 Olympians Madison Hubbell and Zach Donohue will do the rhythm dance. Alexa Knierim and Brandon Frazier, forced to withdraw from the national championships because of his positive COVID-19 tests, will skate the pairs short program.

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, the current U.S. champions, Hubbell and Donohue, and Kaitlin Hawayek and Jean-Luc Baker all have podium potential. Alysa Liu, Karen Chen and Mariah Bell are the U.S. options in the women's short program and free skate. The other U.S. pair is 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."

A different COVID-19 vaccine debate: Do we need new ones?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

COVID-19 vaccines are saving an untold number of lives, but they can't stop the chaos when a hugely contagious new mutant bursts on the scene, leading people to wonder: Will we need boosters every few months? A new vaccine recipe? A new type of shot altogether?

That's far from settled, but with the shots still doing their main job many experts are cautioning against setting too high a bar.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 73 of 81

"We need collectively to be rethinking what is the goal of vaccination," said Dr. Daniel Kuritzkes, infectious disease chief at Brigham & Women's Hospital. "It's unrealistic ... to believe that any kind of vaccination is going to protect people from infection, from mild symptomatic disease, forever."

If the goal is preventing serious illness, "we may not need to be doing as much fine-tuning of the vaccines every time a new variant comes."

The virus is essentially shape-shifting as it mutates, with no way to know how bad the next variant will be. Already a sub-strain of omicron bearing its own unique mutations is circulating. Research is underway to create next-generation vaccines that might offer broader protection against future mutants -- but they won't be ready anytime soon.

The immediate solution: Getting today's shots into more arms will "reduce the opportunities for the virus to mutate and spawn new Greek letters that we then have to worry about," said Jennifer Nuzzo of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

WHY IMMUNITY ISN'T PERFECT

The job of blocking infection falls to antibodies, which form after either vaccination or a prior bout with COVID-19, ready to fight back the next time someone's exposed.

One problem: Mutations change the appearance of the spike protein that covers the coronavirus much like a crook switches disguises to evade capture. That's why omicron was more able to slip past that first defense than earlier variants -- its spike coating was harder for existing antibodies to recognize.

Also, the immune system isn't designed to be in a constant state of high alert, so the antibodies that fend off infection do wane over time. Several months after two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, people had little protection against an omicron infection — a result of both waning antibodies and the variant's mutation.

Thankfully, different immune system soldiers called T cells are key to prevent an infection from turning into severe illness — and that protection is lasting longer because T cells are recognizing other parts of the virus that don't mutate as easily.

A THIRD DOSE MATTERS

After a booster, protection against symptomatic disease from omicron is about 70% -- not as good as the 94% protection seen with earlier variants that more closely matched the vaccine yet highly effective. Importantly, the booster also further strengthened protection against serious illness.

Researchers are closely tracking if infection-fighting antibodies stick around longer after a third dose -- but at some point, those levels are guaranteed to wane again. So-called memory cells can make more the next time the body senses they're needed.

Still, Israel is offering a fourth dose to some people, including those 60 and older, and mulling giving the additional booster to all adults.

The debate is whether repeated boosting really is the best approach — especially since scary new variants are less likely to form once more of the world's population gets initial vaccinations.

Endless boosting just to keep antibody levels constantly high is "not a public health strategy that works," said Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Pfizer and Moderna are testing omicron-specific boosters in some American adults, although it's far from clear if authorities would abandon a vaccine recipe proven to save lives for a tweaked version in hopes of fewer breakthrough infections. Brewing a single shot with two kinds of vaccine is technically possible but, again, they'd have to prove the mixture doesn't weaken the original protection against severe illness.

NEW APPROACHES IN THE PIPELINE

Whatever happens with omicron, it's clear the coronavirus is here to stay and the U.S. National Institutes of Health is funding about \$43 million in projects to develop so-called "pan-coronavirus" vaccines that promise to protect against more than one type. One possibility: Nanoparticles that carry pieces of spike proteins from four to eight different versions of the virus rather than the single type in today's vaccines.

It's a tantalizing idea, but NIH infectious diseases chief Dr. Anthony Fauci called it a years-long endeavor. "I don't want anyone to think that pan-coronavirus vaccines are literally around the corner," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 74 of 81

A possibly more direct approach: Creating COVID-19 vaccines that can be squirted into the nose to form antibodies ready to fight the virus right where we first encounter it. Nasal vaccines are harder to develop than injected versions but attempts are underway, including a large study just announced by India's Bharat Biotech.

PROTECTION VARIES GLOBALLY

Complicating any possible change to vaccine strategy is the grim reality that only 10% of people in low-income countries have received at least one vaccine dose. Also, recent studies show that some types of vaccines used around the world appear easier than others for omicron to evade, meaning booster strategies may need to be tailored.

Yale University researchers found no omicron-targeted antibodies in the blood of people given two doses of vaccine made by China's Sinovac. Following those initial shots with a Pfizer booster -- a very different kind of vaccine -- helped but not enough, only increasing antibody levels to the amount seen by Pfizer recipients who didn't get a booster.

Overshadowing all of these questions is that "we don't know how to predict the next strain," said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, a former Food and Drug Administration vaccine chief. He wants to see a global strategy that defines the trigger for any vaccine change. "Otherwise we are going to have a confused public, again."

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 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 have at times been 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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 75 of 81

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.

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."

States seek to protect election workers amid growing threats

By LISA RATHKE and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — Lawmakers in a handful of states are seeking greater protections for election officials amid growing concerns for their safety after they were targeted by threats of violence following the 2020 presidential election.

Widespread threats against those who oversee elections, from secretaries of state to county clerks and even poll workers, soared after former President Donald Trump and his allies spread false claims about the outcome of the presidential election. "Corrupt secretaries will all hang when the stolen election is revealed" is just one example of the vitriol that has come from social media, emails and phone messages.

Even in Vermont, where the outcome wasn't disputed, election workers have faced threats. A caller to the secretary of state's office said in 2020 that a firing squad would target "all you cheating (vulgarity)," and "a lot of people are going to get executed."

To counter the threats, lawmakers have introduced bills so far in Vermont and several other states, including Illinois, Maine, New Mexico and Washington, all of which have legislatures controlled by Democrats. Much of the legislation would create or boost criminal liability for threats and, in Illinois, for assaults against election workers.

More legislation is possible, as election officials warn that the ongoing attacks endanger democracy and that many election workers have quit or are considering doing so because of the abuse they have faced since the 2020 election.

"Nationally, we are seeing longtime experienced election leaders and their staffs leaving their positions for other work because they've had it — this is it, this has crossed the line," said Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos, a Democrat.

A survey of local election officials commissioned by the Brennan Center last April found one in three felt unsafe because of their job and one in six said they had been threatened. Trump has continued to promote his false claims that the election was stolen from him, despite no evidence of the type of widespread fraud that would be needed to question the outcome, in which President Joe Biden won by more than 7 million votes.

One bill under consideration in Vermont would expand the definition of criminal threatening to make it easier to prosecute those acts. Another would heighten the penalty for the criminal threatening of election officials, public employees and public servants.

During a recent legislative committee hearing, Condos described how the threatening calls had scared one staffer to the point that he was afraid to leave work and walk to his vehicle. He eventually took time off and sought counseling for symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress.

"No election official should ever need to fear for their life for their role in serving our country's democracy in this or any election," Condos said.

A bill in Maine would make threats against election officials a class C felony, after threats to two local clerks in 2021.

"The message has to be loud and clear that this is a threat to our democracy," said Democratic Rep. Bruce White, the sponsor. "Threatening people who work our elections is entirely unacceptable."

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 election, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, a Democrat, left her home for weeks as a safety precaution in response to security concerns. A Democrat-sponsored bill introduced last month expands the felony crime of intimidation to include acts against employees and agents of the secretary of state, county clerks and municipal clerks.

Supporters of the legislation said expanding protections to all election office workers is important because threats haven't been limited to top-level staff.

In Fulton County, Georgia, two election office workers — one a temporary employee — filed a lawsuit in December against a conservative website, accusing it of spreading false stories about them. Their lawsuit said the false claims led to a "deluge of intimidation, harassment, and threats that has forced them to change their phone numbers, delete their online accounts, and fear for their physical safety."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 77 of 81

In the weeks following the election, a top Georgia elections official condemned the onslaught of threats and called on Trump to rein in his supporters. At the time, Trump was claiming "massive voter fraud" in the state and people were driving in caravans past the home of Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, and sending sexualized threats to Raffensperger's wife.

At the federal level, an election threats task force within the U.S. Department of Justice has reviewed more than 850 reports of threats to election officials, Assistant Attorney General Kenneth Polite said. Two people have been charged with federal crimes for threatening election workers, including a Texas man charged with threatening to kill government officials in Georgia after the 2020 election. Polite said the department also has dozens of open investigations.

Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, said it's imperative that harassers face prosecution. "Unless people are held accountable, this kind of behavior is going to continue," she said.

In October, a congressional committee heard from election officials about graphic threats to their safety since the 2020 election.

Legislation also was introduced by a group of Democrats in the U.S. Senate last year that would make it a federal crime for any person to intimidate or threaten an election worker. It became part of a larger effort by Democrats to create federal standards for voting and restore a key provision of the Voting Rights Act.

That broader effort has since stalled, although there are signs that a bipartisan proposal may be in the works that could shore up what election experts have described as weaknesses in the nation's electoral process. That proposal also might include ways to boost protections for election workers who are facing threats and harassment.

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold, a Democrat, said she continues to receive threats and was working on a legislative proposal to protect election workers.

"I don't think that signing up to administer elections should mean that you're afraid that someone is going to hurt you," Griswold said. "We can't have an atmosphere where election workers are afraid to do what's right, afraid to uphold the will of the people, because they're afraid for their kids and for their homes and their lives. That's not a democracy."

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.

EU spokeswoman Nabila Massrali reacted to that by stating that "we are, of course, fully committed to contribute to promoting and protecting sports integrity and to strengthening universal respect for human rights."

"Big sports events such as the Olympic Games often have a universal audience," Massrali said. "They can be instrumental for spreading positive values and promoting freedom and human rights at the global level. However, such platforms should not be used for political propaganda."

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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 78 of 81

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."

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.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in last week's call that Moscow's security concerns need to be taken seriously and addressed, a statement that marked a notable policy shift for Beijing.

"Previously, China avoided such expressions of support for the Russian policies in Eastern Europe," said Vasily Kashin, a China expert with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. "Now we see more unity."

While Moscow and Beijing will be unlikely to forge a formal defense alliance, "their cooperation will steadily grow," Kashin said.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 79 of 81

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.

Olympic members unite against Infantino's World Cup plan

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — FIFA's fading plan for biennial World Cups was labeled a threat from soccer to all other sports by the International Olympic Committee on Thursday.

IOC President Thomas Bach chided FIFA counterpart Gianni Infantino, an IOC member for the past two years, for not being in Beijing to hear the criticism.

"We all would have very much liked to discuss the FIFA proposal for a biennial World Cup together with the FIFA president and IOC member," Bach told about 100 colleagues at the traditional pre-Olympic meeting, with some there in person and others viewing remotely.

Bach added, in a break from the usual politeness of IOC gatherings, that talking to Infantino directly "is not possible against the expectations because he canceled his visit to Beijing the day before yesterday."

Infantino was expected to be watching remotely from Cameroon after telling the IOC he would attend the final stages of the African Cup of Nations.

The FIFA president has been pushing a plan to stage World Cups for men and women every two years instead of four. FIFA believes the plan will accelerate development in soccer worldwide, close the gap on the European clubs and national teams that dominate competitions, and add billions of dollars in revenue it can share among its 211 national federations.

Infantino has strong support from Africa but drew criticism last week after linking the World Cup plan to giving more hope to African people who might risk death in sea crossings to Europe.

The European and South American soccer bodies have said they will boycott biennial tournaments.

The FIFA plan has "no chance" of succeeding, South American soccer president Alejandro Dominguez told The Associated Press last week.

Mustapha Berraf, the president of the African group of national Olympic committees, led the IOC's opposition on Thursday, saying biennial World Cups would have a "heavy impact" on his continent.

"The plan promoted by FIFA as we speak would create immeasurable damage and put in danger sport in general," Berraf said.

IOC executive board member Nenad Lalovic, representing summer sports, and Olympic table tennis gold medalist Seung Min Ryu said adding extra World Cups would add to players' workload and put their health at risk.

"There comes a point where the athletes have to say: 'Stop,'" Ryu said.

After four interventions from IOC members, Bach asked for and was given applause to convey the feeling of the room back to Infantino.

Infantino previously faced criticism from sports leaders when Bach and the IOC hosted an online meeting in December.

Momentum for FIFA's plan stalled after European and South American officials voiced their concern. Infantino then pulled plans for an expected vote on the issue in December.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 4, the 35th day of 2022. There are 330 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 4, 1783, Britain's King George III proclaimed a formal cessation of hostilities in the American Revolutionary War.

On this date:

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 80 of 81

In 1789, electors chose George Washington to be the first president of the United States.

In 1801, John Marshall was confirmed by the Senate as chief justice of the United States.

In 1861, delegates from six Southern states that had recently seceded from the Union met in Montgomery, Alabama, to form the Confederate States of America.

In 1913, Rosa Parks, a Black woman whose 1955 refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus to a white man sparked a civil rights revolution, was born Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee.

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin began a wartime conference at Yalta.

In 1974, newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, 19, was kidnapped in Berkeley, California, by the radical Symbionese Liberation Army.

In 1976, more than 23,000 people died when a severe earthquake struck Guatemala with a magnitude of 7.5, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

In 1977, eleven people were killed when two Chicago Transit Authority trains collided on an elevated track.

In 1997, a civil jury in Santa Monica, California, found O.J. Simpson liable for the deaths of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman.

In 1999, senators at President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial voted to permit the showing of portions of Monica Lewinsky's videotaped deposition.

In 2004, the social networking website Facebook had its beginnings as Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg launched "Thefacebook."

In 2020, thousands of medical workers in Hong Kong were on strike for a second day to demand that the country's border with China be completely closed to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus; the territory reported its first death from the virus and the second known fatality outside China.

Ten years ago: Republican presidential front-runner Mitt Romney cruised to a decisive victory in the Nevada caucuses. Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers won the 2011 Associated Press NFL Most Valuable Player award in a landslide. Florence Green, who had served with the Women's Royal Air Force and was recognized as the last veteran of World War I, died in King's Lynn, eastern England, at age 110.

Five years ago: The Justice Department appealed a judge's order temporarily blocking President Donald Trump's refugee and immigration ban, saying it was the "sovereign prerogative" of a president to admit or exclude aliens in order to protect national security. Running backs LaDainian Tomlinson and Terrell Davis and quarterback Kurt Warner were elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

One year ago: Former President Donald Trump rejected a request from House Democrats that he testify under oath at his second Senate impeachment trial. A fiercely divided House tossed Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia off both of her committees, an unprecedented punishment that Democrats said she'd earned by spreading hateful and violent conspiracy theories. A voting technology company, Smartmatic USA, sued Fox News, three of its hosts and two former Trump lawyers – Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell – for \$2.7 billion, for allegedly conspiring to spread false claims that the company helped "steal" the presidential election. Johnson & Johnson asked U.S. regulators to clear the world's first single-dose COVID-19 vaccine. Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers issued a new statewide mask order after the Republican-controlled Legislature repealed his previous mandate. (The state Supreme Court would strike down the mask mandate nearly two months later.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jerry Adler is 93. Former Argentinian President Isabel Peron is 91. Actor Gary Conway is 86. Actor John Schuck is 82. Rock musician John Steel (The Animals) is 81. Singer Florence LaRue (The Fifth Dimension) is 80. Former Vice President Dan Quayle is 75. Rock singer Alice Cooper is 74. Actor Michael Beck is 73. Actor Lisa Eichhorn is 70. Football Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor is 63. Actor Pamelyn Ferdin is 63. Rock singer Tim Booth is 62. Rock musician Henry Bogdan is 61. Country singer Clint Black is 60. Rock musician Noodles (The Offspring) is 59. Actor Gabrielle Anwar is 52. Actor Rob Corddry is 51. Singer David (dah-VEED') Garza is 51. Actor Michael Goorjian is 51. TV personality Nicolle Wallace is 50. Olympic gold medal boxer Oscar De La Hoya is 49. Rock musician Rick Burch (Jimmy Eat World) is 47. Singer Natalie Imbruglia (em-BROO'-lee-ah) is 47. Rapper Cam'ron is 46. Rock singer Gavin

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 212 ~ 81 of 81

DeGraw is 45. Rock singer Zoe Manville is 38. Actor/musician Bashy, AKA Ashley Thomas, is 37. Actor Charlie Barnett is 34. Olympic gold medal gymnast-turned-singer Carly Patterson is 34. Actor Kyla Kenedy (cq) (TV: "Speechless") is 19.