

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Saturday, Feb. 12

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

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Monday, Feb. 14

GBB at Flandreau Indian - JV at 5 p.m. followed
by varsity

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 15

Boys Basketball at Sisseton

C game at 5 p.m. in the Practice Gym; JV at 5 p.m.
in the varsity gym followed by Varsity game

Junior High Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina. 7th
Grade at 5:30 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

City Council meeting, 7 p.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 16

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Thursday, Feb. 17

Parent-Teacher Conference, 4-8 p.m.

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

☺☺ A good laugh is sunshine
in the house.

William Tackera



Chicken Soup
for the Soul

Friday, Feb. 18

NO SCHOOL

Parent-Teacher Conferences, 8 a.m. to Noon
Basketball Double-Header at Deuel (Clear Lake).

JV games start at 4 p.m.

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Saturday, Feb. 19

Region Wrestling at Britton

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Sunday, Feb 20

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Monday, Feb. 21

NO SCHOOL - President's Day

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla. - RETURNING

Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina - C game at 5
p.m. followed by JV and Varsity

Junior High Basketball vs. Warner. 7th grade game
at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game

Tuesday, Feb. 22

Girls Basketball regions begin

Thursday, April 7: Groton CDE

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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Thank You!

I would like to thank the Groton Community, the Groton School, and the many dance parents for supporting our dance program over the past 35 years.

Special thanks to Wynella Abeln, Ashley Patterson Harr, Gwen Briscoe, and all assistants who helped in any way over the years. Dance teaches so many skills, but it's the friends you make along the way that make it the most special to me. I have heard that "DANCE is about enjoying every STEP along the way," and I have truly enjoyed the past 35 years of dance.

Be sure to support our fundraiser for the GHS Fellowship of Christian Athletes and purchase some home-made baked goods and also sweets from the JUNCTION of Aberdeen in the concessions area. There are also some Valentines items, a blanket raffle, and a split pot drawing. Thanks to Paul Kosel for making this flier, to Groton Area OST for making the raffle blanket, Mike Nehls for setting up tables, and to anyone who helped bake and/or work at our fundraiser. Hope you enjoy our entertainment today.

All four of the songs we chose this year focus on positivity and encouragement. We hope you enjoy our performances.

Keep on dancing!

Kim Weber

Today's Halftime Performance Schedule

Girls JV: Spice Girlz

Boys JV: Sugar Babes

Girls Varsity: Sweet Sensations & Spice Girlz

Boys Varsity: GHS Dance Team joined by all three groups performing to, "Moment of Truth."

The final 2022 performance will be Monday, Feb. 21 during the boys game with Tiospa Zina.



Spice Girlz *"Cloudy Day"*

In back, left to right, are Tenley Frost, Teagan Hanten, Emerlee Jones and Avery Crank; in front are Ruelle Gilbert, Journey Zieroth and Kaedy Bonn; not pictured is Raelynn Feist.



Sugar Babes *"Colorful World"*

In back, left to right, are Jaeden Morehouse, Laken Kurth, Ellie Lassle, Calli Wilkinson and Kinsey Frost; in the middle row, left to right, are Brielle Dunbar, Lexie Locke, Kaylynn Furman, Ivy Cole, and Elaina Fordham; in front, left to right, are Grace Scepaniak, River Wipf, Harper Cleveland and Jorie Locken; not pictured are Layla Feist.



Sweet Sensations

"Lights Shine Bright"

In back, left to right, are Cora Kotzer, Rayna Loeschke, Andi Gauer, Hadley Heilman, Kinzleigh Furman and Hazel Hill; in the middle row, left to right, are Hazel Neu, Nori Hinman, Jozie Lord and Haley Erickson; in front, left to right, are Maci Dunbar, Aryanna Cutler and Railey Mulder; not pictured is Kaelee Morehouse.

Wolves Run Past Beavers From Wachs Arena

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State University men’s basketball team got back in the win column Friday evening, recording a 23-point victory over Bemidji State. The Wolves scored 53 points in the first half, shooting nearly 50.0% from the floor.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 83, BSU 60

Records: NSU 16-11 (10-9 NSIC), BSU 7-15 (4-14 NSIC)

Attendance: 2779

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State out-played Bemidji State in the game, holding a lead for a majority of the minutes played
- The Wolves shot 49.2% from the floor, 42.9% from beyond the arc, and 91.7% from the foul line in the win
- NSU tallied 32 points in the paint, 28 points off the bench, 20 points off turnovers, and 13 second chance points
- They notched 12 made 3-pointers, 27 rebounds, a season high 24 assists, ten steals, and two blocks
- Three Wolves scored in double figures in the game, where 14 saw the floor

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Jordan Belka: 20 points, 58.3 FG%, 6 rebounds
- Sam Masten: 16 points, 63.6 FG%, 6 assists, 5 rebounds
- Kailleb Walton-Blanden: 15 points, 54.5 FG%, 3 rebounds
- Kobe Busch: 9 points, 75.0 3-point FG%
- Jacksen Moni: 9 points, 6 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT

Northern State will face Minnesota Crookston from Wachs Arena this evening. Tip-off is scheduled for 6 p.m. versus the Golden Eagles.

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No. 21 Northern Drops Friday Dual to No. 2 St. Cloud State

The No. 21 Northern State University wrestling team fell to the No. 2 team in the national Friday evening on the road. The Wolves tallied two match victories over St. Cloud State, who sit atop the NSIC.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 6, SCSU 26

Records: NSU 9-3 (5-3 NSIC), SCSU 13-1 (6-0 NSIC)

HOW IT HAPPENED

- St. Cloud State opened the match with 5-straight decision wins
- The Huskies added two major decision victories, before the Wolves scored their first points of the dual
- Teagan Block recorded three team points for NSU, defeating Daniel Valeria in a 4-1 decision
- No. 8 Wyatt Turnquist added the final team points, notching an 8-6 decision win over Nick Novak

FULL RESULTS

Match Summary

157 Anthony Herrera (SCSU) over James Burks (NSU) (Dec 6-4)

165 #12 Devin Donovan (SCSU) over Kelby Hawkins (NSU) (Dec 5-3)

174 #5 Dominic Murphy (SCSU) over Tanner Wiese (NSU) (Dec 4-0)

184 #7 William Pitzner (SCSU) over Treyton Cacek (NSU) (Dec 5-1)

197 #2 Noah Ryan (SCSU) over Cole Huss (NSU) (Dec 8-2)

285 #2 Kameron Teacher (SCSU) over Joshua Trumble (NSU) (MD 15-5)

125 #7 Paxton Creese (SCSU) over Landen Fischer (NSU) (MD 12-3)

133 Teagan Block (NSU) over Daniel Valeria (SCSU) (Dec 4-1)

141 #1 Joey Bianchini (SCSU) over Kolton Roth (NSU) (Dec 5-1)

149 #8 Wyatt Turnquist (NSU) over Nick Novak (SCSU) (Dec 8-6)

157 Exhibition: #2 Colby Njos (SCSU) over Tyson Stoebner (NSU) (TF 15-0 5:07)

UP NEXT

The Wolves close out the NSIC slate on Sunday in Wachs Arena. NSU welcomes UMary for a 2 p.m. dual start.

Oliverson Leads Wolves Past Beavers

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women's basketball team snapped a five game losing streak on Friday night, when they defeated NSIC North foe Bemidji State 75-67.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 75, BSU 67

Records: NSU 11-12 (8-10 NSIC), BSU 13-9 (11-7)

Attendance: 2283

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State used a quick start to the game to jump out to a 6-0 lead, and extended it to 22-16 at the end of the period
- Two layups by Kailee Oliverson pushed the lead to as many as 15 points in the second quarter on two different occasions, the Wolves would go into the halftime break leading by 12
- Bemidji State clawed back to within two points in the third quarter, but Northern used a 10-0 run to push the lead back to double digits; a 3-pointer by Lexi Roe gave NSU a 59-45 lead entering the fourth quarter
- Oliverson converted an and-one layup with four minutes remaining in the game to give the Wolves their largest lead of the game at 18 points
- Northern State saw Kailee Oliverson (28 points, 13 rebounds), Haley Johnson (18 points, 13 rebounds), and Laurie Rogers (10 points, 14 rebounds) all record double-doubles in tonight's win
- Johnson's double-double gave her career highs in both points and rebounds; Rogers also notched a career high in rebounds
- The Wolves shot 44.8 percent from the field, 46.2 percent from 3-point range, and 75.0 percent from the free throw line
- NSU improved to 10-0 on the season when leading at halftime

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Kailee Oliverson: 28 points, 13 rebounds, 2 blocks

Haley Johnson: 18 points, 13 rebounds, 4 assists, 2 steals

Rianna Fillipi: 10 points, 2 rebounds, 4 assists

Laurie Rogers: 10 points, 14 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 blocks

UP NEXT

The Northern State women's basketball team will honor their seniors today when they welcome Minnesota Crookston to Wachs Arena. The Wolves and Golden Eagles are scheduled for a 4 p.m. tip-off this afternoon.

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Lana's Annals

Hello once again. Our workload has greatly increased this week. The days are getting longer as we continue to try to get the bills out of our respective houses before crossover day.

HB 1210, a critical race theory for higher education was passed after listening to several testifiers, both opponent and proponent. This bill deals with cultures and political agendas. No one who is college personnel on our campuses has the right to shame people of other cultures and political ideologies. It is ok to have the conversation, but not to the detriment of individual expression.

HB1337 also addresses critical race theory, but this is about k-12. Teachers are not allowed to discriminate against anyone in the classroom. This subject could be about ideologies, political affiliation, doctrines, religion, and yes, culture. What has become a concern is that a person is being singled out and berated in some manner, and we do not want that. I did point out that while I have a hard time believing this is occurring in schools in my area, I have to be sensitive to those areas who have had trouble. I might also mention that teaching outlandish and destructive philosophies to our children is not only despicable but also violates standard teacher practices and ethics. After removing some of the sections of the bill with an amendment, we kept bantering back and forth until the bill passed after HB1337, Sections 4-7 were removed. Those sections gave a lot of heartburn as may have been interpreted to not be able to have children attend, for example, government class trips to the capitol. The question also would be if they could be paid interns or pages during session among others. On the upside, I was pleased, as House Education chairwoman, to welcome Dr. Ben Carson as a proponent testifier on both bills via zoom.

Our education committee also heard HB1163, which was a request to move the kindergarten date for youngsters who passed school readiness screening requirements. The sponsor requested extending the time an extra 6 months. As the committee thought that was too long of a period of time, we extended it from September 1st to the 30th. It will now be debated on the House floor. While I thought that the current cutoff was reasonable, this provides an opportunity for a child to at least try to meet readiness requirements. I had not, prior to this, thought about the fact that when a child moves in from a state that allows a child less five to be in kindergarten, that child is allowed to transfer to the grade in which he/she had attended.

Our local government committee heard HB1332 that was to create building activity. If passed, it would encourage people age 65 or older who had resided a minimum of 5 years in a current residence to move to a new house and only pay the tax amount they had been paying on the former home. This could be done until sold or up to 10 years. Our committee did not act favorably as it seemed unfair. If I come to a town and purchase a new home, I would have to pay for what it was assessed. I would then not take kindly to a person who moved into the area and only paid the tax that their former home was worth. It was a little too "out of the box" for us so it went to the 41st day.

We also heard a bill that requested to make a law to be able to petition the school board for a community concern. In this case, it was to prevent wearing masks at school. It would seem that the school had moved up a tier and that meant masks. After going to the board and being told that they could do nothing, the people finally came to the capitol hoping for us to pass a law. This did not happen. After asking if the people followed the chain of command and the grievance procedure and being told "no", I decided communication, perhaps, was lacking on the part of patron and school. Therefore this was a local decision to be worked out. It is not up to the legislature to pick winners and losers, nor should we be micromanaging other body-making decisions. Some of the bills we see try to do just that, and we should not be in the middle.

On the floor we discussed the project of workforce housing. I became confused about this as has also been called an infrastructure project only covering the ground and down. So the question is this: will the money be used for building houses and apartments or will it be used for roads, curb and gutter, and dirt removal. Many legislators feel that the housing industry should be promoted and built by private companies. It should not be the duty of government to interfere with private enterprise. This is a good idea IF private companies will do it. I would think that if a large company moves into a city, it would also fund some housing for its people. The rent that the workers would pay would then go back to the company. Seems as if this could be a win, win.

With that, I would encourage you to look at the upcoming bills. Also remember you are welcome to come out anytime. Just let me know, and I will introduce you! Have a good week.

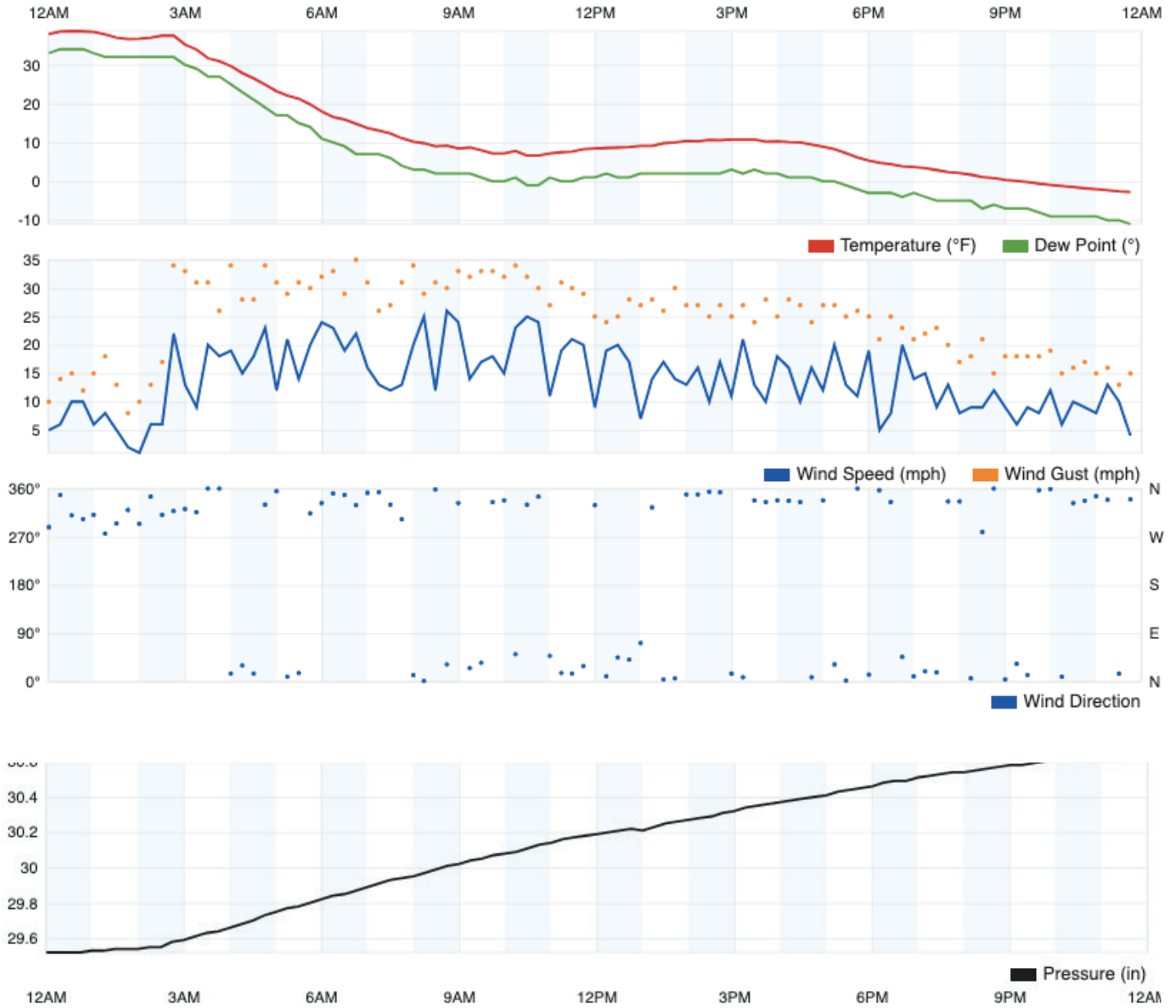
Rep. Lana Greenfield, Dist.2

Lana.greenfield@sdlegislature.gov Lana.greenfield@gmail.com

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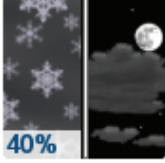



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

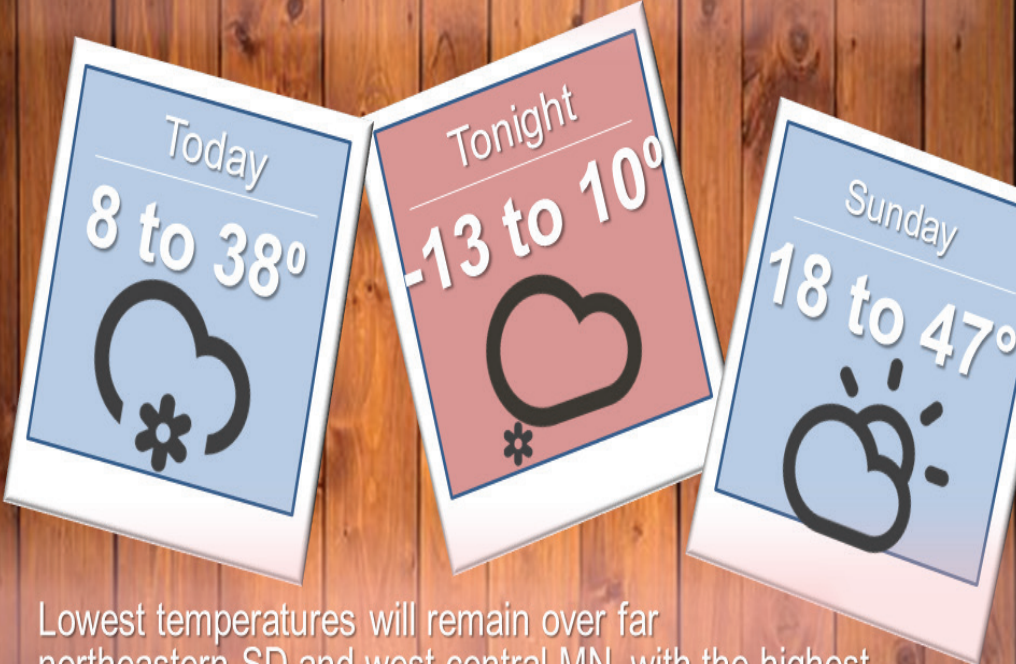



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow	Chance Snow then Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny then Mostly Cloudy and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 21 °F	Low: -3 °F	High: 26 °F	Low: 11 °F	High: 21 °F

Cool with Light Snow




Today
8 to 38°


Tonight
-13 to 10°


Sunday
18 to 47°


Lowest temperatures will remain over far northeastern SD and west central MN, with the highest across central South Dakota.

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

graphic created:
2/12/2022 8:11 AM

Colder air will remain entrenched across northeast SD and west central MN while central SD sees a warm-up this weekend. Periods of snow showers or flurries remain in the forecast through tonight as another system clips the region.

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Today in Weather History

February 12, 1905: On this date in weather history, record low temperatures occurred across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, with lows in the 30s below zero. Sisseton, Aberdeen, and Watertown all had record lows. Sisseton fell to 31 degrees below zero, Watertown saw 35 degrees below zero, and Aberdeen dropped to 36 degrees below zero in 1905. In central South Dakota, Kennebec fell to 34 degrees below zero.

1784: Ice floes were spotted in the Gulf of Mexico after passing out the Mississippi River in February 1784. Ice blocked the river in New Orleans, Louisiana. The ice in New Orleans is one of two times that this occurred during the Great Arctic Outbreak of 1899. The eruption of Laki in Iceland from June 8, 1783, through February 7, 1784, is the likely cause for the severe winter of 1783 - 1784.

1899: The bitter cold outbreak of February 1899 continued across the southern Plains, Texas, and the Deep South. The mercury dipped to 8 degrees below zero at Fort Worth, Texas, and 22 degrees below zero at Kansas City, Missouri. Nebraska's temperature at Camp Clarke plunged to 47 degrees below zero to establish a state record. The all-time record low for Oklahoma City was set when the temperature fell to a frigid 17 degrees below zero, breaking the previous record low of 12 below zero, set on the previous day. Washington D.C. hit 15 degrees below zero, while Charleston, SC, received a record four inches of snow. Snow was also reported in Fort Myers, Tampa, and Tallahassee in Florida.

1958: Snow blanketed northern Florida, with Tallahassee reporting a record 2.8 inches. A ship in the Gulf of Mexico, 25 miles south of Fort Morgan, Alabama, reported zero visibility in heavy snow on the afternoon of the 12th.

1960 - A snowstorm in the Deep South produced more than a foot of snow in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm in the eastern U.S. produced high winds from North Carolina to Maine. A storm in the western U.S. produced up to thirty inches of snow in the Sierra Nevada Range of California. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A classic "nor'easter" formed off the Carolina coast and intensified as it moved up the Atlantic coast bringing heavy snow to the northeastern U.S. Totals ranged up to 26 inches at Camden NY and Chester MA. Arctic cold gripped the north central U.S. Duluth MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 32 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Unseasonably mild weather prevailed across Alaska. Morning lows of 29 degrees at Anchorage and 31 degrees at Fairbanks were actually warmer than those in northern Florida. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Strong southerly winds ahead of an arctic cold front pushed temperatures into the 70s as far north as Iowa and Nebraska. Twenty-one cities in the central U.S., seven in Iowa, reported record high temperatures for the date. Lincoln NE reported a record high of 73 degrees, and the afternoon high of 59 degrees at Minneapolis MN smashed their previous record for the date by twelve degrees. Springfield IL reported a record forty-eight consecutive days with above normal temperatures. (The National Weather Summary)

2006 - An intense snow squall off of Lake Michigan cuts visibility to zero along a section of US 31. The resulting whiteout causes 96 cars to pile up. 25 were injured.

2017: There was an imminent failure of the auxiliary spillway on the Oroville Dam in California.

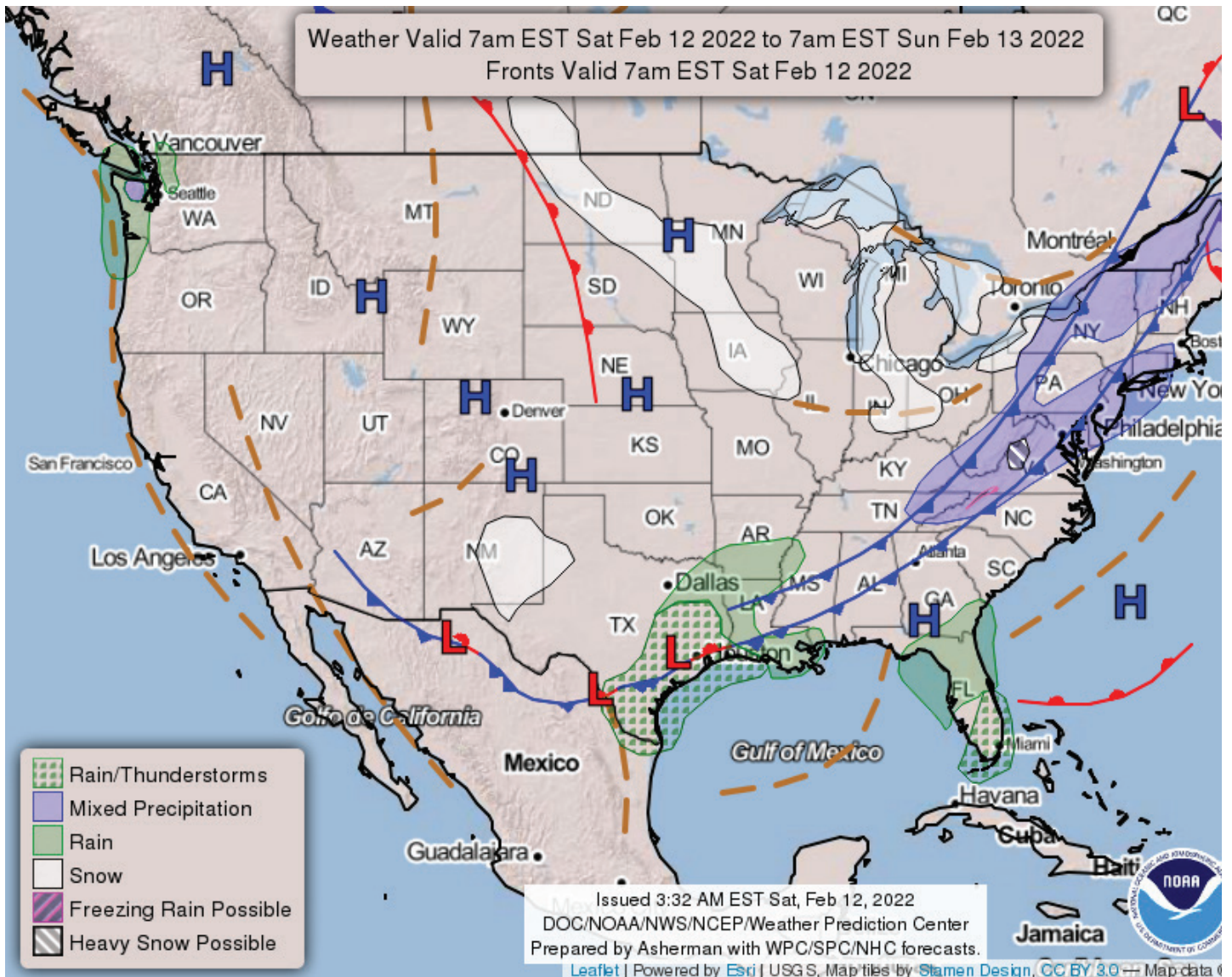
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 39 °F at 12:27 AM
Low Temp: -3 °F at 11:57 PM
Wind: 40 mph at 3:02 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 62 in 1921
Record Low: -36 in 1905
Average High: 28°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.24
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.79
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:56:43 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:34:56 AM



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WHICH WAY ARE WE TO GO?

A shabbily dressed man begging for money was asked, "When you awaken in the morning, how do you determine which way you are going to go?" Puzzled for a moment, he thought and then answered, "I always turn my back to the wind," he replied. "Where I go does not make any difference." In refusing to go against the wind, he always took the path of least resistance.

Not so the courageous man of God who declared, "Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees that I may follow it to the end. Direct me in the path of Your commands for there I find delight."

Some individuals are destroyed because they are ignorant and do not want the insight or advice of anyone - especially God. They do not know which way the right way is, and rather than seeking answers to life's questions, they follow any path before them - even if it leads to destruction and death. All along life's journey we need to constantly pray, "Teach me, Lord, Your way."

There are some who begin to walk in "the Lord's way," but when difficulties arise or if they are faced with challenges, they abandon the journey. They find that following "His way" may require too many sacrifices.

But, those who are willing to follow His path and obey His commands will "find delight." Now, it does not mean that there will not be difficult days or long painful nights waiting to hear God's calming, comforting voice. It means that obeying His way is what will finally bring us joy.

Prayer: Lord, we realize that apart from You there is no satisfaction. Teach us Your ways and cause us to walk in them. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees that I may follow it to the end. Direct me in the path of Your commands for there I find delight. Psalm 119:33-35

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/07/2022 Groton CDE
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 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)
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
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

Program brings farm families to classrooms to promote ag

By MICHAEL NEARY Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — As Danya Buseman and her husband DJ Buseman fielded questions from curious fourth-graders, some of the queries focused on small details. And then there were those that spanned a larger space.

“Is it fun to farm, or is it hard?” asked one student.

“It’s both,” said DJ Buseman. “There are good days and bad days – like everything. When the weather’s good, it’s a lot better.”

The Busemans, speaking to students in South Park Elementary School, are participating in Ag United for South Dakota’s program. The program’s been operating for about 10 years throughout the state, according to a news release from Ag United. It connects farmers with fourth-graders through a series of monthly videos along with in-person visits, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Heidi Zwinger, outreach director for Ag United for South Dakota, said the Adopt A Farmer program creates “a way for the kids to find a little bit of a connection to agriculture in South Dakota and where their food comes from.”

DJ Buseman is a fifth-generation farmer on a farm in Canistota focusing on cattle, sheep and grain. Danya Buseman works as training coordinator at Hefty Seed in Baltic. She also does work on the farm.

Throughout their presentations, the Busemans passed around some of the objects that emerged from the farm, such as wool or corn, for the students to touch.

The Busemans also talked about the way ordinary objects emerged from farm products such as soybeans.

“These are some of the things that come from soybeans,” Danya Buseman told the class. “We’ve got paint, we’ve got candles, tires that people use for their cars or bicycles ...”

She mentioned food, too, including baby formula.

Late in the session, the Busemans began discussing possible careers the students might pursue in agriculture. DJ Buseman said that his college degree was in animal science.

“I came home to farm, but if I’d wanted to, there are several other things I could have done,” he said. “A common thing would have been a livestock nutritionist. So, I could have been the person that put all these (foods) together.”

The Busemans visited the combined fourth-grade classes of Ashley Holmgren and Becka Hewgley, touching on some concepts the students were exploring in different contexts.

“In our reading curriculum this week we were talking about organic farming, so it tied in pretty well,” Holmgren said, noting that learning about farm work also helped their science lessons.

After the session was over, Danya Buseman recalled some of the details that children seemed really to scrutinize.

“The details they pay attention to are kind of amazing,” she said, recalling some students’ interest in the process of wool packing.

She explained the process as taking place with “a big burlap sack that you hung down and would kind of jump into to pack it down.”

DJ Buseman had described the process earlier, while the students were listening. Students became excited and said things like, “That sounds fun.”

“It’s not fun at all,” DJ Buseman replied to them, eliciting chuckles throughout the room.

There’s now a machine they can use to do that, the Busemans explained.

After the session, DJ Buseman sounded a note of optimism regarding career prospects for would-be farmers – even those who haven’t grown up working on a farm.

“I would advise them to try to work for a farmer, and maybe an opportunity would arise that way,” he said. “There may be other opportunities through (USDA) Farm Service Agency and other programs.”

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But the need for help that some farmers are experiencing could nudge the door open to young farmers, DJ Buseman suggested.

"Farmers are getting to be an older generation, and farm help is hard to find right now," he said. "There's a demand for farm workers, and that could lead to something bigger and better."

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Bismarck, N.D. 48, Pierre 44

Brookings 64, Sioux Falls Jefferson 59

Chester 77, Canistota 58

Crazy Horse 72, Alliance, Neb. 11

Crow Creek 56, Miller 51

Dakota Valley 73, Dell Rapids 47

Deubrook 42, Colman-Egan 39

Elk Point-Jefferson 37, Beresford 29

Faith 62, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 37

Faulkton 52, Langford 41

Flandreau 50, Castlewood 32

Gregory 53, Scotland 34

Hanson 57, Kimball/White Lake 29

Huron 45, Aberdeen Central 34

Lakota Tech 76, Rapid City Christian 51

Northwestern 61, North Central Co-Op 54

Pine Ridge 65, Little Wound 64

Platte-Geddes 57, Bon Homme 49

Rapid City Central 35, Harrisburg 29

Rapid City Stevens 59, Yankton 27

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 45, Highmore-Harrold 20

Sioux Falls Washington 60, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 46

Sturgis Brown 61, Hot Springs 22

Tea Area 46, Lennox 15

Timber Lake 53, Newell 43

Vermillion 66, Irene-Wakonda 43

Wagner 79, Chamberlain 53

Watertown 59, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 37

Webster 68, Tiospa Zina Tribal 32

Winner 74, McLaughlin 18

Wolsey-Wessington 73, Iroquois/Doland 51

DWU/Culver's Classic=

Aberdeen Christian 48, Corsica/Stickney 40

Ethan 59, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 47

Howard 56, Jones County 54

McCook Central/Montrose 55, Dell Rapids St. Mary 48

Sioux Falls Christian 39, Belle Fourche 26

St. Thomas More 47, Viborg-Hurley 34

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 70, Huron 52

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Alliance, Neb. 55, Crazy Horse 54
Baltic 40, Alcester-Hudson 28
Bennett County 62, New Underwood 54, OT
Bismarck, N.D. 73, Pierre 60
Canistota 73, Sioux Falls Lutheran 35
Chester 74, Freeman 47
Clark/Willow Lake 54, Redfield 34
Dakota Valley 75, Dell Rapids 55
Deubrook 71, Colman-Egan 51
Faith 64, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 43
Faulkton 56, Langford 27
Gregory 58, Scotland 42
Harrisburg 85, Rapid City Central 50
Highmore-Harold 59, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 47
Kadoka Area 37, Jones County 32
Kimball/White Lake 64, Sunshine Bible Academy 24
Little Wound 84, Pine Ridge 69
Marty Indian 50, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 47
Northwestern 76, North Central Co-Op 32
Philip 76, Hill City 72
Platte-Geddes 66, Bon Homme 52
Sioux Falls Jefferson 61, Brookings 46
Sioux Falls Lincoln 68, Brandon Valley 40
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 52, Sioux Falls Washington 50
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 81, Watertown 51
Sturgis Brown 42, Hot Springs 35
Tea Area 71, Lennox 64
Timber Lake 62, Newell 47
Vermillion 60, Irene-Wakonda 31
Viborg-Hurley 61, Centerville 43
West Central 75, Madison 65
Wilmot 54, Lake Preston 38
Winner 64, McLaughlin 19
Yankton 59, Rapid City Stevens 46

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

11-16-23-24-30, Mega Ball: 24, Megaplier: 3

(eleven, sixteen, twenty-three, twenty-four, thirty; Mega Ball: twenty-four; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$42 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$172 million

Near zero visibility closing interstates, highways

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Strong winds are whipping up blizzard-like conditions and closing sections of

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interstates and highways in North Dakota and Minnesota Friday.

The North Dakota Department of Transportation initially closed Interstate 29 from Canada to the South Dakota border because of near-zero visibility and icy conditions, but later reopened a section from Fargo to Grand Fork. Travel is also prohibited on Highway 13 from Interstate 29 to Wahpeton.

In Minnesota, the State Patrol advised no travel in northwestern Minnesota due to near whiteout conditions. Interstate 94 between Moorhead and Fergus Falls was closed along with sections of Highways 10, 75, 9, 32, 34, 108 and 210.

Patrol Sgt. Jesse Grabow says dozens of vehicles and semis are in the ditch between Barnesville and Rothsay. He says dozens of other vehicles that went off the road are scattered throughout the region.

Snowplows will continue to operate, but motorists are advised not to travel until conditions improve.

The National Weather Service posted a blizzard warning Friday for eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota.

Juneteenth finally official state holiday in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem has signed a bill that makes Juneteenth an official state holiday in South Dakota.

South Dakota was the last state to make June 19 a legal holiday with North Dakota approving legislation last April and Hawaii declaring the holiday with legislation in June.

Juneteenth commemorates the end of slavery in the U.S., when three months after the Civil War ended and 2 1/2 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, word of freedom was spread to enslaved Black people in Texas.

While Noem proclaimed Juneteenth holidays in 2020 and 2021, there was a push in the 2021 legislative session, and again this year, for South Dakota to finally declare it as an annual, official state holiday, the Argus Leader reported.

If Juneteenth falls on a Sunday, the Monday following will be an observed legal holiday; if it falls on a Saturday, the preceding Friday will be an observed legal holiday.

Canada police arrive to remove protesters at US border

By ROB GILLIES and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

WINDSOR, Ontario (AP) — Canadian police moved in Saturday to remove protesters who have disrupted Canada-US trade at a major bridge border crossing.

Protesters at the busiest crossing between the United States and Canada remained overnight despite new warnings to end the blockade that has disrupted the flow of goods between the two countries and forced the auto industry on both sides to roll back production.

A city bus and school bus arrived at the scene Saturday morning and police moved in formation toward them. One of the protesters used a megaphone to alert others that police were coming for the demonstrators, who are protesting against Canada's COVID-19 mandates and restrictions. There is also an outpouring of fury toward Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"The Windsor Police & its policing partners have commenced enforcement at and near the Ambassador Bridge. We urge all demonstrators to act lawfully & peacefully. Commuters are still being asked to avoid the areas affected by the demonstrations at this time," police tweeted.

About 20 protesters huddled together while others remained in pickup trucks and cars as police asked drivers to leave. Tow trucks and ambulances were stationed near the protest.

"The illegal blockades are impacting trade, supply chains & manufacturing. They're hurting Canadian families, workers & businesses. Glad to see the Windsor Police & its policing partners commenced enforcement at and near the Ambassador Bridge. These blockades must stop," Federal Innovation Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne tweeted.

A judge on Friday ordered protesters at the Ambassador Bridge over the U.S.-Canadian border to end the blockade that has now entered a sixth day.

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On Friday, Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency in the province that will allow his cabinet to impose \$100,000 fines and up to one year in jail as punishments against people who continue to illegally block roads, bridges, walkways and other critical infrastructure.

Chief Justice Geoffrey Morawetz of the Ontario Superior Court issued an injunction giving protesters blocking cross-border traffic until 7 p.m. Friday to clear out. However, the deadline came and went.

Windsor police immediately warned that anyone blocking the streets could be subject to arrest and their vehicles could be seized.

The news was met earlier with defiance by protesters.

At the Ambassador Bridge, an unidentified person grabbed a microphone and addressed the crowd, asking if they wanted to stay or leave when the deadline rolled around. By a show of applause, it was agreed they would stay. "OK," the man said. "Let's stand tall." The protesters responded by singing the Canadian national anthem.

The Ambassador Bridge is the busiest U.S.-Canadian border crossing, carrying 25% of all trade between the two countries. The standoff comes at a time when the auto industry is already struggling to maintain production in the face of pandemic-induced shortages of computer chips and other supply-chain disruptions.

While the Canadian protesters are decrying vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 restrictions, many of the country's infection measures, such as mask rules and vaccine passports for getting into restaurants and theaters are already falling away as the omicron surge levels off.

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the U.S., but Canadians have largely supported them. The vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated, and the COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the United States.

Putin, Biden plan high-stakes phone call in Ukraine crisis

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden are to hold a high-stakes telephone call on Saturday as tensions over a possibly imminent invasion of Ukraine escalated sharply and the U.S. announced plans to evacuate its embassy in the Ukrainian capital.

Before talking to Biden, Putin is to have a call with French President Emmanuel Macron, who met with him in Moscow earlier in the week to try to resolve the crisis.

Russia has massed well over 100,000 troops near the Ukraine border and has sent troops to exercises in neighboring Belarus, but insistently denies that it intends to launch an offensive against Ukraine.

However, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Saturday that the country has "optimized" staffing at its embassy in Kyiv, but said the move was in response to concerns about possible military actions from the Ukrainian side.

"We conclude that our American and British colleagues apparently know about some military actions being prepared in Ukraine that could significantly complicate the situation in the security sphere," she said. "In this situation, fearing possible provocations by the Kyiv regime or third countries, we actually decided to somewhat optimize the staffing of Russian foreign missions in Ukraine."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone Saturday. Lavrov told Blinken that "the propaganda campaign launched by the United States and its allies about 'Russian aggression' against Ukraine pursues provocative goals."

Britain on Saturday told its citizens to leave Ukraine. Armed Forces Minister James Heappey told the BBC that U.K. troops that have been training the Ukrainian army also would leave the country. Germany and the Netherlands also called on their citizens to leave as soon as possible.

Adding to the sense of crisis, the Pentagon ordered an additional 3,000 U.S. troops to Poland to reassure allies.

Biden has said the U.S. military will not enter a war in Ukraine, but he has promised severe economic sanctions against Moscow, in concert with international allies.

The timing of any possible Russian military action remains a key question.

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The U.S. picked up intelligence that Russia is looking at Wednesday as a target date, according to a U.S. official familiar with the findings. The official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and did so only on condition of anonymity, would not say how definitive the intelligence was. The White House publicly underscored that the U.S. does not know with certainty whether Putin is committed to invasion.

However, U.S. officials said anew that Russia's buildup of offensive air, land and sea firepower near Ukraine has reached the point where it could invade on short notice.

A State Department travel advisory on Saturday said most American staff at the Kyiv embassy have been ordered to leave and other U.S. citizens should depart the country as well.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on Saturday said "it is critically important to remain calm, to consolidate within the country, and to avoid actions that undermine stability and sow panic." It added that the armed forces "are constantly monitoring developments and are ready to rebuff any infringement on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine."

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said Americans should not expect the U.S. military to rescue them in the event that air and rail transportation is severed after a Russian invasion.

Several NATO allies including Britain, Canada, Norway and Denmark also are asking their citizens to leave Ukraine, as is non-NATO ally New Zealand.

Sullivan said Russian military action could start with missile and air attacks, followed by a ground offensive.

"Yes, it is an urgent message because we are in an urgent situation," he told reporters at the White House.

"Russia has all the forces it needs to conduct a major military action," Sullivan said, adding, "Russia could choose, in very short order, to commence a major military action against Ukraine." He said the scale of such an invasion could range from a limited incursion to a strike on Kyiv, the capital.

Russia scoffed at the U.S. talk of urgency.

"The hysteria of the White House is more indicative than ever," said Russian spokeswoman Zakharova. "The Anglo-Saxons need a war. At any cost. Provocations, misinformation and threats are a favorite method of solving their own problems."

In addition to the more than 100,000 ground troops that U.S. officials say Russia has assembled along Ukraine's eastern and southern borders, the Russians have deployed missile, air, naval and special operations forces, as well as supplies to sustain a war. This week Russia moved six amphibious assault ships into the Black Sea, augmenting its capability to land marines on the coast.

Sullivan's stark warning accelerated the projected timeframe for a potential invasion, which many analysts had believed was unlikely until after the Winter Olympics in China end on Feb. 20. Sullivan said the combination of a further Russian troop buildup on Ukraine's borders and unspecified intelligence indicators have prompted the administration to warn that war could begin any time.

"We can't pinpoint the day at this point, and we can't pinpoint the hour, but that is a very, very distinct possibility," Sullivan said.

Biden has said U.S. troops will not enter Ukraine to contest any Russian invasion, but he has bolstered the U.S. military presence in Europe as reassurance to allies on NATO's eastern flank. On Friday the Pentagon said Biden ordered a further 3,000 soldiers to Poland, on top of 1,700 who are on their way there. The U.S. Army also is shifting 1,000 soldiers from Germany to Romania, which like Poland shares a border with Ukraine.

Biden spoke to a number of European leaders on Friday to underscore the concerns raised by U.S. intelligence about the potential imminence of a Russian invasion.

Russia is demanding that the West keep Ukraine and other former Soviet countries out of NATO. It also wants NATO to refrain from deploying weapons near its border and to roll back alliance forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a bitter conflict since 2014, when Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly leader was driven from office by a popular uprising. Moscow responded by annexing the Crimean Peninsula and then backing a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, where fighting has killed over 14,000 people.

A 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany helped halt large-scale battles, but regular skirmishes have continued, and efforts to reach a political settlement have stalled.

On voting rights, Biden's power to act on his own is limited

By COLLEEN LONG, CHRIS MEGERIAN and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Republicans impose new restrictions on ballot access in multiple states, President Biden has no easy options for safeguarding voting rights despite rising pressure from frustrated activists.

Unlike on other issues such as immigration or environmental protection, the White House has little leverage without congressional action as the November elections creep up.

"If there were some sort of easily available presidential power on this, others would have done it," said Nicholas Stephanopoulos, a Harvard Law School professor who researches election law. "There is no significant unilateral authority here."

Nine months before elections that will determine control of Congress, voting rights advocates are worried there's not enough time to fend off state laws and policies that make it harder to vote. They view the changes as a subtler form of past ballot restrictions such as literacy tests and poll taxes that were used to disenfranchise Black voters, a vital Democratic constituency.

Biden did issue an executive order last March that expanded access to voter registration and election information. The order is designed to make it easier for people in federal custody to register to vote, improve tracking of military ballots and provide better access for Americans with disabilities.

But to do more than that, Biden would have to rely on obscure and controversial constitutional provisions that probably could not take effect in time anyway, Stephanopoulos said. And the farther Biden were to go to push the issue of voting rights, the more he could face criticism for overstepping his authority.

"It's very hard for a president to weigh in," said Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice University. "Everything is being done at a state-by-state level."

So while Biden may be able to take some small actions around the edges, Brinkley said, "if he tries something extraordinary, it will be tied up in the courts for years."

Americans have grown accustomed to seeing presidents act unilaterally when they hit roadblocks in Congress. President Barack Obama resorted to a wave of executive actions branded as "we can't wait." He flexed his authority to increase environmental regulations and shield from deportation young immigrants who were brought to the country illegally.

There's no equivalent legal leverage for Biden to advance voting rights policies.

Marc Morial, leader of the National Urban League, was skeptical that executive actions — which can be reversed by a future president as quickly as they were imposed by a predecessor — could be sufficient anyway.

"An executive order or an executive action is not a replacement or a substitute or even a credible alternative to legislation to protect voting rights and democracy," he said.

But so far, legislation has not been a workable option for Democrats.

Democrats have written voting legislation that would usher in the biggest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation by striking down hurdles to voting enacted in the name of election security. The plan would create national election standards that would trump state-level laws and restore the ability of the Justice Department to police election laws in states with a history of discrimination.

Republicans said the proposed changes were not aimed at fairness but at giving Democrats an advantage in elections. And Democrats were unsuccessful at changing Senate rules to allow the slim Democratic majority in the chamber to pass the laws on their own.

Republicans last year pushed through 33 laws creating new voting limits in 19 states, and five other states have bills that seek to restrict voting. The effort is motivated in part by a growing and widespread denial of President Donald Trump's 2020 election loss.

Republicans who have fallen in line behind Trump's election lies are separately promoting efforts to influence future elections by installing sympathetic leaders in local election posts and by backing for elective office some of those who participated in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Democrats and voting rights advocates are looking to the Justice Department as their best chance to

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ensure elections are free and fair. But there's a political divide over what "free and fair" means in a country where millions believe false claims that the 2020 election was stolen.

The department has lawyers dedicated to enforcing civil voting statutes, and Attorney General Merrick Garland has made it a priority.

But the department is limited in what it can do, following a 2013 Supreme Court decision that dismantled part of the civil rights-era Voting Rights Act, which required states with a history of discrimination to get approval for changes to election laws.

Separately, the Justice Department also has a role in ensuring fair elections but that, too, has been complicated by politics in recent years.

There has been increasing skittishness among election administrators over the department's role after then-Attorney General William Barr told prosecutors to investigate election fraud claims before the 2020 election was certified. Barr cited concern over potential widespread voter fraud because of an increase in mail ballots during the pandemic, but he later declared there had been no widespread fraud.

Garland's Justice Department has sued Georgia over the state's new election law, alleging Republican state lawmakers rushed through a sweeping overhaul with an intent to deny Black voters equal access to the ballot. The Justice Department has also brought a suit against Texas over its newly drawn congressional districts.

But the Supreme Court this past week signaled a willingness to side with the GOP on such issues.

The high court put on hold a lower court ruling that Alabama must draw new congressional districts before the 2022 elections to increase Black voting power. The court's action means the upcoming elections will be conducted under a map drawn by Alabama's Republican-controlled Legislature that contains one majority-Black district in a state in which more than one-quarter of the population is Black.

The three-judge lower court, which includes two judges appointed by Trump, had ruled that the state had probably violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the political power of Black voters.

NAACP President Derrick Johnson said the Supreme Court has undercut the ability of the federal government to protect voting rights, and he still believes the best chance for long-term change is to get legislation through Congress.

"The Justice Department is doing as much as they can with one hand tied behind their back," he said. He noted the Voting Rights Act only became law after previous attempts failed.

"We don't stop because the first attempt didn't work."

Olympics Live: Lindvik wins large hill ski jumping gold

BEIJING (AP) — The Latest on the Beijing Winter Olympics:

Marius Lindvik of Norway has won Olympic gold in ski jumping on the large hill by holding off Ryoyu Kobayashi of Japan.

Lindvik jumped 140 meters Saturday on his final jump and earned 296.1 points overall to become the first Norwegian to win the event since Toralf Engan in 1964.

Kobayashi earned silver after winning on the normal hill on Sunday. Karl Geiger of Germany finished third.

Two-time defending champion Kamil Stoch of Poland was fourth. He came up short on his shot to become the first to win three straight Olympic titles on the large hill.

Two-time gold medalist Andreas Wellinger is unable to compete in China because he tested positive for COVID-19.

The men will be back on the large hill on Monday for a team competition. Norway, Germany and Austria have won the last three Olympic team events. The trio of traditional powers will likely contend for medals again, trying to hold off Slovenia and Japan.

Russian ice dancers Gleb Smolkin and Diana Davis, the daughter of controversial figure skating coach Eteri Tutberidze, qualified for the free dance with a strong performance in the rhythm dance portion of

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the competition Saturday night.

Smolkin and Davis received a score of 71.66 points to their program, set to "Boom Boom Pow" by the Black Eyed Peas and "Bom Bidi Bom" by Nick Jonas and Nicki Minaj. That's not enough to threaten for a spot on the podium, but it was easily enough to make the cutoff for the top 20 dancers to advance to Monday's free dance.

Davis was born in Las Vegas and holds dual citizenship with the United States and Russia.

Tutberidze has come under fire during the Beijing Games for her work with 15-year-old Kamila Valieva, the favorite to win individual gold. Valieva tested positive for a banned medication in December and is now awaiting a decision from the Court of Arbitration for Sport on Monday to see whether she can continue competing in the Olympics.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport says it expects to announce Monday whether figure skater Kamila Valieva can compete in the women's individual event at the Beijing Olympics.

CAS says a closed-door appeal hearing will start at 8:30 p.m. local time Sunday at a hotel in Beijing.

A three-judge panel will aim to notify all the parties of its verdict Monday afternoon. That's less than 24 hours before Valieva is due back on the ice to start the individual event, where she's the strong favorite.

Russia's anti-doping agency provisionally banned Valieva on Tuesday because she failed a doping test in December. After an appeal, the agency lifted the ban Wednesday.

The IOC, World Anti-Doping Agency and International Skating Union have challenged the lifting of the ban.

The 15-year-old skater's positive test was announced only after she helped the Russian Olympic Committee team win gold in the team event.

Johannes Thingnes Boe of Norway skied fast enough to win the gold medal in the biathlon sprint race despite missing one target.

Boe covered the 10-kilometer course in 24 minutes, 0.4 seconds. It's his third medal of the Beijing Games. He also won gold in the mixed relay and bronze in the individual race.

Quentin Fillon Maillet of France also missed one target but couldn't match Boe's ski speed. He won silver, 25.5 seconds back. He won gold in the individual and silver in the mixed relay, where he was outsprinted by Boe. He's also the overall World Cup leader.

Tarjei Boe, who had a single miss on the day, won bronze, 38.9 seconds behind his younger brother.

Estonia's Kristjan Ilves has been released from isolation and cleared to train on the Beijing Games' cross-country course.

Ilves, the world's sixth-ranked Nordic combined skier, previously tested positive for COVID-19 and that knocked him out of the normal hill competition and 10K cross-country race on Wednesday night.

He was one of four Nordic combined stars to miss the first of three medal events in China.

Three-time world champion Jarl Magnus Riiber of Norway was still in isolation on Sunday.

Fifth-ranked and three-time Olympic champion Eric Frenzel of Germany and teammate Terence Weber, who is ranked seventh, were still in isolation as of Saturday night.

Gao Tingyu thrilled the home crowd in Beijing by becoming the first Chinese man to claim an Olympic gold medal in speedskating, winning the 500 meters.

Gao added to the bronze medal he took in the 500 at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

Zhang Hong had been the only Chinese gold medalist at the oval. She won the women's 1,000 eight years ago in Sochi.

Now, she's got company.

Gao skated in the seventh of 15 pairs, setting an Olympic record of 34.32 seconds. Then he waited nervously on the infield as 16 other skaters took aim at his time.

None could beat it. The silver went to South Korea's Cha Min Kyu, whose time of 34.39 gave him a

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matching medal to the silver he won four years ago in Pyeongchang. Wataru Morishige of Japan took the bronze in 34.49.

Russian Sports Minister Oleg Matytsin says there will be no hearing until Sunday on whether figure skater Kamila Valieva can keep competing at the Beijing Olympics.

In comments carried by the state news agency Tass, Matytsin says that the Court of Arbitration for Sport will hear the case Sunday.

Valieva tested positive for the heart drug trimetazidine in a sample taken at the Russian national championships on Dec. 25.

The CAS hearing will not decide whether she doped, only whether she can keep competing until there is a full disciplinary hearing later on. The women's competition starts Tuesday and Valieva is the heavy favorite for gold.

Russia's gold medal in the team competition, where Valieva competed, could also be at risk, but that won't be decided until later.

Snowboarding icon Shaun White's next big contest is the Super Bowl. He was bound for the airport less than 24 hours after he took his final competitive halfpipe ride at the Olympics.

He's headed from Beijing to Los Angeles to watch his first Super Bowl in person.

White said his girlfriend, actress Nina Dobrev, has been suggesting he make a list of things he wants to do in retirement "so I'm not sitting around twiddling my thumbs."

"I've been to the house parties and stuff. Never been to the game, so I'm excited to check that off the list," White said in a phone interview with The Associated Press, as he rode to Beijing on Saturday to catch a late-night flight.

After that, he'll take some time to relax.

The build-up to his last contest, then the tear-stained aftermath of his fourth-place finish, have been an emotional roller coaster for the three-time champion.

"I woke up this morning and I just felt this peacefulness," White said. "It was amazing to know I have so much ahead of me."

The Russian team started strong and finished strong Saturday in the women's four-person relay, winning another Olympic gold medal in cross-country skiing.

Yulia Stupak broke away early with nine women chasing. On the next leg, Natalia Nepryaeva was chased down by Katharina Hennig of Germany.

The Germans briefly took the lead on the last lap, with Russian skier Veronika Stepanova just behind Sofie Krehl. But Stepanova pulled away on the final climb and won in 53 minutes, 41 seconds. Germany took silver, 18.2 seconds behind. Sweden edged Finland for bronze.

Tatiana Sorina skied the third lap for the Russian team, which is competing at the Beijing Games under the acronym ROC — short for Russian Olympic Committee.

The four-person relay began as a mass-start with 18 racers. Each woman skied two laps on a 2.5-kilometer (1.5-mile) course. The first two skiers raced in the classic style and the last two in freestyle.

The start of the men's 500 meters is being delayed at the Olympic speedskating oval.

The ice was all set for the sprint race when workers came out to remove some of the lane markers and repair a section of the outer lane in the corner. One of the Zambonis was reappeared and made two trips around to smooth over that area.

Fifteen pairs are competing in the race.

Japan has set an Olympic record in the quarterfinals of the women's speedskating team pursuit at the Beijing Olympics.

Japan broke its own Olympic mark Saturday with a time of 2 minutes, 53.61 seconds, advancing to the

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semifinals as the top qualifier.

The Japanese will face the fourth-fastest qualifier, the Russian Olympic Committee (2:57.66). Canada (2:53.97) and the Netherlands (2:57.26) also advanced and will meet in the other semifinal.

China and Norway were relegated to the C final. Belarus and Poland will meet in the D final.

The United States men's hockey team beat Canada, its biggest rival, 4-2 in a preliminary round game at the Beijing Olympics.

Andy Miele responded to Canada's early goal by tying it 70 seconds later and Brendan Brisson scored his second of the Olympics.

The Americans are now in the driver's seat to earn a spot in the quarterfinals of the men's hockey tournament.

Sean Farrell also set up Ben Meyers to give him three assists and six points and goaltender Strauss Mann made 35 saves to help the U.S. improve to 2-0 in the preliminary round. Beating Germany on Sunday would put the U.S. first in the group and could make it the top seed in the knockout round.

The boom or bust potential of the youngest team in the tournament was on full display against Canada, a bigger, stronger and more experienced opponent.

The U.S. — with 12 college players on the ice — went hit for hit with Canada and used a combination of offensive skill and bad opposing goaltending to take control of the game.

Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva was in tears after a shaky practice Saturday at the Beijing Olympics that included a fall on a triple axel — a jump she typically executes without a problem.

Valieva was doing a run-through of her short program when she fell. She later landed two combos, a triple flip-triple toe loop and a triple lutz-triple toe loop, before skating to the boards and giving her coach, Eteri Tutberidze, an emotional hug.

Valieva has continued to practice while the Court of Arbitration for Sport considers whether a failed doping test will keep the 15-year-old sensation out of the women's competition. The event begins Tuesday in Beijing.

Valieva helped Russia win team gold last weekend. Then on Monday, a test taken in December was flagged for traces of the banned heart drug trimetazidine, putting the medal won by her entire team in possible jeopardy.

The inaugural Olympic monobob starts Sunday at the Beijing Games. In monobob, there's only one woman in the bobsled.

Americans Kaillie Humphries and Elana Meyers Taylor are expected to be among the top contenders in the new event. Medals will be awarded Monday and the traditional two-woman competition starts Friday night.

Humphries is the reigning world champion in the event and Meyers Taylor is this season's monobob World Series overall champion.

Humphries and Meyers Taylor were both fighting COVID-19 in recent weeks, yet recovered just in time to keep their Olympic hopes going.

Men compete in the four-man bobsled and Humphries and Meyers Taylor hoped the Olympics would add a women's event, but most countries besides the U.S. and Canada don't have enough female bobsledders to compete. So monobob was added instead.

Defending Olympic champion Sofia Goggia of Italy appeared content after completing the opening downhill training session at the Beijing Games less than three weeks after injuring her left leg and knee in a crash.

Goggia finished 1.55 seconds behind leader Priska Nufer of Switzerland.

Mikaela Shiffrin was slightly quicker in ninth and 1.33 back.

Two more training sessions are scheduled before Tuesday's race.

Goggia did not enter the super-G and arrived late in China to get in some extra rehab at home in Italy.

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She sprained her left knee, partially tore a cruciate ligament, had a "minor fracture" of the fibula bone in her leg, plus some tendon damage, after the crash in a super-G in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on Jan. 23. There was light snowfall and fog on the top of the course.

Lindsey Jacobellis has won her second gold medal of the Olympics, teaming with 40-year-old Nick Baumgartner for the title in the new event of mixed snowboardcross.

The 36-year-old Jacobellis took gold earlier this week in the women's event; it came 16 years after a late showboat move as she was cruising in for an apparent win cost her the title at the Turin Games.

After a slow start, the U.S. now has five gold medals and 11 overall at the Games. Jacobellis accounts for two, while snowboarder Chloe Kim has another.

The Italian team of Omar Visintin and Michela Moioli came in second and the Canadian duo of Eliot Grondin and Meryeta O'Dine finished third.

Finally, a real sign of winter at the Winter Olympics: real snow in the mountains used for Alpine skiing. Just a light flurry, mind you.

Still, actual flakes are dropping on the hills of the Yanqing Alpine Skiing Center, about 55 miles northwest of Beijing's city center.

It is the first precipitation since ski racing competition began last week -- the absence of snow is not much of a surprise, given how dry the season usually is in these parts.

All of the snow that American star Mikaela Shiffrin and others have been skiing on is manufactured.

There are no Alpine medals at stake Saturday, just a chance for Shiffrin and other women to take training runs for the downhill along the course known as The Rock. The race is scheduled for Tuesday.

More snow is in the forecast for Sunday, when the men are supposed to contest the giant slalom -- and even continuing through Monday morning. A total of about 3 1/2 inches (9 centimeters) is expected at the Alpine skiing venue.

German pairs skaters Nolan Seegert and Minerva Fabienne Hase practiced for the first time Saturday, 10 days after Seegert tested positive for COVID-19 upon his arrival in Beijing and was put into quarantine.

Seegert and Hase were forced to withdraw from the team competition, which meant Germany received no points for the pairs short program. That made it impossible for the longshots to advance to the medal round of the event.

The individual pairs competition begins Friday night, so they still have nearly a week to prepare.

The women's session is later Saturday at the same practice rink near Capital Indoor Stadium. It's unclear whether Kamila Valieva, who is at the center of a Russian doping controversy, will be on the ice again. She is awaiting a ruling from the Court of Arbitration for Sport on whether she can continue in Beijing with the women's event beginning Tuesday.

Bieber wows A-list crowd at pre-Super Bowl 'Homecoming'

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. (AP) — Justin Bieber can leave even a room full of elite athletes, actors and A-listers star struck.

The invite-only guests at Friday's first of two nights of a Super Bowl-week party dubbed "Homecoming Weekend" crushed around a small stage-in-the-round under a tent at the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood, California to get close to Bieber, who hopped, bopped and shimmied through a 45-minute set as the evening's headliner.

The crowd included Jeff Bezos, his girlfriend TV host Lauren Sánchez, "Hamilton" actor Anthony Ramos and NFL Hall-of-Famer Tony Gonzalez.

Most of the hands around the stage were holding phones in the air and filming. Some gleeful fans turned around to shoot selfies with Bieber, who wore a black skullcap, shades, a white hoodie and a sparkling

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necklace as he boogied in the background.

With a spare five-piece band, the 27-year-old pop star played a set that leaned heavily on recent songs, including "Somebody," "Hold On," "Ghost," and "As I Am," with a few nods to the past, like 2015's "What Do You Mean?"

He stood at a keyboard to play an earnest electric-piano intro to "Peaches" before getting back to the dancing.

Bieber kept the songs flowing, and kept the between-song banter to a minimum.

"You guys having a good night?" he said at one point. "You guys rooting for the Rams?"

Despite the free food and top-shelf spirits being served, the outdoor patios were mostly empty as everyone jammed into the tent to watch Bieber.

Proof of vaccination was required of the 1,500 guests. Few wore masks.

It was one of a week full of entertainment events leading up to Sunday's Super Bowl at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, the first in the Los Angeles area in nearly three decades, with the hometown Los Angeles Rams playing the Cincinnati Bengals.

Night one also included a DJ set from Marshmello. Drake is set to perform on night two.

The event, presented by The h.wood Group, REVOLVE, PLACES.CO and Uncommon Entertainment, was themed on a high school homecoming.

The mostly young guests posed at photo stations with bejeweled football helmets, took pictures in front of a faux-high-school hallway of pink lockers and trophy cases.

Staffers were dressed in football uniforms, making the rounds with fancified versions of stadium food, including plant-based chicken bites, garlic fries and tiny pizzas.

Other pre-Super Bowl entertainment events on Friday night included Shaq's Fun House, a public event thrown by Shaquille O'Neal at the Shrine Auditorium that featured a performance from Lil Wayne, and the second night of the three-night Bud Light Super Bowl Music Fest, which featured Gwen Stefani, Blake Shelton and Mickey Guyton, who will sing the national anthem at Sunday's big game.

Russian skater's doping case to be heard Sunday at Olympics

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva will find out Monday if she can compete at the Olympics in the women's competition, which starts a day later.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport said Saturday the expedited hearing on Valieva's doping case will be held Sunday night in Beijing, with a ruling by Monday afternoon.

The 15-year-old skater, the favorite to win the gold medal, broke down in tears after an emotional practice session Saturday.

At the court's closed-door hearing, which will be held by video link, lawyers for the Russian Olympic team and Valieva can ask the three judges to listen to a personal statement from her.

"If she attends I assume it will be by video conference," CAS director general Matthieu Reeb said at the court's hotel base. "It will be a long night. It could be four or five hours."

Valieva's status at the Olympics became unclear after she tested positive for the banned heart medication trimetazidine in Russia in December. She won a gold medal in the team event five days ago, before the test result was known, and is scheduled to compete as an individual Tuesday.

On Saturday, Valieva fell during practice on a triple axel — a jump she typically executes without a problem — while doing a run-through of her short program. She later landed two combos, a triple flip-triple toe loop and a triple lutz-triple toe loop before skating to the boards and giving her coach, Eteri Tutberidze, an emotional hug.

Earlier Saturday, CAS confirmed it has received appeals from both the International Olympic Committee and the World Anti-Doping Agency challenging Valieva's right to compete.

The Russian Anti-Doping Agency gave her an automatic ban after testing positive. A day later, RUSADA lifted the provisional ban. The IOC filed an urgent appeal, which the Court of Arbitration of Sport will hear

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Sunday.

"It was sending a signal that we want this solved as quickly as it can be," IOC spokesman Mark Adams.

The legal process is unusually complex because of Valieva's status as a minor, which gives her protections in the anti-doping rule book.

Because Valieva is only 15, her ultimate penalty could be as little as a reprimand. Her entourage of coaches and doctors face more scrutiny because the World Anti-Doping Code mandates they are automatically put under investigation.

Valieva tested positive in a sample given on Dec. 25, when she won the Russian national championships.

That sample was the responsibility of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency, known as RUSADA. It was sent to a WADA-approved laboratory in Stockholm, Sweden, for analysis.

On Monday — hours after Valieva's skating helped the Russians win the Olympic team event — the Stockholm lab notified RUSADA the test was positive.

The three CAS judges, from Italy, the United States and Slovenia, will consider only the request to re-impose the interim ban on Valieva. It will be chaired by Milan-based lawyer Fabio Iudica.

The American judge, Jeffrey Benz, is a former national-level figure skater and one of the most in-demand arbitrators for CAS cases. Vesna Bergant Rakočević is a high court judge in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana.

Whether the Russian team keeps the gold medal in the team event is a separate issue that will be decided later.

The full investigation of the doping case is for RUSADA to handle and could take months. That could also be appealed to CAS.

Biden weighs appeal of 3 top candidates for high court

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden had zeroed in on a pair of finalists for his first Supreme Court pick when there were rumors last year that Justice Stephen Breyer would retire. But since the upcoming retirement was announced late last month, it has come with the rise of a third candidate, one with ready-made bipartisan support that has complicated the decision.

For Biden, it's a tantalizing prospect. The president believes he was elected to try to bring the country together following the yawning and rancorous political divide that grew during the Trump administration and especially following the Capitol insurrection in January 2021.

And a Supreme Court nominee with a raft of qualifications who has the vocal support of even one or two Republican senators could well attract the backing of other Republicans. That, in turn, could make for a smoother nomination process after some painfully partisan ones in recent years.

This story is based on accounts from seven people familiar with Biden's decision-making who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to talk about private discussions.

Two of the three judges now on Biden's short list were evaluated last year by White House aides, although that early vetting did not include deep dives into their opinions or backgrounds, formal interviews or FBI background checks.

They are Ketanji Brown Jackson, 51, a recent appointee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where she has served since June 2021, and Leandra Kruger, 45, a California Supreme Court judge since 2015 who would be the first person in more than 40 years to move from a state court to the Supreme Court if she were to be confirmed.

Jackson is seen as the top candidate. And she, too, has a proven record of bipartisan support: She was confirmed to the appeals court on a 53-44 vote. Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Susan Collins of Maine and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina voted for her.

But J. Michelle Childs has rapidly become a serious third candidate after House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, D.-S.C., publicly announced his support for her, as did the state's Republican senators, Graham and Tim Scott. Graham has made clear Childs is his preferred choice.

The 55-year-old is a federal judge in South Carolina who has been nominated to serve on the U.S. Court

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of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. That nomination is on hold while she's under consideration for the high court.

Childs lacks the elite law school credentials of many current Supreme Court justices — she attended the University of South Carolina School of Law. But that's part of her appeal to Clyburn and others who question why Ivy League credentials are necessary. Eight of the court's nine current members attended law school at Harvard or Yale. Childs also has a master's degree from the school as well as a different legal degree from Duke.

Among the three justices on Biden's short list, Childs is considered the most moderate, and she has been criticized by progressives and labor groups who say her record is not sufficiently supportive of worker rights. She was previously a state court judge and has served as a federal trial court judge since 2010.

Jackson did attend Harvard Law School and has expertise that would bring considerable professional diversity to the high court. She worked as a public defender and served on the U.S. Sentencing Commission before she was nominated to the federal bench by former President Barack Obama. She is the favorite of progressives.

Kruger, 45, has been on the California Supreme Court since 2015. She was just 38 when chosen for the job by then-Gov. Jerry Brown. She's seen as a moderate on the seven-member court. She used to work for the Department of Justice.

Breyer's replacement won't shift the ideological makeup of the court. So in some ways, that makes it easier for Republicans to back a candidate advanced by Biden. But Biden has also said bipartisan support is not a necessity; a razor-thin majority in the U.S. Senate means he doesn't need it.

Biden said earlier this week he was looking closely at "about four" candidates and was interested in selecting a nominee in the mold of Breyer who could be a "persuasive" force with fellow justices. Although his votes tended to put him to the left of center on an increasingly conservative court, Breyer frequently saw the gray in situations that colleagues to his right and left were more likely to find black or white.

Biden, who is spending the weekend at Camp David, is studying a range of cases and other materials about the candidates, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday.

His team, led by former Democratic Sen. Doug Jones, has compiled past writings, public remarks and decisions of the candidates, as well as learning their life stories.

Psaki said Biden could begin meeting with top contenders as early as next week, noting that such interviews typically happen at the end of the vetting process. She said the president remains on track for an announcement by the end of the month.

Going back as far as his campaign, Biden has pledged to nominate a Black woman for the slot. The Supreme Court was made up entirely of white men for almost two centuries. Justice Clarence Thomas and the late Thurgood Marshall are the only two Black men who have served on the court. There has never been a Black woman.

Other possible candidates included U.S. District Court Judge Wilhelmina Wright from Minnesota; Melissa Murray, a New York University law professor who is an expert in family law and reproductive rights justice; and Leslie Abrams Gardner, a U.S. district judge for the Middle District of Georgia and the sister of Stacey Abrams, a powerful voting rights activist and nominee for Georgia governor.

Afghans protest US order to give \$3.5B to 9/11 victims

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Demonstrators in Afghanistan's capital Saturday condemned President Joe Biden's order freeing up \$3.5 billion in Afghan assets held in the U.S. for families of America's 9/11 victims — saying the money belongs to Afghans.

Protesters who gathered outside Kabul's grand Eid Gah mosque asked America for financial compensation for the tens of thousands of Afghans killed during the last 20 years of war in Afghanistan.

Biden's order, signed Friday, allocates another \$3.5 billion in Afghan assets for humanitarian aid to a trust fund to be managed by the U.N. to provide aid to Afghans. The country's economy is teetering on

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the brink of collapse after international money stopped coming into Afghanistan with the arrival in mid-August of the Taliban.

Torek Farhadi, a financial adviser to Afghanistan's former U.S.-backed government, questioned the U.N. managing Afghan Central Bank reserves. He said those funds are not meant for humanitarian aid but "to back up the country's currency, help in monetary policy and manage the country's balance of payment."

He also questioned the legality of Biden's order.

"These reserves belong to the people of Afghanistan, not the Taliban ... Biden's decision is one-sided and does not match with international law," said Farhadi. "No other country on Earth makes such confiscation decisions about another country's reserves."

Afghanistan has about \$9 billion in assets overseas, including the \$7 billion in the United States. The rest is mostly in Germany, the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland.

"What about our Afghan people who gave many sacrifices and thousands of losses of lives?" asked the demonstration's organizer, Abdul Rahman, a civil society activist.

Rahman said he planned to organize more demonstrations across the capital to protest Biden's order. "This money belongs to the people of Afghanistan, not to the United States. This is the right of Afghans," he said.

Misspelled placards in English accused the United States of being cruel and of stealing the money of Afghans.

Taliban political spokesman Mohammad Naeem accused the Biden administration in a tweet late Friday of showing "the lowest level of humanity ... of a country and a nation."

Biden's Friday order generated a social media storm with Twitter saying #USA_stole_money_from_afghan was trending among Afghans. Tweets repeatedly pointed out that the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi nationals, not Afghans.

Obaidullah Baheer, a lecturer at the American University in Afghanistan and a social activist, tweeted: "Let's remind the world that #AfghansDidntCommit911 and that #BidenStealingAfgMoney!"

Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was brought to Afghanistan by Afghan warlords after being expelled from Sudan in 1996. Those same warlords would later ally with the U.S.-led coalition to oust the Taliban in 2001. However, it was Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar who refused to hand over bin Laden to the U.S. after the devastating 9/11 attacks that killed thousands.

Still, some analysts took to Twitter to question Biden's order.

Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center, called Biden's order to divert \$3.5 billion away from Afghanistan "heartless."

"It's great that \$3.5B in new humanitarian aid for Afghanistan has been freed up. But to take another \$3.5B that belongs to the Afghan people, and divert it elsewhere--that is misguided and quite frankly heartless," he tweeted.

Kugelman also said the opposition to Biden's order crossed Afghanistan's wide political divide.

"I can't remember the last time so many people of such vastly different worldviews were so united over a US policy decision on Afghanistan," he tweeted.

US aims to counter China by opening Solomon Islands embassy

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The U.S. says it will open an embassy in the Solomon Islands, laying out in unusually blunt terms a plan to increase its influence in the South Pacific nation before China becomes "strongly embedded."

The reasoning was explained in a State Department notification to Congress that was obtained by The Associated Press.

The plan was confirmed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a visit to Fiji Saturday on a Pacific tour that began in Australia.

Blinken left Fiji late in the evening bound for Hawaii, where he will host the foreign ministers from Japan

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and South Korea to discuss the threat posed by North Korea, amid rising concerns over its recent missile tests.

The State Department said Solomon Islanders cherished their history with Americans on the battlefields of World War II, but that the U.S. was in danger of losing its preferential ties as China "aggressively seeks to engage" elite politicians and business people in the Solomon Islands.

The move comes after rioting rocked the nation of 700,000 in November. The riots grew from a peaceful protest and highlighted long-simmering regional rivalries, economic problems and concerns about the country's increasing links with China, after it switched allegiance from the self-ruled island of Taiwan to Beijing three years ago. Rioters set fire to buildings and looted stores.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare survived a no-confidence vote the following month, telling lawmakers in a fiery 90-minute speech that he'd done nothing wrong and would not bow down to "the forces of evil" or to "Taiwan's agents."

The U.S. previously operated an embassy in the Solomons for five years before closing it in 1993. Since then, U.S. diplomats from neighboring Papua New Guinea have been accredited to the Solomons, which has a U.S. consular agency.

The embassy announcement fits with a new Biden administration strategy for the Indo-Pacific that was announced Friday and emphasizes building partnerships with allies in the region as a way to counter China's growing influence and ambitions.

In its notification to Congress, the State Department said China had been "utilizing a familiar pattern of extravagant promises, prospective costly infrastructure loans, and potentially dangerous debt levels," when engaging with political and business leaders from the Solomon Islands.

"The United States has a strategic interest in enhancing our political, economic, and commercial relationship with Solomon Islands, the largest Pacific Island nation without a U.S. Embassy," the State Department wrote.

The State Department said it didn't expect to build a new embassy immediately but would at first lease space at an initial set-up cost of \$12.4 million. The embassy would be located in the capital, Honiara, and would start small, with two U.S. employees and about five local staff.

The State Department said the Peace Corps was planning to reopen an office in the Solomon Islands and have its volunteers serve there, and that several U.S. agencies were establishing government positions with portfolios in the Solomons.

"The Department needs to be part of this increased U.S. presence, rather than remaining a remote player," it wrote.

During his visit to Fiji, Blinken met with Acting Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and other Pacific leaders to talk about regional issues, especially the existential risk posed by climate change. It was the first visit by a U.S. secretary of state to Fiji since 1985.

Sayed-Khaiyum said he welcomed the renewed U.S. engagement in the region and President Joe Biden's move last year to rejoin the Paris Agreement. He said that in the past, Pacific island nations had sometimes felt overlooked by larger nations as "flyover" countries.

"Small dots spotted from plane windows of leaders, en route to meetings where they spoke about us rather than with us, if they spoke of us at all," he said.

Blinken and the Pacific leaders also spoke about the coronavirus pandemic and disaster assistance. But looming over the visit were the increasing tensions in Ukraine.

"We continue to see very, very troubling signs of Russian escalation, including new forces arriving around Ukraine's borders," Blinken said.

Blinken visited Fiji after leaving the Australian city of Melbourne, where he had a meeting with his counterparts from Australia, India and Japan. The four nations form the so-called "Quad," a bloc of Indo-Pacific democracies that was created to counter China's regional influence.

Russian coach produces teen skating stars with short careers

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By JAMES ELLINGWORTH AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The coach behind Russia's figure skating dynasty rarely speaks to the media, enhancing her mystique as a guru who produces a line of teenage stars who can land jumps no other women even attempt.

A doping furor around her star pupil has forced Eteri Tutberidze into the spotlight at the Beijing Olympics. She broke her silence on the case against Kamila Valieva on Saturday, telling Russian TV: "We are absolutely sure that Kamila is innocent and clean."

Tutberidze-trained skaters have dominated competition for eight years, but critics have raised concerns about their short careers - many retire as teenagers - and propensity to suffer serious injuries.

The news that 15-year-old Valieva tested positive for a banned heart medication before the Olympics puts Russia's gold medal in the team event in jeopardy and could kick her out of the women's competition next week.

The positive drug test has been the top story out of the Olympics for days, pitting Russia against world sporting agencies again. Tutberidze and Valieva shared an emotional hug Saturday near the end of practice.

Valieva made her senior debut just five months ago, but she's already acclaimed as a generational talent. She combines spectacular jumping power — landing the first quadruple jump by a woman in Olympic history on Monday — with elegant skills to shatter world-record scores.

When an athlete under 16 — a "protected person" in Olympic jargon — tests positive, the rules say their entourage must be investigated. That means the Russian anti-doping agency is launching an examination of Tutberidze's world-beating, secretive training group in Moscow.

"On one hand, they are professional athletes, and they are competing at high level competitions as other adults (do) and should be ready to bear all their responsibility," Margarita Pakhnotskaya, former deputy CEO of the Russian anti-doping agency, told The Associated Press.

"But on the other hand, we know that psychologically and mentally, they are not adults. And partly this responsibility should be shared with the senior people who are in their nearest circle."

Tutberidze's approach to training focuses on athleticism and a fearsome work ethic. She had to work to build a coaching career from a low point as a penniless skater performing in U.S. ice shows in the 1990s. She was stuck in Oklahoma living in a YMCA when she survived the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

One person in Tutberidze's orbit who could face questions is sports doctor Filipp Shvetsky, who accompanied Valieva to her first senior international competition in October. The doctor has said he was barred from working with Russia's rowing team after a 2007 doping investigation.

WORLD-BEATERS

In less than a decade, Tutberidze has gone from being one of many Russian skating coaches to the leader of a dynasty.

Her breakthrough came when Yulia Lipnitskaya helped Russia win the team event gold in Sochi in 2014, becoming the second-youngest gold medalist in the history of the sport.

Four years later, Tutberidze had the top two women, with Alina Zagitova beating Evgenia Medvedeva for the gold. In Beijing, Tutberidze coaches all three Russian women, who could sweep the podium with their high-scoring quad jumps.

Tutberidze can select the most promising young Russian skaters for her camp, which has enviable facilities and funding. At the national championships where Valieva tested positive in December, a Tutberidze skater won for the seventh year in a row.

SHORT CAREERS, INJURY CONCERNS

Stars trained by Tutberidze have not had long careers.

Defending Olympic champion Zagitova took a break in December 2019 at 17, saying she needed to find motivation after losing to younger Russians with quad jumps. She hasn't skated competitively since and focuses on a TV career. Medvedeva performed at the 2018 Games with a cracked bone in her foot. Three months later, she left Tutberidze's camp to train with Brian Orser in Canada, saying she wanted to "work together with a coach like (a) friend."

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Lipnitskaya retired at 19, revealing she had struggled with anorexia. Chronic back injuries forced retirement last year for Elizabet Tursynbaeva of Kazakhstan, the first woman to land a quad at the world championships in 2019. Another Tutberidze skater, Darya Usacheva, suffered a serious injury in November and traveled home in a wheelchair.

Rafael Arutyunyan, coach of Olympic men's champion Nathan Chen, likened Russian skaters with short careers to single-use coffee cups in a 2020 interview with a Russian sports website, without mentioning Tutberidze by name.

U.S. LINKS

Tutberidze's outlook and career were shaped by spending much of the 1990s in the United States.

Born in Moscow to Georgian parents, Tutberidze never made it to the elite of Soviet figure skating. After the Soviet Union collapsed, she headed to the U.S. to skate in ice shows.

In a rare interview published on the Russian Figure Skating Federation website in 2015, Tutberidze detailed how the dream turned sour. Other skaters had visa issues and her money ran out while waiting for them to arrive in Oklahoma. Without money, she attended Baptist church services for free food.

"We had to sit through the service, and afterward they brought out water for the congregation and some little sandwiches," she said.

Tutberidze said she was living in a YMCA just a block away from the federal building in Oklahoma City when she was caught up in one of the worst terrorist acts on U.S. soil. The April 1995 bombing by anti-government extremist Timothy McVeigh left 168 people dead.

"Glass, rubble, smashed paneling, blood, mutilated bodies," she said. "To begin with we didn't understand what had happened. There was a building and now it's not there, just dust, and on the intersection lumps of rubble instead of cars."

Tutberidze's name is inscribed on a "survivors' wall" on the site of the blast. She spent six years in the U.S., first as a skater, then as a coach in San Antonio. Her daughter, Diana Davis, competing in Beijing on the Russian ice dance team, was born in the U.S.

She returned to Russia and worked for more than a decade before becoming an internationally recognized coach. Tutberidze has said life's successes require hard times — a philosophy that might also apply to her coaching style.

"It's a very comfortable, quiet life there (in the U.S.). Great people, wonderful relationships," she said. "But for me, there's a lack of contrast in all that abundance. When there are no difficulties, you can't understand what happiness is."

AP exclusive: White looks to Super Bowl, rest and new start

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — Shaun White's next big contest — the Super Bowl.

Less than 24 hours after snowboarding's global icon took his final competitive halfpipe ride at the Olympics, he was bound for the airport. The destination: Los Angeles to watch his first Super Bowl in person.

White said his girlfriend, actress Nina Dobrev, has been suggesting he get busy making a list of things he wants to do in retirement "so I'm not sitting around twiddling my thumbs."

"I've been to the house parties and stuff. Never been to the game, so I'm excited to check that off the list," White said in a phone interview with The Associated Press, as he rode to Beijing on Saturday to catch a late-night flight.

After that, he'll take some time to relax.

The build-up to his last contest, then the tear-stained aftermath of his fourth-place finish, have been an emotional roller coaster for the three-time champion.

"I woke up this morning and I just felt this peacefulness," White said. "It was amazing to know I have so much ahead of me."

White said his phone has been blowing up — all of it supportive. And though no single athlete has meant more to the sport of snowboarding than the 35-year-old Californian, he conceded he had been nervous

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about what kind of reaction he'd get.

"As a competitor, I always wanted to be on the podium and I didn't know if people would still respect my legacy," he said.

He put down a solid run to get into medal contention, but with a chance to move up one spot and land on the podium, his legs grew weak and he fell as he tried the second of back-to-back 1440s — one of the toughest combinations in the sport.

The less-than-perfect performance, his emotional reaction to it, and even his worries about what others would think — all of that revealed the softer side of White, who grew from "The Flying Tomato" to a multi-platform sports and business icon in front of the world's eyes. The past week in the mountains above Beijing have triggered an outpouring of feelings along every step of the way.

Any second thoughts about his decision to hang it up?

"The initial competitive reaction was, 'Oh, I almost had the podium and I want to come back and try that again,'" White said. "It's one of the things that's driven me to be one of the best in sports. But I think I'm going to enjoy this new lifestyle much better."

Dobrev took to social media and praised her boyfriend, saying: "You will forever be the G.O.A.T. of snowboarding. Not to mention you are also the G.(B).O.A.T. = Greatest Boyfriend Of All Time."

"I couldn't be more proud. Of everything you have accomplished over the last 20 years as a competitor and the man you have become," she wrote.

White's next chapter will include a dive back into business.

He has combined with his brother, Jesse, to launch a new snowboard brand, Whitespace. He said a first run of snowboards sold out online in 15 minutes. White is also owner of a music-and-competition event, Air & Style, which could get fresh legs if COVID-19 subsides.

White said one of his realizations as he weighed whether to retire was that "instead of beating these guys out here, I want to start sponsoring them."

He's still figuring that part out. He said offering advice and helping a few young riders find their way in the sport is intriguing. A dip into coaching — at least in the way that his buddy and coach, 2002 bronze medalist J.J. Thomas is doing it — might take a little longer.

"I would need time before I did something like that, and it would have to be a very special situation," White said. "But definitely supporting in some capacity would be very enjoyable, I think."

But before that, some rest.

Even for a megastar used to traveling the globe, the last four months have been a lot. There was a long stretch in Europe for training, which also led to the decision to retire.

There was a hectic swing through qualifying events, which were hampered by an ankle injury, a bout with COVID-19, a broken binding in one contest, then a quick unexpected trip to Switzerland to secure his spot on the team.

And then China. It was not an easy trip for anyone, and for White, it was made all the more hectic — and emotional — because the spotlight was shining on the final performance of his one-of-a-kind career.

"Advice I've got from others is 'Just take a second,'" White said. "I just want to take a pause and really soak in this moment, everything I've done and earned and enjoyed, and then see what sparks my interest."

New Zealand tries old earworm hits to flush out protesters

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Some countries might send in a riot squad to disperse trespassing protesters. In New Zealand, authorities turned on the sprinklers and Barry Manilow.

Initial moves to try and flush out several hundred protesters who have been camped on Parliament's grassy grounds since Tuesday had little effect.

The protesters, who have been voicing their opposition to coronavirus vaccine mandates, responded to the soaking from the sprinklers by digging trenches and installing makeshift drainpipes to divert the water.

When a downpour hit Saturday, their numbers only grew. Protesters brought in bales of straw, which

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they scattered on the increasingly sodden grounds at Parliament. Some shouted, others danced and one group performed an Indigenous Maori haka.

By evening, Parliament Speaker Trevor Mallard had come up with a new plan to make the protesters uncomfortable: using a sound system to blast out vaccine messages, decades-old Barry Manilow songs and the 1990s earworm hit "Macarena" on a repeat loop.

Protesters responded by playing their own tunes, including Twister Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It."

The protest began when a convoy of trucks and cars drove to Parliament from around the nation, inspired by protests in Canada. At first there were more than 1,000 protesters but that number dwindled as the week wore on before growing again on Saturday.

Police have been taking a more hands-off approach since Thursday, when they arrested 122 people and charged many of them with trespassing or obstruction. Police, who have been wearing protective vests but haven't been using riot gear or carrying guns, had tried to slowly advance on the protesters.

But that resulted in a number of physical confrontations. A video of two female officers briefly dragging a naked woman by her hair from amid a scuffle went viral.

In a response to questions from The Associated Press, New Zealand police said they did not remove the woman's clothing as some people had claimed online, and that she had been naked for "some time" before her arrest. Police also said the images and videos didn't provide the full context of the protest activity or the situation that police faced.

Still, the scuffles seemed to prompt a strategic rethink by police, who appeared more content to wait it out as the week wore on. But by Friday, Mallard, the Parliament speaker, had seen enough, and told staff to turn on the sprinklers overnight.

"I ordered them on," he confirmed to the AP.

"No one who is here is here legally, and if they're getting wet from below as well as above, they're likely to be a little bit less comfortable and more likely to go home," Mallard said, according to news organization Stuff.

"Some people have suggested we add the vaccine in the water, but I don't think it works that way," he joked.

Mallard told media he was responsible for the sound system loop as well.

Some of the protesters' vehicles have remained parked in the middle of streets around Parliament, forcing some street closures. The National Library and many cafes and bars in the area have closed their doors while the protest plays out. Police said one protester had a medical event on Friday evening and an ambulance was unable to reach him because of the vehicles blocking the streets, resulting in a delay before he was treated.

Among the protesters' grievances is the requirement in New Zealand that certain workers get vaccinated against COVID-19, including teachers, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel. Many protesters also oppose mask mandates — such as those in stores and among children over about age 8 in classrooms — and champion the ideal of more "freedom."

Parliament's grounds have often been the site of peaceful protests, although mass campouts are unusual. Typically at least some politicians will come out to listen to the concerns of protesters, but politicians reconvening at Parliament after a summer break were in rare unison by not acknowledging the protesters.

New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic after it closed its borders and implemented strict lockdowns, limiting the spread of the virus. The nation has reported just 53 virus deaths among its population of 5 million.

But some have grown weary of the restrictions. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern last week said the country would end its quarantine requirements for incoming travelers in stages as it reopened its borders. With about 77% of New Zealanders vaccinated, Ardern has also promised she won't impose more lockdowns.

An outbreak of the omicron variant has been growing, with New Zealand reporting a record 454 new community cases Saturday. But none of the 27 people hospitalized from the outbreak needed to be in intensive care beds.

Japan mulls easing COVID border controls amid criticism

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan is considering easing its stringent border controls amid growing criticism that the measures, which have banned most foreign entrants including students and business travelers, are hurting the country's economy and international profile.

"I plan to look into easing the border controls," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters Saturday.

Kishida did not provide a timeline or other details and said he will make a decision based on a scientific assessment of the omicron variant, infection levels in and outside Japan and quarantine measures in other countries.

Currently, most of Japan is under virus-related restrictions but infections have shown little signs of slowing. Nationwide, Japan reported nearly 100,000 new cases in the latest 24-hour period, including 18,660 in Tokyo.

The current border measures are scheduled to remain in place until the end of February.

Japan has become one of the world's most difficult countries to enter and critics compare it to the locked country, or "sakoku," policy of xenophobic warlords who ruled Japan in the 17th to 19th centuries.

The current border rules allow in only Japanese nationals and permanent foreign residents, and have raised the ire of foreign students and scholars who say the measures are unfair, unscientific and force talented visitors to go to other countries. Hundreds of thousands of them have been affected, and critics say the rules are also hurting Japan's national interest.

Frustrated students have started gathering outside Japanese diplomatic compounds around the world to protest.

Japanese and foreign business groups have also protested the government, saying the prolonged border closure has affected investment, business deals, product development and deliveries. Experts also say the border policy is further delaying recovery in Japan's pandemic-hit economy.

Kishida unveiled his plan to consider easing border controls Saturday after visiting Tokyo's Haneda international airport, where he observed quarantine areas and a worksite vaccination rollout for airline workers.

Kishida's government is scrambling to accelerate COVID-19 booster shots, after facing criticisms over a delayed decision to cut intervals between the first two shots and a third to six months from an initially planned eight. Only about 8% of Japan's population have received their third jabs. Kishida has set a target to give 1 million doses a day by the end of February.

The government has also faced criticism over its failure to keep omicron out of U.S. military bases, where Japan has no jurisdiction. American troops fly directly into the country without observing Japanese quarantine requirements and they were not tested for weeks, until Tokyo asked them to.

Many of the Japanese public, however, are supportive of the tight border controls as they think troubles such as the pandemic come from outside their island nation. Kishida's stringent border controls are widely seen as politically motivated to gain public support for his governing party in the upcoming July parliamentary elections.

Kishida has taken a lesson from his predecessor, Yoshihide Suga, who stepped aside after only a year in office partly due to his administration's perceived weak handling of the pandemic.

US ramps up Ukraine warning, says Russia may invade any day

By MATTHEW LEE, AAMER MADHANI and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration on Friday escalated dire warnings of a possibly imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, saying it could happen at any moment, even as emergency diplomatic efforts continued. U.S. officials said the United States is preparing to evacuate its embassy in Kyiv, and Americans in Ukraine are being told to leave within the next 48 hours.

Adding to the sense of crisis, the Pentagon ordered an additional 3,000 U.S. troops to Poland to reassure allies.

As diplomatic options for averting war in Ukraine appeared to narrow, the White House said President

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Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin would discuss the crisis by phone on Saturday.

Biden has said the U.S. military will not enter a war in Ukraine, but he has promised severe economic sanctions against Moscow, in concert with international allies.

Timing of possible Russian military action remains a key question.

The U.S. picked up intelligence that Russia is looking at Wednesday as a target date, according to a U.S. official familiar with the findings. The official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and did so only on condition of anonymity, would not say how definitive the intelligence was, and the White House publicly underscored that the U.S. does not know with certainty whether Putin is committed to invasion.

However, U.S. officials said anew that Russia's buildup of offensive air, land and sea firepower near Ukraine has reached the point where it could invade on short notice.

U.S. officials told The Associated Press late Friday that the State Department plans to announce early Saturday that virtually all American staff at the Kyiv embassy will be required to leave. The State Department would not comment.

The department had earlier ordered families of U.S. embassy staffers in Kyiv to leave. But it had left it to the discretion of nonessential personnel if they wanted to depart.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, said a small number of officials may remain in Kyiv but the vast majority of the almost 200 Americans will be sent out or relocated to Ukraine's far west, near the Polish border, so the U.S. can retain a diplomatic presence in the country.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, urged all Americans in Ukraine to leave, emphasizing that they should not expect the U.S. military to rescue them in the event that air and rail transportation is severed after a Russian invasion.

Several NATO allies including Britain, Canada, Norway and Denmark also are asking their citizens to leave Ukraine, as is non-NATO ally New Zealand.

Sullivan said Russian military action could start with missile and air attacks, followed by a ground offensive.

"Yes, it is an urgent message because we are in an urgent situation," he told reporters at the White House.

"Russia has all the forces it needs to conduct a major military action," Sullivan said, adding, "Russia could choose, in very short order, to commence a major military action against Ukraine." He said the scale of such an invasion could range from a limited incursion to a strike on Kyiv, the capital.

Russia scoffed at the U.S. talk of urgency.

"The hysteria of the White House is more indicative than ever," said Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. "The Anglo-Saxons need a war. At any cost. Provocations, misinformation and threats are a favorite method of solving their own problems."

In addition to the more than 100,000 ground troops that U.S. officials say Russia has assembled along Ukraine's eastern and southern borders, the Russians have deployed missile, air, naval and special operations forces, as well as supplies to sustain a war. This week Russia moved six amphibious assault ships into the Black Sea, augmenting its capability to land marines on the coast.

Sullivan's stark warning accelerated the projected timeframe for a potential invasion, which many analysts have believed was unlikely until after the Winter Olympics in China end on Feb. 20. Sullivan said the combination of a further Russian troop buildup on Ukraine's borders and unspecified intelligence indicators have prompted the administration to warn that war could begin any time.

"We can't pinpoint the day at this point, and we can't pinpoint the hour, but that is a very, very distinct possibility," Sullivan said.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin conferred by phone with several of his NATO counterparts. Echoing Sullivan's public remarks, Austin told them a Russian invasion of Ukraine "could begin at any time," Kirby said.

Biden has said U.S. troops will not enter Ukraine to contest any Russian invasion, but he has bolstered the U.S. military presence in Europe as reassurance to allies on NATO's eastern flank. On Friday the Pentagon said Biden ordered a further 3,000 soldiers to Poland, on top of 1,700 who are on their way there.

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Together they form an infantry brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division. The U.S. Army also is shifting 1,000 soldiers from Germany to Romania, which like Poland shares a border with Ukraine.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke by phone Friday with his Russian counterpart, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. Milley's office provided no details beyond saying the two men discussed "several security-related issues of concern." Milley also had phone calls with several of his counterparts from NATO countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Britain, Italy, Poland and Romania.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was traveling in Australia, was the first senior U.S. official to say publicly that an invasion could come before the end of the Olympics.

Sullivan would not discuss the intelligence details behind the U.S. assessment and denied a report that American officials believe Putin has made the decision to invade. But he said U.S. officials believe there is "a strong possibility" of an invasion.

"We believe he very well may give the final go order," Sullivan said. "It may well happen soon."

Biden spoke to a number of European leaders on Friday to underscore the concerns raised by U.S. intelligence about the potential imminence of a Russian invasion. Sullivan said the Western leaders were completely united and would respond harshly to a Russian invasion with devastating economic and trade sanctions.

Britain's defense secretary, Ben Wallace, visited Moscow a day after British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss held frosty talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and urged him to pull back Russia's troops near Ukraine. Lavrov characterized that meeting as a "conversation between deaf and dumb."

Russia opened massive war games in Belarus on Thursday that are due to run through next weekend but says it has no plans to invade Ukraine.

The Russians are insisting that the West keep Ukraine and other former Soviet countries out of NATO. It also wants NATO to refrain from deploying weapons near its border and to roll back alliance forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

Speaking at the start of his talks with Britain's Wallace, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said "the military-political situation in Europe is growing increasingly tense, and it's not our fault."

Shoigu said shipments of weapons to Ukraine by the U.S., Britain and other allies have contributed to the tensions and pointed to the recent deployment of British soldiers to Ukraine, asking why they were sent and how long they would stay.

Speaking to reporters after the talks, Wallace said the anti-tank missiles that Britain sent to Ukraine were defensive tactical weapons that do not pose a threat to any neighbor unless it invades.

He described the talks as "constructive and frank" and noted his Russian counterpart's assurances that Moscow has no intention to attack Ukraine. But he also emphasized that the concentration of Russian troops near Ukrainian territory is clearly "beyond normal exercising."

Russia's troop concentration includes forces deployed on the territory of its ally Belarus for massive joint drills involving firing live ammunition. Those exercises entered a decisive phase Thursday and will run through Feb. 20. The Ukrainian capital is about 75 kilometers (47 miles) south of the Belarus border.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg visited a military base in Romania, hailing the deployment of additional U.S. troops as "a powerful demonstration of trans-Atlantic unity."

Separately, the U.S. Agency for International Development notified Congress on Friday of a new \$73 million aid package to Georgia, another former Soviet republic that has faced aggression from Moscow and fought a war with Russia in 2008. The assistance includes almost \$46 million in money to help Georgia combat "transnational threats and crime," notably to "decrease dependence on Russia," according to the congressional notification that was obtained by the AP.

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a bitter conflict since 2014, when Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly leader was driven from office by a popular uprising. Moscow responded by annexing Crimea and then backing a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, where fighting has killed over 14,000 people.

A 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany helped halt large-scale battles, but regular skirmishes have continued, and efforts to reach a political settlement have stalled.

Mental health hovers over Olympics, on its way to mainstream

By SARAH DiLORENZO Associated Press

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — At the Tokyo Olympics, mental health was the breakout star. Amplified by some of the world's top athletes, it shook up those Games and made everyone take notice.

Six months later, in Beijing, the conversation has evolved: The subject pops up regularly, but no one is shocked when it does.

Many athletes have spoken about their struggles, but often in a no-biggie, nothing-to-see-here way. A difficulty is mentioned, then the conversation moves on. After star gymnast Simone Biles pulled out of competition in Tokyo because she wasn't in the right headspace, retired Olympic swimming phenom Michael Phelps memorably said that "It's OK to not be OK."

And now, thanks in part to people like Biles, it seems it's OK to talk about it, too.

"I think the biggest lesson I've learned after the last Olympics is being as open as possible," snowboarding sensation Chloe Kim told reporters after she took the gold medal on Thursday in the halfpipe competition.

It was Kim's second gold at an Olympics. She initially threw that first one, earned in Pyeongchang four years ago, in the trash — a story that epitomizes the dissonance between the cheery face many champions show the world and the torments they face behind the scenes.

"After my last Olympics, I put that pressure on myself to be perfect at all times, and that would cause a lot of issues at home. I would be really sad and depressed all the time when I was home," Kim told reporters after easily securing the top spot on the podium — but also failing to land a new trick she is working on.

"I'm happy to talk about whatever I've been experiencing," she said. "Honestly, it's really healthy for me."

It wasn't just Kim who was talking about it. After snowboarder Jamie Anderson, who came to Beijing as the two-time defending slopestyle champion, finished ninth, she posted on Instagram that her "mental health and clarity just hasn't been on par."

Skier Mikaela Shiffrin was particularly honest after she failed to finish either of her first two races in events that are specialties of hers. She said that she had been feeling pressure, something every elite athlete feels and is distinct from the more complicated mental health challenges many have been talking about.

But Shiffrin also plumbed greater depths, acknowledging that she was angry with her dad, who died in 2020, for not being there to support her.

After finally managing to complete a race on Friday — shockingly, even that had become an open question for the star — she posted on Instagram about the ups and downs of competition.

"There's a lot of disappointment and heartbreak going around in the finish area," she wrote.

As several elite athletes stumbled in Beijing, they were often quick to remind the world that they're human, too. Shiffrin even has a paid post on Instagram, in which the tagline is: "Yeah, I am human." A far cry from the usual vaunting of athletes as something much more than that.

This is what many hoped for after Tokyo — that as more athletes acknowledged what they face behind the scenes, the stigma around talking about mental health would recede and the issue would merely become one more challenge in the mix.

"I think that it really has become normalized with so many athletes talking about their mental health, and there has been such a push for parity with mental health and physical health," said Jess Bartley, director of mental health services for Team USA.

"I think, in the experience I've had with a lot of these athletes, it's really relieving to be able to talk about it, to have folks understand, to have the audience understand what may be coming up that might have impacted their performance," she said. "Just in the same way that you hear about a sprained ankle."

Bartley works with athletes to prepare how they'll respond to questions about their mental health just as she works with them on preparing their performance. Some feel comfortable revealing those struggles; others don't.

Louie Vito, a snowboarder who competed for Italy in Beijing, puts himself in the latter camp. He's glad that mental health is being talked about more openly — he readily admits framing some of his struggles in that way was eye-opening for him — but he would prefer to keep much of that private.

"I think some people would rather deal with their mental battles in their inner circle," he said. "To me, it's

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not a right or a wrong on how you deal with it as long as you're aware and it doesn't become detrimental to you. I don't think you have to talk about in public."

And he acknowledged that many people are still embarrassed to talk about these issues.

Yet so many do keep talking — encouraged by a generation of younger athletes determined not only to be heard but to ensure that this subject is no longer something to be dramatically revealed, but simply addressed like anything else important.

Amanda Fialk, who is the chief clinical officer at The Dorm, a mental health treatment program for young people, is heartened by the increasingly open conversations happening. But she warns that true change will take much more time to take hold.

She underscores that there are vast cultural differences — across countries and between communities within any given country — that affect access to and the stigma around mental health care.

"I am also mindful that old habits die hard," said Fialk, who was a competitive figure skater when she was younger. "It is going to take continued talking about these issues and continued efforts to normalize talking about all these issues for the change to not just be a change, but to become a new normal."

One eye on midterms, Dems ease up on approach to virus

By ZEKE MILLER and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — "People are tired," Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock says in the opening ad for his reelection campaign.

There's not a face mask to be seen in the Democrat's video montage of scenes across Georgia, as he goes on to say people that are "wondering when things will get back to normal, and at the same time not knowing what normal even means anymore."

The ad reflects a shifting narrative on COVID-19 restrictions across the country: Democrats are now increasingly supportive of easing mandates as they struggle to address voter frustration with the lingering pandemic.

They're hoping a shift in policy could serve to blunt incoming political attacks with the midterm elections — when control of Congress is at stake — now less than nine months away. But their appeals for a return to normalcy, both in symbols and practice, are putting new pressure on President Joe Biden.

More than a year after he was sworn into office pledging to bring about an end to the pandemic, the virus' persistence has taken a toll on Biden's approval in the midterm election year as COVID-19 restrictions and mask-wearing requirements move to the forefront of the nation's culture wars.

After months of sparring with Republican governors for standing in the way of public health measures like face-coverings and social distancing, the sudden shift on the part of Democrats in recent days has caught White House officials off guard and left them seemingly out of sync with their own party.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to recommend indoor masking in more than 99% of the country, even Democratic states from New York to California began easing mandates for the public, and New Jersey announced plans to roll back its face-covering requirement in schools.

"Some people may call what's happening now the 'new normal,'" Biden said last month, acknowledging the frustrations. "I call it a job not yet finished."

Yet Biden, even some members of his own party contend, isn't moving swiftly enough to finish the job. Governors in both parties have appealed to the federal government for new, clearer guidelines as COVID-19 becomes endemic and less of a public health emergency.

Administration officials for the first time this past week allowed that they have been working on new guidelines for the "next phase" of the pandemic response, but those are still weeks away.

"We understand where the emotions of the country are," press secretary Jen Psaki said this week. "People are tired of masks."

But she noted it wasn't universal. "If you look at the polling though, there's also a huge chunk of people who still want masks. Right? So, it's not even that specific."

She said Biden remains committed to his promise, stretching back to the campaign, to "listen to scien-

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tists, listen to data.”

White House officials, themselves eager to see the country get back to normal, looked forward to the Food and Drug Administration’s expected authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for the youngest kids. With what would then be universal coverage for the shots, new therapeutics and increasingly available rapid-tests, the administration believed it would have the tools to sell the country on putting the pandemic in the past.

But the FDA on Friday slowed the approval of the Pfizer shot by weeks as the company awaits more data on the effectiveness of a third booster dose in the youngest kids.

Republicans around the country have long criticized Democrats for what they say was prioritizing unnecessarily harsh restrictions meant to slow the pandemic’s spread over the economy, and for continuing to require masks even when they were perhaps no longer medically necessary.

Democratic Governors Association spokesman David Turner said the party’s shifting approach has been motivated by the evolving virus and not politics. But he said that while Democratic governors have tried to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, many of their Republican colleagues have made things worse by deliberately spreading misinformation about it and the coronavirus vaccine.

“I think Democratic governors are going to have a good story to tell about following science and facts and listening to public health experts to keep people safe from the pandemic,” Turner said about the November elections. “And there’s going to be a story to tell about Republicans actively working to prolong it.”

Allies of the administration have argued that Biden should at least lay out a roadmap for moving back toward normalcy while waiting for the scientists to conclude their work, in a nod to the American people’s frustrations.

According to an AP-NORC last month, just 45% say they approve of Biden’s handling of COVID-19, down from 57% in December and from 66% in July 2021.

Biden on Thursday called the efforts by members of his own party to ease restrictions “probably premature,” though he acknowledged it was a tough call for leaders.

White House officials noted that the Democratic mask roll-backs coincided with sharply declining cases as a two-month nationwide surge in cases from the omicron variant was showing signs of ebbing.

Even as Biden has shown reluctance, top Democrats are applauding the shift.

New York Rep. Sean Patrick Murphy, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the party’s House campaign arm, hailed his state’s Democratic governor for easing masking rules, tweeting “Now, it’s time to give people their lives back. With science as our guide, we’re ready to start getting back to normal.”

The change has come too late to help Democratic political fortunes in some places. Republican Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s upset victory last fall got a boost from parents who were angry about school masking rules.

Youngkin used an executive order on his first day in office to ban school mask mandates, but that has been bogged down by lawsuits from some of the state’s largest school districts. Less than a month later, however, three Democrats in the Virginia Senate sided with Youngkin in helping to pass a bill Wednesday that prohibits public schools from imposing mask requirements on students.

“We are telling parents what to do,” said one of the trio, centrist Democratic state Sen. Joe Morrissey. “And as a legislator, I just don’t believe that I have the audacity to tell them what they can do and cannot do.”

Warnock’s ad stood in stark contrast to a photo from Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Stacey Abrams days earlier, which featured the candidate mask-less in front of a room of school-children with their faces covered. Abrams’ campaign insisted she had followed safety protocols, but later deleted the photo amid near-universal backlash.

At Olympics and beyond, getting away with it is Russia’s way

By BRIAN CAROVILLANO and TED ANTHONY Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Be it sports, politics, hacking or war, the recent history of Russia’s relationship with the world can be summed up in one phrase: They get away with it.

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Vladimir Putin's Russia has perfected the art of flouting the rules, whether the venue is the Olympic arena, international diplomacy or meddling in other countries' elections from the comfort of home. And it has suffered little consequence for its actions.

At the Beijing Winter Olympics, Russia the country isn't here — technically. Its athletes are competing under the acronym ROC, for Russian Olympic Committee, for the second time. The national colors and flag are banned because of a massive state-sponsored doping operation that goes back to the 2014 Sochi Games, which Russia hosted.

And yet the 2022 Games' first major scandal has managed to involve a 15-year-old figure skater who has tested positive for using a banned heart medication that may cost her Russia-but-not-really-Russia team a gold medal in team competition.

Her provisional suspension, like the so-called ban on Russia's official participation in these Games, didn't do much. Kamila Valieva continues to train even as her final disposition is considered, and she may yet compete in the women's individual competition, in which she is favored.

Those who have watched the country's interactions with others in recent decades aren't entirely surprised at the developments.

"In Russia, the culture is generally that the ends justify the means, and the only thing that matters is the outcome," said Dmitri Alperovitch, the chairman of the Silverado Policy Accelerator think tank, who grew up in the former Soviet Union.

Doping in particular has been a longstanding tradition in the Soviet Union and Russia, Alperovitch said. But Putin frequently operates with impunity in other arenas, including when the stakes are much higher than bronze, silver and gold.

More than 100,000 Russian troops are currently massed along the Ukrainian border preparing for a possible invasion. Despite weeks of diplomacy, Putin still seems to hold all the cards, pushing Europe to the brink of war and prompting British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to call this the continent's "most dangerous moment" in decades.

Many have accused the Russian government of dabbling in poisoning with little consequence. Among those poisoned after criticizing the Kremlin: investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who fell severely ill after drinking a cup of tea in 2004 and recovered, only to be shot to death two years later; and Russian opposition politician and vocal Putin critic Alexei Navalny, who fell gravely ill from poison in 2020. He recovered and is currently in a Russian prison. Neither poisoning was explicitly linked to the Russian government.

Putin's efforts to upend U.S. elections included hacking the Democratic National Committee in 2016 in an effort to aid then-candidate Donald Trump and damage his rival, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, U.S. federal investigations showed. Russian government hackers were also blamed last year for a massive hacking campaign that breached vital federal agencies.

The current Ukraine standoff isn't the first time Russian militarism has threatened to upend the so-called "Olympic truce," an agreement among nations to set aside their conflicts during the Games.

In 2014, while hosting the Sochi Olympics, Putin seized control of the Crimean peninsula and its strategic Black Sea ports from Ukraine. And during the 2008 Summer Olympics, also held in Beijing, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two breakaway regions of neighboring Georgia, as independent nations and bolstered its military foothold there following a five-day war.

Economic sanctions and other punishments imposed by the United States and its allies after various Russian transgressions seem to have had little effect as a deterrent against future bad behavior by Putin.

In 2020, the U.S. Justice Department charged six current and former Russian intelligence officers in a hacking campaign targeting the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. They were accused of unleashing a devastating malicious software attack during the opening ceremony of those Games, in apparent retaliation for the IOC's decision to ban Russia from future Games for doping.

"Time and again, Russia has made it clear: They will not abide by accepted norms, and instead, they intend to continue their destructive, destabilizing cyber behavior," then-FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich

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said at the time the indictment was announced.

And time and again, Russia presses on unchastened. So there was Putin last Friday, waving from his luxury box to Russian athletes entering Beijing's Bird's Nest stadium during the Games' opening ceremony.

Even though it is banned on Russian uniforms at these Games, Russian flags waved in the stands as the ROC men's hockey team, clad in their traditional red, shut out Switzerland in their inaugural match.

"I don't know why the Russians are competing as they are given their history of doping," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, who helmed the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. "I think it is a huge mistake."

Russian athletes' involvement in the Games, Romney said, "is something which I think is leaving a great stain on the Olympic movement."

Back home, Valieva's positive test has been met with outrage, fueling a sense that when it comes to sports, politics and international relations, it's Russia vs. the world.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the scandal has been fueled by "those who did not have the appropriate information." And other prominent Russian skaters, including Tatiana Navka, former Olympic ice-dancing gold medalist and Peskov's wife, spoke out in support of Valieva.

"This is some kind of a fake," said Russia's top figure skating coach, Tatiana Tarasova. "She's only 15, what do you mean doping?"

Ordinary Russians questioned the allegations as well. Nikolai Stashenkov, 88, blamed the scandal on the "impudence of European and Western politicians."

"This is not nice," he said. "This is not sport. This is dirty politics."

Politics were also to blame, according to Russian officials, in the doping scandal that resulted in a reduced squad of Russian athletes being allowed to compete in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

"This has become one of the most compelling evidence of direct political interference in sports," Putin would later say in a meeting with Russian Paralympians.

Polling has shown the tactic is working with the Russian public. A 2016 poll by the Levada Center, Russia's top independent pollster, showed 76% of Russians viewed the decision to bar the Russian track and field team from the Rio Olympics as "politicized" and "aimed at discrediting Russia."

But Russia has often done an able job of discrediting itself.

For the Sochi Games in 2014, Russian medal contenders handed over samples of clean urine months in advance before taking a cocktail of steroids dissolved in alcohol, according to Grigory Rodchenkov, then the director of the drug-testing lab for the Games. He later fled to the United States.

During the Olympics, Rodchenkov said he swapped out samples via a hole in the wall of the laboratory to a person from the Russian security services who opened the urine sample bottles and replaced the contents with the stored, clean urine.

Russia has admitted some individual lapses on doping, but strenuously denies it formed part of an organized program or that the Russian state writ large supported doping.

In Beijing this week, events are moving fast. Urgent hearings are being convened about Valieva, and lots of officials are saying lots of things behind lots of closed doors. It remains to be seen whether her case becomes a new chapter in Russia's twin track records of operating with impunity in both sport and geopolitics, or a footnote to the rise of another Olympic superstar.

Either way, Alperovitch, who is also the co-founder and former chief technology officer of the CrowdStrike cybersecurity firm, sees all of it as of a piece — evidence of a facet of Russian culture that prizes outcomes above everything else and will do what it takes to achieve them.

"The thing in Russia is that cheating is acceptable if you don't get caught," Alperovitch said. "Shame on you if you do. But if you think you can get away with it, go for it."

Canadian judge orders an end to blockade at border bridge

By ROB GILLIES, TOM KRISHER and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

WINDSOR, Ontario (AP) — A judge on Friday ordered protesters at the Ambassador Bridge over the U.S.-Canadian border to end the 5-day-old blockade that has disrupted the flow of goods between the

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two countries and forced the auto industry on both sides to roll back production.

It was not immediately clear when or if law enforcement officers would be sent in to remove the demonstrators, who parked their pickups and other vehicles in a bumper-to-bumper protest against the country's COVID-19 restrictions and an outpouring of fury toward Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government.

Chief Justice Geoffrey Morawetz of the Ontario Superior Court said during a virtual hearing that the order would be effective at 7 p.m. to give protesters time to leave.

Windsor police immediately warned that anyone blocking the streets could be subject to arrest and their vehicles may be seized.

The news was met with defiance by protesters.

At the Ambassador Bridge, an unidentified person grabbed a microphone and addressed them, asking if they wanted to stay or leave when the deadline rolled around. By a show of applause, it was agreed they would stay. "OK," the man said. "Let's stand tall." The protesters responded by singing the Canadian national anthem.

The crowd later grew in size and intensity, with flag-waving and frequent chants of "Freedom!" More patrol cars moved in around the site, and police handed out leaflets warning that a state of emergency would come into effect at midnight.

Since Monday, drivers mostly in pickup trucks have bottled up the bridge connecting Windsor to Detroit. Hundreds more truckers have paralyzed downtown Ottawa over the past two weeks; it was a party atmosphere there Friday night, when they even set up a concert stage.

And protesters have also blocked two other border crossings, in Alberta and Manitoba.

The judge's decision came after a 4 1/2-hour court hearing at which the city of Windsor and lawyers for auto parts makers argued that the blockade was causing undue economic harm for the city and region.

Supporters of the protesters, some of them truckers, argued that an order to disband would disrupt their right to peacefully protest vaccine mandates that hinder their ability to earn a living.

The ruling came in a day of fast-moving developments as federal, provincial and local officials worked simultaneously on different fronts to try to break the standoff with the so-called Freedom Convoy, whose members have been cheered on by the right in the U.S., including Fox News personalities, Donald Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz.

"This unlawful activity has to end and it will end," Trudeau warned just hours earlier.

"We heard you. It's time to go home now," the prime minister said, cautioning that "everything is on the table" for ending the blockades.

Also Friday, Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency and threatened heavy penalties against those who interfere with the free flow of goods and people.

Ford said he would convene the provincial cabinet on Saturday to urgently enact measures that make it "crystal clear" it is illegal to block critical infrastructure. Violators will face up to a year in prison and a maximum fine of \$100,000, he said.

"There will be consequences for these actions, and they will be severe," Ford said. "This is a pivotal, pivotal moment for our nation."

The measures will also provide additional authority "to consider taking away the personal and commercial licenses of anyone who doesn't comply," according to the premier's office.

Trudeau called Ontario's decision "responsible and necessary" and said he spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden about it.

"We discussed the American and indeed global influences on the protest," Trudeau said. "We talked about the U.S.-based flooding of the 911 phone lines in Ottawa, the presence of U.S. citizens in the blockade and the impact of foreign money to fund this illegal activity."

Trudeau said that on some fundraising platforms, as much as 50% of the donations are coming from the U.S.

He said he and Biden agreed that "for the security of people and the economy, these blockades can't

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continue.”

Trudeau said he understands the protesters are frustrated by the pandemic, but “these blockades are hurting everyday families, auto assembly workers, farmers, truckers, blue-collar Canadians.”

The protests have caused shortages of auto parts that have forced General Motors, Ford, Toyota and Honda to close plants or cancel shifts.

Before the judge’s ruling came down, dozens of protesters in Windsor blocked the entrance to the bridge in what felt like a block party. Demonstrators milled about, carrying signs and Canadian flags — some at the ends of hockey sticks — while music played and food was handed out. A trampoline was set up for the children.

Troy Holman, a 32-year-old Windsor resident who has protested every day this week, said he believes the government overreached with its COVID-19 restrictions, which he said hurt his wife’s small business.

“Unfortunately, we have to be here, because this is what’s going to get the attention of the government,” he said.

Signs read, “Freedom Is Essential,” “Say No to Mandatory Vaccines” and “End Mandates.”

“We stand for freedom. We believe that it should be everyone’s personal decision what they inject into their bodies,” said protester Karen Driedger, 40, of Leamington, Ontario. “We’re saying, ‘That’s enough.’ We need to go back to normal and live our lives again.”

Authorities at various levels of government have hesitated to forcibly remove the protesters around the country, reflecting apparently a lack of manpower by local police, Canada’s reverence for free speech, and fears of violence. Windsor Mayor Drew Dilkens warned earlier this week that some of the truckers are “willing to die.”

But the political pressure to reopen the bridge appeared to be mounting along with the economic toll.

The Ambassador Bridge is the busiest U.S.-Canadian border crossing, carrying 25% of all trade between the two countries. The standoff comes at a time when the auto industry is already struggling to maintain production in the face of pandemic-induced shortages of computer chips and other supply-chain disruptions.

“American legislators are freaking out, and rightfully so,” said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. “Pressure is now being exerted by the White House on Trudeau to act more decisively.”

Amid signs that authorities might be prepared to get tough, police in Windsor and Ottawa awaited reinforcements from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the federal police force.

Ottawa’s mayor has asked for 1,800 additional officers, which could nearly double the manpower available to the capital city’s force.

The protests have spread outside Canada as well. Demonstrators angry over pandemic restrictions drove toward Paris in scattered convoys of camper vans, cars and trucks Friday in an effort to blockade the French capital, despite a police ban.

And in a bulletin to local and state law enforcement officers, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security warned that truck protests may be in the works in the United States. The agency said the protests could begin in Southern California as early as this weekend and spread to Washington around the State of the Union address in March.

While the Canadian protesters are decrying vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 restrictions, many of the country’s infection measures, such as mask rules and vaccine passports for getting into restaurants and theaters, are already falling away as the omicron surge levels off.

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the U.S., but Canadians have largely supported them. The vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated, and the COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the United States.

EXPLAINER: A look at what’s behind the protests in Canada

By JIM MORRIS and ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — For five days, a blockade of pickups, cars and a handful of commercial trucks has

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choked off traffic at the Ambassador Bridge, the busiest border crossing between Canada and the United States. There are blockades at two other crossings as well. And for two weeks, downtown streets in Canada's capital have been snarled by a convoy of semis and other vehicles as protesters rail against COVID-19 restrictions and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Here's a look at the ongoing protests that have gripped Canada, disrupting international commerce and prompting Washington to pressure Ottawa to end the border siege.

HOW DID THE PROTESTS START?

Much of it can be tied to anger against Trudeau, a Liberal Party politician who has been prime minister since 2015 and is loathed by many conservatives, particularly in the western province of Alberta, the most conservative in the country.

In 2019, well before the current protests, demonstrators drove a convoy of hundreds of trucks from western Canada to Ottawa in opposition to the Trudeau government's new carbon tax, an environmental measure they said would hurt the oil industry. Many wore yellow vests in solidarity with a French protest movement that same year against perceived economic injustice.

This year's "freedom convoy" began in January with the first vehicles also setting out from the western part of the country and protesters from elsewhere joining in.

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Convoy organizers said they were moved to protest by a federal government requirement that truck drivers be fully vaccinated if they want to avoid a 14-day quarantine upon re-entry from the United States. However it's a bilateral measure with the U.S. imposing the same rule on Jan. 22 — meaning that even if Canada ended the restriction, it would make no practical difference.

The demonstrators in Ottawa, Ontario and elsewhere are primarily demanding an end to all COVID-19 vaccine mandates and other restrictions including mask requirements — though most of those were put in place by provincial governments. Protesters have called, too, for Trudeau's resignation.

WHO'S INVOLVED?

The "freedom convoy" was announced in early January by a group called Canada Unity, which was founded by James Bauder, a supporter of the QAnon conspiracy theories. Also involved are Tamara Lich, who previously belonged to the far-right Maverick Party, which calls for western Canada to become independent; and a former member of Trudeau's Royal Canadian Mounted Police security detail.

Few actual commercial trucks are a part of the blockade at the Ambassador Bridge. Ontario Premier Doug Ford said Friday that the last count he had was five of them there, with the rest being personal cars: "Ninety-nine percent of the truckers are working their backs off. ... This is about a political statement, that's what this is about."

Some far-right figures appear to be trying to capitalizing on the protests and pandemic fatigue to try to revitalize their movements, which represent a small minority of Canadians.

WHAT HAS THE RESPONSE BEEN?

Trudeau has stood firm against lifting vaccine mandates, calling the protesters a "fringe" who believe in conspiracy theories and wear "tin foil hats." That has only incensed them further.

The protests have also been widely condemned by truckers and trucking groups. That includes the Canadian Trucking Alliance, which says the vast majority of drivers are fully vaccinated, in line with the country's broader population.

Pandemic restrictions have been far stricter in Canada than in the United States, but Canadians have largely supported them. The country has less hospital capacity, so provinces have been quick to impose lockdowns when infections rise. Canada's COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the United States.

In the United States, the protests have been cheered and promoted by Fox News personalities and former president Donald Trump, who issued a statement attacking "the harsh policies of far left lunatic Justin Trudeau who has destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates." Texas Sen. Ted Cruz has called the truckers "heroes" and "patriots," and Tesla billionaire Elon Musk also tweeted his support.

THE AMBASSADOR BRIDGE

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Spanning the Detroit River between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, the suspension bridge accounts for a whopping 25% of all trade between the two countries, with \$328 million (417 million Canadian dollars) in goods crossing each day.

The bridge is critical to the food sector in both countries as well as the auto industry; with crossings all but shut down, shortages have forced plants on both sides of the border to go offline or operate at reduced capacity.

On Friday, a judge ordered protesters at the bridge to end the blockade and police warned that people blocking the streets could be subject to arrest and have their vehicles seized.

Premier Ford has declared a state of emergency that would allow penalties of up to a year in jail and fines of about \$80,000 (100,00 Canadian dollars) for anyone impeding the movement of goods, people and services along critical infrastructure.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer urged Canadian authorities to resolve the standoff quickly, saying, "It's hitting paychecks and production lines. That is unacceptable."

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OTTAWA?

Thousands of protesters initially descended on the city two weeks ago. Their numbers have declined, but more than 400 trucks remain parked in front of the Parliament Buildings along with a makeshift kitchen.

Demonstrations have largely been peaceful but offensive to many Canadians. Some protesters parked and urinated on the National War Memorial, and Confederate flags and swastikas have been seen. A statue of Terry Fox, a national hero who set off on a fundraising trek across Canada after losing a leg to cancer, was draped with an upside-down Canadian flag and a sign reading, "mandate freedom." Many protesters carry signs or flags with obscene insults referencing Trudeau.

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency last week, saying the protests posed a threat to residents' safety as many were being harassed. Locals complained about the nonstop honking of horns, but after a court injunction was obtained, that noise has dissipated.

Phoenix police say man shot ex-girlfriend before ambush

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and TERRY TANG Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — A man who shot his ex-girlfriend at a Phoenix home early Friday ambushed the first officer on the scene, seriously injuring him, then opened fire on other police as they tried to rescue a baby that was left outside the door.

The woman later died. In all, five officers were shot, including four who were wounded while trying to take the baby to safety. Four more officers were injured by shrapnel or ricocheting bullets, police said.

Of the five shot, four remain hospitalized. All of the officers were expected to survive, and the baby girl was unharmed.

"A baby is safe today because of our Phoenix police officers," Mayor Kate Gallego said at a news conference near the scene.

The most seriously injured officer was the first to arrive at the home, around 2:15 a.m., following a report of a woman shot. He was invited inside, Phoenix police Sgt. Andy Williams said.

"As he approached the doorway, the suspect ambushed him with a gun and shot him several times," he said. "That officer was able to get back and get away to safety."

Video from the scene shows another man coming outside holding a baby and a satchel. The man put the satchel on the ground and then laid down the infant, wrapped in a blanket, between the satchel and the front door. He raised his hands to surrender while backing away from the house.

After that man was detained, other officers approached the doorway to get the baby girl, and the suspect fired more shots. The police returned fire, which then led the suspect to barricade himself. Eight of the officers were wounded by ricocheting bullets or shrapnel in that exchange, Williams said.

Police were able to get the baby to safety as a SWAT unit took over.

The suspect remained barricaded for several hours and was later found dead from a gunshot wound inside the home.

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Police also found the suspect's ex-girlfriend in the home. She had been shot and was critically injured, and she died hours later at a hospital, police said. Williams said the baby was believed to be the woman and suspect's child. She is now in state custody.

The man who brought the baby outside suffered non-life-threatening injuries. Williams said he's a family member and is cooperating with police.

"No information suggests that he's part of the ambush, but it's an ongoing investigation," Williams said.

Police identified the gunman as 36-year-old Morris Richard Jones III and said they were still trying to learn about the circumstances preceding the incident.

"This is just one more example of the dangers that officers face every day keeping us and our community safe," Police Chief Jeri Williams said at an early morning news conference. "If I seem upset, I am. This is senseless. It does not need to happen and it continues to happen over and over again."

Federal court records show Jones has a criminal history dating back to at least 2007, when he was sentenced in Oklahoma to seven years in prison for using a firearm during a drug trafficking crime and possessing a fire arm after a felony conviction.

Records also show Jones pleaded guilty in March 2020 to conspiring to transport, for profit, people who were in the country illegally near the San Simmons area in southeastern Arizona. He was sentenced to three years of probation. Prosecutor sought to revoke his probation because they say Jones used marijuana and cocaine in the spring of 2021 and punched his girlfriend in the face and took her gun.

In September, his probation was revoked, and he was sentenced to federal prison for five months

The middle-class neighborhood in southwest Phoenix where the shooting occurred has newly constructed stucco houses tightly packed together and sits next to large shipping and fulfillment facilities for businesses. The home had its second-story windows shot out.

Frank DeAguiar, its owner, said the residence is a rental and he didn't know anything about the people living there. He said a property management firm handles the details. "It's just a sad situation," he said.

Chris Grollnek, an active shooter expert, told The Associated Press that it's important to know how the incident was initially reported. Was it a 911 call from the woman pleading for help? A neighbor reporting gunfire and screaming?

The immediate information would determine how the first officers respond as they get to the scene, he said.

Traditionally, a barricaded suspect buys the police time to set up a perimeter and call a SWAT team, which could take 20 minutes to arrive. But if someone is injured inside, "the human factor takes over," Grollnek said. "I'm the first one there, I'm going in."

Charles "Sid" Heal, former commanding officer of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's SWAT unit, said department policies often give the decision-making authority to the responding officer.

Both Heal and Grollnek described firing on officers who are trying to save a baby as "evil." They said police protocols simply cannot cover such a scenario.

"Hopefully it doesn't happen often enough that we'll ever have a protocol for it," Heal said.

He added he cannot imagine a situation where the officers would have left the baby exposed because it was too dangerous for them to rescue the child.

"The moral factors far exceed the physical risk," he said.

BEIJING DIARY: A taste of Tibet with Chinese characteristics

By KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — I can't visit Tibet while I'm in China working at the Beijing Winter Olympics. But China can show me its own version of the remote region.

China's "closed loop" system for the Games means it's almost impossible for any of the thousands of athletes, sports officials, journalists and media workers who have arrived from overseas to get out and see the country.

Games attendees are staying at dozens of hotels, all fenced off from the rest of Beijing and accessible

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only by bus or taxi to the press center, competition venues or the airport.

By chance, part of The Associated Press' Olympics team has been assigned to the Beijing Tibet Hotel, which has been built and outfitted to evoke the distant region on China's western edge.

I've traveled widely in China but have never been to Tibet, a long-isolated place that's always been hard for foreigners, especially journalists, to reach, well before pandemic travel restrictions. Foreign correspondents can only visit on government-organized tours. So I was curious to see what the hotel would be like.

For foreigners, Tibet brings to mind snowcapped peaks, crimson-robed monks and prayer flags snapping in the Himalayan wind.

China's Communist Party took full control of the vast Himalayan region in 1951, when troops overran Tibet's feeble defenses. An uprising eight years later led to increasingly harsh Chinese rule over the region. Rights groups accuse China of political repression and tightening control over traditional Buddhist culture in the region, home to Tibetans and other ethnic minorities.

China denies the allegations. The government says its modernization efforts have brought Tibet out of isolation, but critics say Tibetans have less say on building their future than Han Chinese migrants.

At the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, Tibet was a flashpoint. Protesters disrupted the flame lighting ceremony and parts of the relay route.

I wondered what connection the hotel had to Tibet. A waitress at the hotel restaurant told me it was owned by the Tibet regional government. The hotel website revealed it was linked to a Tibetan government-owned company that also sells Tibetan medicine, food and handicrafts.

It's not unusual for Chinese regional or provincial governments to operate hotels in the capital. Other Olympic visitors are being put up at the Guizhou and Fujian hotels — provinces in the southwest and on the coast across from Taiwan.

The hotel's exterior walls gently slant inwards as they rise to the roof, an architectural feature reminiscent of the Potala Palace in the capital, Lhasa, the home of Tibet's traditional Buddhist leaders. Elevator video screens play scenes of Tibetan landscapes on an endless loop.

Some of the Chinese writing, like the gold lettering for the coffee shop and banquet rooms, mimics the distinct angular style of Tibetan script.

Were these design touches a tasteful appreciation of Tibetan culture? Or Chinese-style cultural appropriation? It probably depends on whom you ask.

One of the hotel's two restaurants, Shambhala — a reference from Tibetan Buddhism to a mythical kingdom hidden in the Himalayas — is decorated with prayer wheels along one wall. It's closed during the Olympics because there aren't enough diners. The other restaurant features dishes with yak meat, a staple food on the Tibetan plateau, where yaks are native. At dinner one evening, I chose the yak stew. Tasted a lot like beef.

Missing from the menu were yak butter tea or tsampa (cereal made from barley flour), also Tibetan signature delicacies.

So far, it mostly seemed like a standard and fairly innocuous showcase of local culture. But there were signs of the Chinese Communist Party's grip on history.

In the unused conference room, I came across a portrait of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, with his name and party secretary title underneath in both Chinese and Tibetan.

And down one hallway, there's an extensive exhibition of Tibetan life under Chinese rule, explaining how Xi's strategy for Tibet will help the region "enter a New Era of socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Pictures of Tibet's stunning scenery and people and displays of traditional garb are mixed with commentary on the Communist Party's role in modernization.

"The old Tibet was the purgatory for millions of serfs, who lived a miserable life," one section read. "The new Tibet is a happy paradise for the people."

Conspicuously absent are photos of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual figure that many Tibetans claim allegiance to, but who is a target of scorn by Beijing. Neither are there images of the Panchen Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's second-highest figure. He went missing 25 years ago at the age of 6 after being picked

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by the Dalai Lama, after which China named another boy to the position.

Instead, there are photos of Xi and historical shots of Communist Party bosses signing an agreement with Tibetan leaders in 1951. The unspoken message: It's Beijing who calls the shots.

Xi's visit to Tibet last year, the first by a Chinese leader in 30 years, reinforced that message.

But what did real Tibetans have to say? Were any actually working here? In previous Olympics, the lack of restrictions at least gave visitors more opportunity to meet and talk to local people.

I started asking around. A cleaning attendant was from neighboring Hebei province. The restaurant manager was a Beijinger. The lobby convenience shop attendant was from Gansu, a province next to Tibet.

Eventually, I found some Tibetans working in the hotel restaurant. One said they had been sent from their school in Tibet to work at the hotel for several months as they studied hospitality.

I asked another what Lhasa was like.

"Nice," she said, giving me a thumbs up.

Then the restaurant manager appeared with a message: If I had any questions, I should ask him.

Landlords finding ways to evict after getting rental aid

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

A day before she was due to be evicted in November from her Atlanta home, Shanelle King heard that she had been awarded about \$15,000 in rental assistance. She could breathe again.

But then the 43-year-old hairdresser got a letter last month from her landlord saying the company was canceling her lease in March — seven months early — without any explanation.

"I'm really pissed about it. I thought I would be comfortable again back in my home," said King, whose work dried up during the pandemic and who now worries about finding another apartment she can afford. "Here I am back up against the wall with no where to stay. I don't know what I am going to do."

Although the \$46.5 billion Emergency Rental Assistance Program has paid out tens of billions of dollars to help avert an eviction crisis, some tenants, like King, who received help are finding themselves threatened with eviction again — sometimes days after getting federal help. Many are finding it nearly impossible to find another affordable place to live.

"It is a Band-Aid. It was never envisioned as anything more than a Band-Aid," Erin Willoughby, director of the Clayton Housing Legal Resource Center Atlanta, said of the program.

"It's not solving the underlying problem, which is a lack of affordable housing. People are on the hook for rents they cannot afford to pay," she said. "Simply finding something cheaper is not an option because there is not anything cheaper. People have to be housed somewhere."

The National Housing Law Project, in a survey last fall of nearly 120 legal aid attorneys and civil rights advocates, found that 86% of respondents reported cases in which landlords either refused to take assistance or accepted the money and still moved to evict tenants. The survey also found a significant increase in cases of landlords lying in court to evict tenants and illegally locking them out.

"A number of issues could be described as issues related to landlord fraud ... and a set of problems I would describe as loopholes within the ... program that made it less effective to accomplish the goal," said Natalie N. Maxwell, a senior attorney with the group.

National Apartment Association President and CEO Bob Pinnegar said the survey was not based on facts, adding that its members are doing everything they can to keep tenants in their homes, including lobbying to get rental assistance out faster.

"Skewed surveys aren't reflective of the entire situation. By and large the rental housing industry has gone to great lengths to support residents, including when it comes to rental assistance and adherence to laws and regulations," Pinnegar said in a statement.

Legal aid attorneys interviewed across the country confirmed they are seeing a steady increase in cases where tenants were approved for rental help and still faced eviction.

These include the mother of a newborn and two other children in Florida who received rental assistance but was ordered evicted after the landlord refused to take the money. Another Florida landlord lied in

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court that she hadn't received the money in a bid to push through an eviction.

There have also been cases in Georgia and Texas where landlords who received assistance moved to end leases early, increased rents to unaffordable levels or found other reasons than nonpayment to evict someone, lawyers said.

"As it is right now, it doesn't seem to be working as intended," said Tori Tavormina, an eviction prevention specialist with Texas Housers. "It feels much more like it's a program that is alleviating the pressure of the eviction crisis but not solving the underlying problems."

District Court Judge Shera Grant, who handles housing cases in Birmingham, Alabama, said she and her fellow judges have seen an uptick in cases of landlords getting assistance and returning to court a few weeks later after a tenant has fallen behind on rent to seek an eviction. So far they have prevented them — though she expects a spike in these kinds of cases going forward.

"It's incumbent on the judges to make sure we are paying close attention to our eviction cases and making sure that the landlord is not having their cake and eating it too," she said. "By the same token, we are not forcing landlords to take the money. There are some unfortunate circumstances where the tenant has to be evicted."

In the case of King, she believes her landlord was retaliating for earlier complaints about mold and water leaks in her three-bedroom house. The company King was dealing with, NDI Maxim, which manages property for owners, said it "was not at liberty to share details of tenants' status nor their payment records."

Other cases are complicated by the length of the pandemic and conflicting accounts of landlord and tenant. And they often leave both parties feeling shortchanged.

Despite his landlord getting more than \$20,000 in rental assistance, Prince Beatty is facing imminent eviction from his three-bedroom house in East Point, Georgia.

After the money was approved, Beatty signed an agreement in court late last year to pay several thousand dollars more that he owed as a condition to remain housed. He went back to the county for additional assistance to cover the balance but says he was denied. Unable to find warehouse work during the pandemic, the 47-year-old Navy veteran still can't pay rent and is now \$12,000 behind, in part due to his rent increasing from \$1,250-a-month to \$2,000.

Beatty, who was told he would be evicted this month, said he wakes most mornings in a panic, wondering if this will be the day when marshals "come and disrespect my stuff and throw it in the street."

His landlord, Monique Jones, said she tried to work with Beatty. But she said he violated the lease by subletting rooms to several other people and that the amount of rental assistance has not covered losses from months of unpaid rent that started before the pandemic.

"It was helpful but it did not address the underlying issue which is his nonpayment of rent," she said of the rental assistance. "That still remains and that is rightfully why I am proceeding. If I have a tenant who will pay rent and abides by the lease, I would not attempt to evict."

Limits with rental assistance often come down to some states and localities failing to follow Treasury Department guidance calling for policies requiring landlords delay evictions after getting money. Although the program prevents landlords from evicting during the period covered by rental assistance, the Treasury Department can only encourage states to adopt policies that ban evictions up to three months afterward.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition found only 29 states and localities in 2021 had adopted policies that prohibit landlords who participate in the rental assistance program from evicting tenants for a period ranging from 30 days to 12 months. Six states — Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina and West Virginia — passed regulations while several cities or counties in Texas and Maryland did.

Gene Sperling, who is charged with overseeing implementation of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package, said there was no data to suggest landlords evicting tenants after getting assistance is a "pervasive issue" but that it was "completely unacceptable."

While it's "not against the letter of the act, it's against the spirit of it," he said.

The Coalition also said the program's issues illustrate a larger problem.

"We are in the middle of a severe affordable housing crisis with gaping holes in our social safety net," CEO Diane Yentel said. "We have a systemic power imbalance that favors landlords at the expense of low-income tenants. Emergency rental assistance and eviction moratoriums were a temporary patch to

those holes.”

In reversal, FDA puts brakes on COVID shots for kids under 5

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — COVID-19 vaccinations for children under 5 hit another monthslong delay Friday as U.S. regulators abruptly put the brakes on their efforts to speed review of the shots that Pfizer is testing for youngsters.

The Food and Drug Administration, worried about the omicron variant’s toll on kids, had taken the extraordinary step of urging Pfizer to apply for OK of the extra-low dose vaccine before it’s clear if tots will need two shots or three. The agency’s plan could have allowed vaccinations to begin within weeks.

But Friday, the FDA reversed course and said it had become clear the agency needed to wait for data on how well a third shot works for the youngest age group. Pfizer said in a statement that it expected the data by early April.

FDA’s vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks said he hoped parents would understand that the agency’s decision was part of its careful scientific review of the evidence Pfizer has submitted so far.

That information “made us realize that we needed to see data from a third dose from the ongoing trial in order to make a determination,” Marks told reporters. “We take our responsibility for reviewing these vaccines very seriously because we’re parents as well.”

The nation’s 18 million children under 5 make up the only age group not yet eligible for vaccination.

Rachel Perera, the mother of an 8-month-old from Los Angeles, said Friday’s news felt “like the rug just got pulled out from under me.”

After consulting with her pediatrician, Perera hoped a vaccine would be available this winter, or in early 2022 at the latest. The education policy researcher and her husband are caring for their child to avoid the unpredictability and risks of child care during a pandemic. But that means working on her dissertation for the Ph. D. she is pursuing when her child sleeps. On top of that, the daily calculations of risks, she says, have left her with “decision fatigue.”

“I’m just tired, and it feels like ‘when is this going to end?’” Perera said. “It feels like people around us are moving on with their lives, and we’re being left behind.”

Vaccine experts had been concerned with the sudden race to evaluate Pfizer’s vaccine -- and now wonder what parents will make of the back-and-forth.

“I think they made the right decision to be careful and wait for the third-dose data,” said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, a former FDA vaccine chief.

“It was great to hear that there might be some promising data from two doses but it came out as ‘Hey everybody, you can expect a vaccine in a few weeks,’” he added. “I think this messaging gets very confusing for people.”

It’s not the first delay. Pfizer originally had expected to know by late December if the extra-low doses worked for kids under 5 — only to face a disappointing setback. Preliminary study results showed two shots were safe and strong enough to give good protection to babies as young as 6 months. But once tots reached the preschool age — the 2- to 4-year-olds — two doses weren’t protective enough, prompting the addition of a third to the study.

So it was a surprise when a few weeks ago, FDA urged Pfizer and its partner BioNTech to go ahead and apply. Next week, the agency’s independent scientific advisers were set to publicly debate if it was OK to start giving tots two shots before there was proof that a third would give them the extra needed protection — a highly unusual move.

Friday, the FDA abruptly canceled that meeting, promising to hold it once Pfizer submits the third-dose evidence. Even if Pfizer completes its submission by early April, it will take the FDA and other health authorities several weeks to review and publicly vet the data.

Earlier this week, FDA’s Marks had promised the agency wouldn’t cut corners but also noted how rapidly the pandemic was changing. Before Thanksgiving, no one had heard of omicron, by last month pediatric

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COVID-19 infections had hit an all-time high — and now cases are dropping fast as the latest mutant burns out.

How long to wait for new vaccine data -- and how much to require -- is a difficult balancing act for the FDA. It is caught between pressure to be more proactive against a rapidly changing virus and the risk that acting too quickly may deter families already on the fence about vaccinating their children.

Pfizer aims to give children as young as 6 months shots that contain one-tenth of the dose given to adults -- two shots three weeks apart followed by a third at least two months later.

That's a smaller dose than youngsters ages 5 to 11 receive, a third of the adult dose.

Vaccination rates have been lower among children than in other age groups. As of last week, just 22% of kids ages 5 to 11 and just over half of 12- to 17-year-olds were fully vaccinated, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nearly three-quarters of adults are fully vaccinated.

A Kaiser Family Foundation poll taken last month found just 3 in 10 parents of children under 5 would get their youngster vaccinated as soon as shots were authorized, while about a quarter said they definitely would not.

Dr. Moira Szilagyi, the pediatricians group's president, recognized parental frustration but said in a statement that doctors were committed to "a careful, robust and transparent process to evaluate the evidence."

Dr. Natasha Burgert, a pediatrician in Overland Park, Kansas, said, "We're just gutted. We need this protection for our kids."

She said some families likely feel relieved "because they didn't want to make that decision without good efficacy data. Other groups of parents are just crying out, 'Give us a choice. Show us what you've got and let us make a choice. Let us have access to it.'"

EXPLAINER: Where could revelations about Trump records lead?

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Revelations that Donald Trump took government records with him to Mar-a-Lago are creating a political headache for the former president — and a potential legal one, too.

House lawmakers have opened an investigation and the National Archives and Records Administration has reportedly asked the Justice Department to look into the matter. The Justice Department and the FBI have not yet said what, if anything, they'll do.

A look at what could lie ahead:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN OTHER AGENCIES SEEK A JUSTICE DEPARTMENT INVESTIGATION?

The Justice Department routinely receives referrals from Congress and other government agencies when those agencies come upon conduct they think might break the law.

Sometimes those referrals result in investigations and even criminal charges, though in many other instances they do not. The Justice Department is generally not bound to take any action suggested to it by another agency.

The Washington Post first reported this week that the archivist asked the Justice Department to investigate the discovery of 15 boxes of White House records recovered from Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida, and that the former president had a habit in office of tearing up records both "sensitive and mundane."

WHAT MIGHT INVESTIGATORS LOOK FOR?

There are several issues potentially at play, including the Presidential Records Act, which was enacted in 1978 after former President Richard Nixon wanted to destroy documents related to the Watergate scandal.

The law mandates that presidential records are the property of the U.S. government, rather than belonging to the president himself. Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., the chair of the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement announcing the investigation that Trump was required under the law to turn over the documents to the National Archives before leaving office, and that lawmakers are seeking information about the contents of the boxes recovered from Mar-a-Lago.

Another statute, punishable by up to three years in prison, makes it a crime to conceal or intentionally

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destroy government records.

But a potentially more serious issue concerns the handling of classified material. The Post also reported that some of the recovered documents were clearly marked as classified, including at the top secret level.

"I think the obvious legal issue presented is whether the removal of classified information from the White House and its transport and storage at Mar-a-Lago — a place unauthorized to keep classified information — was a violation of law, and if so whether it merits criminal prosecution," said David Laufman, who as the former head of the Justice Department's counterintelligence section was involved in the 2016 investigation into former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY ABOUT THE HANDLING OF CLASSIFIED RECORDS?

There are multiple statutes governing classified information, including a law punishable by up to five years in prison that makes it a crime to remove such records and retain them at an unauthorized location. Another statute makes it a crime to mishandle classified records either intentionally or in a grossly negligent manner.

Though prosecutors could theoretically charge an individual for extreme negligence, Justice Department prosecutions over the last century have focused on what former FBI Director James Comey described in 2016 as a "clearly intentional and willful mishandling of classified information," indications of disloyalty to the United States, efforts to obstruct justice or the exposure of vast quantities of classified information that could suggest an intent to commit misconduct.

Comey made the statement in announcing the FBI would not recommend charging Clinton for her handling of classified material through a private email server she used as secretary of state in the Obama administration.

In other words, the mere misuse of classified information does not necessarily form the basis of a prosecution.

HOW OFTEN DOES THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT INVESTIGATE THESE SORT OF CASES?

It's hardly unheard of for senior government officials to find themselves entangled in classified information investigations.

The most notable recent probe is the Clinton one.

In closing out the case, the FBI said 110 emails in 52 email chains were found to have contained classified information at the time they were sent and received, but officials decided against charges because officials concluded that she had not intended to break the law.

In 2005, President Bill Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, was fined \$50,000 for taking classified documents from the National Archives in a deal that spared him prison time.

A decade later, former CIA Director David Petraeus pleaded guilty to knowingly removing classified information and retaining it at an unauthorized location, admitting that he provided eight black binders of sensitive material to his biographer. He was sentenced to two years' probation as part of a plea deal.

HOW DOES TRUMP'S STATUS AS A FORMER PRESIDENT FACTOR INTO ANY INVESTIGATION?

This will be a key question since Trump could presumably attempt to argue that, while president, he had original classification authority and was the ultimate arbiter in determining what is classified — and what is no longer so — and that the documents in his possession had been declassified.

"I doubt that Trump or people close to him went through such a formality given what we know about the informality with which he treated official documents," Laufman said. "But the fact that he possessed that authority could muddy the water, potentially, for the government meeting its burden of proof in a criminal case."

He added that the department should attempt to unpack the relevant facts, adding that it would be "derelict" for the FBI to not undertake an investigation and see where the facts lie.

Utah senator blocks internment camp designation, draws ire

By JAMES ANDERSON and SAM METZ Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — On the eve of the 80th anniversary of the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese Ameri-

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cans at the onset of World War II, Republican U.S. Sen. Mike Lee of Utah is getting backlash for holding up the creation of a national historic site at a former internment camp in rural Colorado.

U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, a Colorado Democrat, says he has the support of 99 of the chamber's 100 senators to pass the Amache National Historic Site Act, which would make the remote southeastern Colorado landmark a national historic site eligible for additional preservation assistance.

But his bill, co-sponsored by Colorado Democratic Sen. John Hickenlooper, failed to pass by unanimous consent last week due to a lone objection from Lee, who opposes adding new federal lands without adequate funding and in the past has advocated for "swaps" to prevent expanding federal land ownership.

"Senator Lee does not object to this specific historical site. He does object to any increase in the total amount of land owned by the federal government as the federal government fails to adequately care for the land already in its vast holdings," Lee's spokesman, Lee Lonsberry, told The Associated Press.

A similar House bill, sponsored by Colorado Republican Rep. Ken Buck and Democratic Rep. Joe Neguse, swiftly passed last year, and Bennet's Senate companion may still advance for consideration.

The dispute comes amid a broader reckoning about race in U.S. history as Japanese Americans strive to spread awareness about the gross injustices committed by the U.S. government against their community during World War II.

The Amache site is less than one square mile (2.4 square kilometers), Bennett's office and the Prowers County Assessor said. It contains remnants of barracks, latrines, mess halls, military police structures and a cemetery.

Lee has been one of the Republican Party's most vocal opponents of the expansive power that federal agencies have to manage public lands in Western states.

He supported the Trump administration's 2017 decision to shrink the size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, two national monuments in Utah. And last year, he opposed the Biden administration's decision to restore Bears Ears' original borders. In a 2018 speech in Utah, where about two-thirds of land is managed by federal agencies, he said his long-term goal to transfer federal lands to state control.

Camp Amache is owned by the town of Granada and already listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its current designation qualifies it for preservation funds, but designating it as a National Historic Site would make available additional federal funds through the National Park Service.

Calling the Japanese American internment one of "the most disgraceful chapters in our nation's history" fed by "racist fear," Bennet said in a floor speech Feb. 3 the bill intended to honor people "who never gave up on the United States of America even as it was interning them on their own soil."

Japanese Americans were held in 10 camps in California, Arizona, Wyoming, Utah, Arkansas and Colorado, expelled from their homes near the West Coast under an executive order by President Franklin Roosevelt issued on Feb. 19, 1942. More than 7,000 people were interned at Amache — the camp's unofficial name, after a Cheyenne chief's daughter — between 1942 and 1945.

According to the National Park Service, a cemetery, reservoir, water well and tank and trees planted by internees remain at the site, which is managed by a non-profit, the Amache Preservation Society.

Lee's stance has drawn outrage from numerous organizations, including the Japanese American Citizens League and the National Parks Conservation Association, which advocates for the National Park System. The citizens league, its local Southern Colorado affiliate and other groups plan a Day of Remembrance on Feb. 19 that will, in part, demand passage of Bennet's bill.

The initiative "not only serves as a healing tool and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing by our government, but it allows individuals and our country to move forward to a better way of being," said Shirley Ann Higuchi, chair of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation whose parents were interned at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in that state.

She noted that her own father, William Higuchi, went on to become chair of the Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the University of Utah; another detainee, Raymond Uno, became Utah's first ethnic minority judge.

"A lot of Japanese Americans contributed so much to Utah, and it's a shame that in some quiet way they

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cannot be honored," Higuchi said. "They have quietly contributed to our country and it's unfortunate they can't be supported by someone from their own state."

Both Bennet and Lee's offices said the senators have spoken about how to add the remnants of the Amache-Granada War Relocation Center to the parks system.

Q&A: Surgeon General on omicron, masks and mental health

By HILARY POWELL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says he can imagine a future where Americans don't have to contend with mask requirements. But pulling back safeguards too quickly, Murthy warns, risks more avoidable suffering, especially for people with weakened immune systems or other vulnerabilities.

In an interview this week with The Associated Press, Murthy also shared his concerns about the pandemic's impact on the mental wellbeing of youth. He's the father of two young children. Growing up, he witnessed the toll of unresolved mental health problems.

Some of Murthy's comments:

A FUTURE WITHOUT MASKS

"I can imagine that future. I can't tell you if it's coming in a couple of months or in six months or in 12 months.

"What I can tell you is that to live that future, we are going to need the tools that we've been building over the last year. We're going to need readily available vaccines and therapeutics ... we're going to need those freely available high-quality masks and tests, and we're going to also need the right mindset recognizing that COVID is not going to disappear overnight.

"We may see waves of old or new variants, but if we have these tools, if we're using them well, particularly our vaccines and boosters, we can protect the vast majority of people from hospitalizations and deaths."

EBB AND FLOW OF THE PANDEMIC

"The pandemic is not over today. We are still seeing record numbers of hospitalizations, deaths, and cases in this country.

"I think that as the pandemic gets better, we should be pulling back on restrictions. The conversation now is about what should determine when that happens.

"It's likely going to be some combination of the hospitalization rate or hospital capacity itself, which is about health care staffing, about the death rate, and also just about where we're going in terms of cases."

"We also have to have a clear plan for protecting those who are more vulnerable. And we know that there are people in our community, particularly those who are immunocompromised, who may continue to be at higher risk."

AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

"I come at this issue of youth mental health, not just as a surgeon general or as a doctor, but first and foremost as a parent.

"How do I make sure that my kids have a foundation for good physical and mental health going forward?"

"You can't necessarily legislate your way out of stigma ... but where Congress can make a big difference is in focusing on expanding access to treatment, making sure that we are integrating primary care with mental health services, and we're expanding our pipeline for ... mental health professionals."

MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES

"Right now, only 2% of the 41,000 psychiatrists in our country are Black ... which is just a reflection of the lack of diversity we have in our mental health workforce and that has direct implications for providing care."

"We do not have adequate representation in the workforce when it comes to communities of color."

"We may come in different flavors and maybe different words are used to describe mental illness, but there's this stigma that makes people feel ashamed.

"When I was in high school, we had an uncle who lived close by to us, who was struggling with depression and we didn't know it. We found that he had taken his life and I still remember just how that shook me.

"People who are struggling with mental illness who are people of color are often less likely to go and

seek out help.”

A SENSE OF HOPE

“What gives me hope is actually our experience with the COVID-19 vaccination effort in equity.

“There was a gap in the very beginning. We saw that Latino and Black communities and Native American communities were less likely to be vaccinated.

“But then we worked as hard as we could to close that gap with the help of trusted messengers, increasing access points and doing everything we could.

“We’ve got to bring that same focus, that same accountability to closing the equity gap when it comes to mental health.”

Biden orders 3,000 more troops to Poland amid Ukraine crisis

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon is sending another 3,000 combat troops to Poland to join 1,700 who already are assembling there in a demonstration of American commitment to NATO allies worried at the prospect of Russia invading Ukraine, a senior defense official said Friday.

The additional soldiers will depart their post at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, over the next couple days and should be in Poland by early next week, according to the defense official, who provided the information under ground rules set by the Pentagon. They are the remaining elements of an infantry brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Their mission will be to train and provide deterrence but not to engage in combat in Ukraine.

The announcement came shortly after Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden’s national security adviser, issued a public warning for all American citizens in Ukraine to leave the country as soon as possible. Sullivan said Russian President Vladimir Putin could give the order to launch an invasion of Ukraine any day now.

In addition to the U.S. troops deploying to Poland, about 1,000 U.S. soldiers based in Germany are shifting to Romania in a similar mission of reassurance to a NATO ally. Also, 300 soldiers of an 18th Airborne Corps headquarters unit has arrived in Germany, commanded by Lt. Gen. Michael E. Kurilla.

The American troops are to train with host-nation forces but not enter Ukraine for any purpose.

The U.S. already has about 80,000 troops throughout Europe at permanent stations and on rotational deployments.

Taliban free detained UNHCR staff, 2 foreign journalists

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban released two foreign journalists working with the U.N. refugee agency and several of the aid organization’s Afghan staff on Friday, UNHCR said, hours after news broke about their detentions in the capital, Kabul.

The announcement followed a tweet by the Taliban-appointed deputy minister of culture and information, Zabihullah Mujahid, who said they were detained because they didn’t have documents that properly identified them as UNHCR. Mujahid said they were freed after their identities were confirmed.

“We are relieved to confirm the release in Kabul of the two journalists on assignment with UNHCR, and the Afghan nationals working with them,” the Geneva-based organization said in a brief two-sentence statement. “We are grateful to all who expressed concern and offered help. We remain committed to the people of Afghanistan.”

The development in Kabul comes as President Joe Biden signed an executive order that promised \$3.5 billion — out of \$7 billion of Afghanistan’s assets frozen in the United States — would be given to families of America’s 9/11 victims. The other \$3.5 billion would be freed for Afghan aid. The order would allow U.S. financial institutions to facilitate access to the money by humanitarian groups, which would then give it directly to the Afghan people.

One of the detained foreign journalists was Andrew North, a former British Broadcasting Corporation journalist who has worked extensively in Afghanistan. His wife, Natalia Antelava had earlier issued a plea

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on Twitter for his release.

"Andrew was in Kabul working for the UNHCR @Refugees trying to help the people of Afghanistan," Antelava said. "We are extremely concerned for his safety & call on anyone with influence to help secure his release."

The Committee to Protect Journalist had also condemned the detentions and called for the immediate release of the journalists.

"The Taliban must immediately release Andrew North and all other journalists held for their work, and cease harassing and detaining members of the press," the CPJ statement said, noting they were detained on Tuesday.

The Taliban swept over Afghanistan, capturing Kabul and much of the country in mid-August, as U.S. and NATO troops were in the final, chaotic weeks of their pullout following the 20-year intervention.

"The Taliban's detention of two journalists on assignment with the U.N. refugee agency is a sad reflection of the overall decline of press freedom and increasing attacks on journalists under Taliban rule," Steven Butler, CPJ's Asia program coordinator, said in Washington.

Also released on Friday was Parvaneh Ibrahimkhel, a women's rights activist detained more than two weeks ago. She spoke to local TOLO TV to confirm that she was free but few other details were immediately available. The international community had also demanded her freedom, as well as that of four other women activists.

Since taking control, the Taliban have imposed widespread restrictions, many of them directed at women. Women have been banned from many jobs, outside the health and education field, their access to education has been restricted beyond sixth grade and they have been ordered to wear the Islamic headscarf, or hijab. The Taliban have, however, stopped short of imposing the burqa, which was compulsory when they previously ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s.

Universities for women have also begun to re-open and Taliban have promised girls would be allowed to resume their education beyond grade 6 after the Afghan New Year at the end of March.

In January, the Taliban stormed the Kabul home of activist Tamana Zaryabi Paryani who was among about 25 women who took part in an anti-Taliban protest a few days earlier against the hijab. It wasn't immediately clear whether Paryani was also being released, but there have been international demands for her freedom as well.

The international community has been wary of officially recognizing Afghanistan's new rulers, concerned the Taliban would impose the same harsh rule as they did when they were in power the first time.

In the wake of the takeover, international funding was suspended and billions of dollars in Afghanistan's assets abroad, mostly in the U.S., were frozen and financial aid to the government was largely halted, pushing the Afghan economy further into a tailspin.

Super Bowl ads look toward the future — and the past

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Super Bowl advertisers this year want Americans to forget about pandemic woes and focus on the future: of electric vehicles, mind reading Alexas, robots and cryptocurrency — and also to harken back to the nostalgic past of '90s movies like "Austin Powers" and "The Cable Guy."

The Los Angeles Rams are taking on the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl 56 on Sunday at the SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California. But for many, the big show of the night will be the commercials.

Advertisers are hoping to deliver a dose of escapism with light humor and star-studded entertainment amid the pandemic, high inflation and tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

"Marketers are recognizing Americans have had a very heavy, difficult two-year period and are responding by bringing some good old-fashioned entertainment for Super Bowl Sunday," said Kimberly Whitley, marketing professor at the University of Virginia.

NBC sold out of its ad space briskly and said an undisclosed number of 30-second spots went for \$7 million, a jump from the \$6.5 million that last year's ads went for.

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Super Bowl viewership has declined in recent years. Last year, 92 million people tuned in, according to Nielsen, the lowest viewership since 2007. But viewership at other big live events like the Grammys and the Oscars has also plummeted. Ratings for the Olympics — which NBC is broadcasting concurrent with the Super Bowl — are way down, too. So the Super Bowl remains the biggest night for advertisers.

"It's the only game in town," said Villanova marketing professor Charles Taylor.

This year's ads will be amusing and warm, leading Kelly O'Keefe, CEO of brand consultancy Brand Federation, to dub this year the "Ted Lasso Super Bowl." It's not just because two of the Apple+ sitcoms' stars are starring in ads — Jason Sudeikis for TurboTax and Hannah Waddingham for Rakuten.

It's because the ads, like the sitcom, will be "nothing too heavy," O'Keefe said. "It's funny, positive, and makes you happy — but doesn't go too deep."

FUTURE FORWARD

What does the future look like? Electric, if automakers have anything to do with it. With automakers back in full force this Super Bowl, BMW shows Arnold Schwarzenegger as Zeus, the god of the sky (or in this commercial, the god of lightning) whose wife, Salma Hayek Pinault, gives him the EV BMW iX to spice up retirement.

Kia showcases the Kia EV6, the brand's first battery electric vehicle, in its ad, along with a cute "robo dog." Nissan gives a nod to its all-electric 2023 Nissan Ariya.

A first time advertiser, Wallbox, showcases an actual survivor of being struck by lightning in its ad for its home electric vehicle charger.

Other advertisers are future forward too. Amazon's spot shows real-life spouses living in a world where Amazon's digital assistant Alexa can read your mind. In a regional ad, Samuel Adams shows Spot, the dancing robo-dog from Boston Dynamics, getting down with the brewer's employees.

Bud Light NEXT, a new zero-carb Bud Light brand expansion, showcases an NFT in its ad. And Facebook gives a glimpse of its vision of the metaverse in a humorous ad that shows a discarded animatronic dog meeting up with his pals again in the metaverse.

CRYPTO BOWL

Among the 30 new advertisers are several cryptocurrency exchanges. Advocates of the blockchain-based digital currencies that have captured the interest of investors and financial service firms alike, want to lure regular Americans too. Exchanges Crypto.com, FTX and eToro have all announced Super Bowl ad plans, and others have been rumored but not confirmed.

While the Super Bowl can be a good place to launch a new brand or category into the public consciousness, there are risks of getting lost in the shuffle as first-time advertisers. And they have a big task with 30 seconds.

"They need to educate the public on what their product is, why it's not risky, and where they can access it," Villanova's Taylor said.

POP CULTURE NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia is always a safe bet to win over viewers, and this year's Super Bowl is no different.

In a teaser, Verizon hints that it's bringing back Jim Carrey to reprise his loathsome 1996 "Cable Guy" character for their ad. GM has enlisted Mike Myers for an "Austin Powers"-themed ad that features a reprise of his role as Austin Powers' nemesis, Dr. Evil. Sidekicks played by Rob Lowe, Seth Green and Mindy Sterling also join.

And some ad executives are hoping people can still remember iconic advertising as well. ETrade hinted in a teaser that it's bringing back the spokesbaby that appeared in its Super Bowl ads from 2008 to 2014. A Hellmann's ad shows Washington Commanders' linebacker David Mayo tackling unsuspecting people who waste food. The ad is an homage to a 2003 Reebok Super Bowl ad starring a fictional linebacker named Terry Tate who tackled office workers who weren't being productive.

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CELEBRITY OVERLOAD

A well-liked celebrity generally adds some goodwill to a brand message. So how about three to five of them? Super Bowl ads are always stuffed with celebrities, but this year, many ads are overstuffed with them.

"I've ever seen anything like this number of A-List celebrities," said Villanova's Taylor.

Uber Eats wanted to get across the message that you can order household items and other sundries from its delivery service, not just food. So its ad shows celebrities and other actors trying to eat everything from cat litter to diapers. "If it was delivered by Uber Eats, does that mean I can 'Eats' it?" White Lotus actor Jennifer Coolidge asks. Gwyneth Paltrow tries to eat a candle, Trevor Noah tries to eat a light bulb and Nicholas Braun from "Succession" tries to eat dish soap.

In Michelob Ultra's ad, a bowling alley run by Steve Buscemi unites superstar athletes from across sports enjoying some bowling in their off time: tennis great Serena Williams, former NFL quarterback Peyton Manning, the NBA's Miami Heat all-star forward Jimmy Butler, WNBA star Nneka Ogwumike, top golfer Brooks Koepka and U.S. women's soccer star Alex Morgan.

Planet Fitness' ad has narration by William Shatner and shows Lindsay Lohan working out, winning Jeopardy against Dennis Rodman and bedazzling Danny Trejo's ankle bracelet.

And in Nissan's ad, a straight-laced Eugene Levy is transformed into an action hero by taking a drive in a 2023 Nissan Z sports car, alongside stars Danai Gurira and Dave Bautista. Levy's "Schitt's Creek" co-star Catherine O'Hara appears in Nissan's new Ariya electric car.

SOCIAL MESSAGES

Most advertisers are steering clear of sentiment.

"People are avoiding the deeper issues," said Brand Federation's O'Keefe. "People aren't going to try to unite us or divide us or get us to think deeply. Ads will be much more amusing. But also very safe."

A few, though, are delivering heartfelt messages.

The Budweiser brand, absent last year, returns with a spot centered on one of its Clydesdale mascots. After it's injured by jumping a barbed wire fence — a not-so-subtle reference to the U.S. and the coronavirus pandemic — another Budweiser mascot, a Labrador, a stableman, and a vet, help the Clydesdale recover and gallop again. Budweiser wanted to return "with a message of strength and resilience," said Daniel Blake, group vice president at Anheuser-Busch.

Google's ad for the Pixel 6 stars the singer Lizzo and focuses on how the phone's camera highlights darker skin tones. And Toyota's ad, which debuted during the Olympics but will also run during the Super Bowl, tells the story of the McKeever Brothers, cross-country skiers who have won 10 Paralympic medals together.

On the ice, a question: Where are the Black figure skaters?

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Before her own Olympic career began, Canadian figure skater Vanessa James had seen Black Girl Magic on the ice. It was on display at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, when French skater Surya Bonaly leapt into the air, kicked into a backflip and landed on one leg.

The thrilling move has neither been widely attempted since nor accepted by judges for international competitions, such as the Olympic Games, and thus "the Bonaly flip" has never become a big thing. Yet despite the move being controversial at the time, Bonaly's tenacity in attempting it has inspired many who have followed her.

"I wanted to do a backflip, but I was always really too scared to try it," says James, who is skating in Beijing in her fourth Winter Games after representing France in Vancouver and Pyeongchang.

The Salchow, the Biellmann, the Charlotte spiral — these figure skating standards are named after white people from the 20th century. And in a century-old sport that was largely European until just a few decades ago, some wonder: How can more Black athletes make the same lasting imprint on it?

"If you don't see yourself in the sport, how can you believe that you belong, how can you believe that you

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can be the best, how do you know that you can be creative or that you'll be accepted for your uniqueness?" says James, who in 2010 was one half of the first Black French pairs skating duo with Yannick Bonheur.

There are no Black athletes competing in figure skating for the Americans this year, though the U.S. team includes five Asian American skaters, an openly LGBTQ skater and the first gender-nonbinary skater. Mexico's figure skating team consists of Donovan Carrillo, the lone representative from Latin America.

Kristi Yamaguchi and Michelle Kwan came to define Asian American representation at the Olympics in the 1990s, while China, Japan and South Korea became more prominent in the early 2000s. And with Nathan Chen clinching a gold medal, and Alysa Liu and Karen Chen on the American team, the pipeline of figure skaters has yet to show signs of slowing.

James, who skates in the pairs event with teammate Eric Radford, is the only Black figure skater competing for any nation in Beijing. She carries not just the hopes of Canadian and French skaters, but also Black girls and women, boys and men across the world who strain to see themselves represented on the ice and slopes during the Winter Games.

Part of the reason, says Elladj Baldé, a Black and Russian professional figure skater from Canada, is that "Black skaters weren't allowed to be in figure skating clubs (or) in figure skating competitions" during the sport's early years.

Whether it was Europe's blond-haired, blue-eyed and petite figure skating standard or a period of racial segregation at rinks in the U.S., Black skaters who broke barriers in the sport did so with metaphorical weights chained to their skates.

"That doesn't leave a lot of room and a lot of time for Black skaters to innovate," Baldé says, "especially if a sport is confining everyone to a certain style."

Baldé's unconventional, hip-hop-inflected dancing style has gone viral on social media in recent years, allowing him to leverage the attention to push for both change and diversity. The Skate Global Foundation, which he cofounded last year, works to build or rehabilitate ice rinks and exposes Black people and other people of color in Canada to figure skating.

For consecutive Winter Olympics, the Canadian and French Olympic teams have included Black skaters, which some say is a reflection of Bonaly's influence. But the American team has struggled to establish a strong pipeline of Black talent.

Historians trace the problem to the stories of Black American skaters such as Joseph Vanterpool, a World War II veteran from New York City who took up professional skating after seeing an ice show in England but was rarely featured outside of all-Black showcases. Mabel Fairbanks, a pioneer whose Olympic dreams were dashed by racist exclusion from U.S. Figure Skating in the 1930s, was by far the most successful of the sport's Black trailblazers.

Fairbanks later opened doors that were closed to her for generations, including one of her mentees, Debi Thomas. In the 1988 Calgary Games, Thomas became the first Black American to medal at the Winter Olympics. But few others have come close to appearing in Olympic competition after her.

"How did somebody like Debi Thomas have the success that she had, break down the barriers that she did, but yet didn't that lead to further influx of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) skaters following in her footsteps?" wonders Ramsey Baker, the executive director of U.S. Figure Skating.

It's a question the governing body had wrestled with for years, in addition to the socioeconomic barriers associated with elite competition. Then, diversity in figure skating became an even bigger focus following the 2020 murder of George Floyd by American police, amplifying the Black Lives Matter movement's calls for racial justice and equity.

As protests over police brutality erupted across the world, the figure skating associations in Canada and the U.S. responded with pledges to answer protesters' cries and make changes from within. However, both also have faced some criticism from Black athletes who felt the pledges were a ploy for media attention.

Last year, U.S. Figure Skating hired Kadari Taylor-Watson, a Black woman, as its first director of diversity, equity and inclusion. Her work has included its first diversity census of skaters, judges and other sport officials. Through a working group, the association plans to put tangible action behind the pledge to be even more inclusive of Black skaters.

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"We have to think about the 100 years of not just U.S. figure skating history, but the 100 years of U.S. history," Taylor-Watson says, "and all of the racial turmoil that has been going on in our society that created those barriers.

"We don't want to invite BIPOC skaters into a community that is not welcoming for them or ready for them."

James's participation in the Winter Games coincides with Black History Month, an annual observance that originated in the United States but has been recognized in Canada, Britain and increasingly in other parts of Europe.

Former French Olympic figure skater Maé-Bérénice Méité, who is Black, gave James a shoutout over Instagram ahead of the first day of the figure skating team competition in Beijing last week.

"So to all of you who'd like to support an example of what Black excellence looks like, I encourage you to support my best friend," Méité wrote to her more than 52,000 followers.

James says the two came up in the sport together. "It's important to have her support because we see each other when we look in the mirror," James says. "When she's on the ice, I see me."

She and Méité know they are beacons of inspiration for young, aspiring Black skaters. James says she imagines that somewhere, young Black girls are watching the Winter Games and thinking, "I look like her. I wanna be just like her. I can do that. I can be better than that."

"That's the key to excellence," James adds. "It's not just seeing it once. It's recreating it and repeating it. We need that. We need to grow."

NASA's new space telescope sees 1st starlight, takes selfie

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA's new space telescope has captured its first starlight and even taken a selfie of its giant, gold mirror.

All 18 segments of the primary mirror on the James Webb Space Telescope seem to be working properly 1 1/2 months into the mission, officials said Friday.

The telescope's first target was a bright star 258 light-years away in the constellation Ursa Major.

"That was just a real wow moment," said Marshall Perrin of the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore.

Over the next few months, the hexagonal mirror segments — each the size of a coffee table — will be aligned and focused as one, allowing science observations to begin by the end of June.

The \$10 billion infrared observatory — considered the successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope — will seek light from the first stars and galaxies that formed in the universe nearly 14 billion years ago. It will also examine the atmospheres of alien worlds for any possible signs of life.

NASA did not detect the crippling flaw in Hubble's mirror until after its 1990 launch; more than three years passed before spacewalking astronauts were able to correct the telescope's blurry vision.

While everything is looking good so far with Webb, engineers should be able to rule out any major mirror flaws by next month, Feinberg said.

Webb's 21-foot (6.5-meter), gold-plated mirror is the largest ever launched into space. An infrared camera on the telescope snapped a picture of the mirror as one segment gazed upon the targeted star.

"Pretty much the reaction was 'Holy Cow!'," Feinberg said.

NASA released the selfie, along with a mosaic of starlight from each of the mirror segments. The 18 points of starlight resemble bright fireflies flitting against a black night sky.

After 20 years with the project, "it is just unbelievably satisfying" to see everything working so well so far, said the University of Arizona's Marcia Rieke, principal scientist for the infrared camera.

Webb blasted off from South America in December and reached its designated perch 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away last month.

How inflation and tangled supply lines are gripping economy

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By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Since the pandemic erupted two years ago, Forest Ramsey and his wife, Kelly, have held the line on prices at their gourmet chocolate shop in Louisville, Kentucky. Now, they're about to throw in the towel.

In the past year, the costs of ingredients for their business, Art Eatables, have surged between 10% and 50%. The Ramseys are paying their employees 30% more than they did before the pandemic.

And in the face of supply shortages, their packaging costs are up. They've begun using 12-piece trays in their eight-piece chocolate boxes because they can no longer get any eight-piece trays.

So having just tried to survive for the past two years, the Ramseys, who own three retail outlets and sell custom chocolates to about 25 bourbon distilleries, have reached an unpleasant decision: They're going to raise their customer prices 10% to 30%.

"We've got to adjust this — we can't afford to keep taking the hits anymore," Forest Ramsey said.

The struggles of Art Eatables illustrate how inflation and tangled supply chains have seeped into nearly every nook of the economy, forcing consumers and businesses to make painful decisions that many of them have never had to contemplate before. With the government reporting Thursday that consumer inflation reached 7.5% over the past year — a 40-year high — the acceleration of prices is leaving few unscathed.

Some of the supply chain snarls that have magnified inflation since the pandemic recession may begin to ease in the coming months. If so, inflation would likely moderate somewhat.

Yet the key trends that have sent prices soaring — higher wages, parts shortages, rent increases, robust consumer spending — won't likely fade anytime soon. And it's unclear when, or how much, inflation might actually slow.

Increased pay, though good for workers, has led many other retail and restaurant chains, from Starbucks to Amazon to Chipotle, to charge customers more. When Amazon announced last week that it was raising the price of its annual Prime memberships, from \$119 to \$139, it pointed to its increased labor and shipping costs.

And an acceleration of apartments rents, many economists say, will likely help keep inflation up at least through the end of this year. Rising prices are also broadening from pandemic-battered industries like autos to wider categories of goods and services, from electricity to clothing to airfares. That suggests that high inflation will outlast COVID-19.

Neil Dutta, an economist at Renaissance Macro, noted that even if you exclude from the government's consumer price index the costs of food, energy, housing and used cars — some of the fastest-rising categories during the pandemic — prices still rose a steep 0.7% from December to January. That's above even the 0.6% increase for overall consumer prices, a stark illustration of how widespread price increases have become.

Many big corporations say that even after they've raised prices, their customers have kept right on buying. Rising wages and higher savings, boosted by heavy government stimulus aid last year, have likely helped keep consumer demand strong. Over time, though, high levels of spending and wages can fuel further price hikes in a continuing spiral.

"We have not seen any meaningful impact to customer demand," John Culver, Starbucks' chief operating officer, said on a conference call with investors, referring to the company's two price hikes last year. "To the contrary, our customer demand continues to grow."

Starbucks' CEO Kevin Johnson said further price hikes are planned for this year.

Many analysts had warned that spending would slow once the government's stimulus programs expired. But the early signs suggest that that hasn't happened. Bank of America said this week that spending through its credit and debit cards and digital platform jumped 17% compared with the same month a year ago — roughly double the pre-pandemic pace. The rise didn't just reflect price increases. Transactions rose 10%.

Brian Moynihan, Bank of America's CEO, suggested in an interview with The Associated Press that the spending jump reflected rising paychecks, rather than Americans simply taking on more debt. And even with all the spending, he said, customers' bank accounts still grew in the past year.

Rising apartment rental rates have emerged as a major contributing factor in surging inflation. Average

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rents rose 0.5% in January, the largest increase in 20 years, and are up 4.4% from a year ago.

More Americans have returned to cities, after some had left in the early months of the pandemic. The apartment vacancy rate has reached its lowest level since the mid-1980s, according to a report from the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies. And with job growth strong, more young people are expected to move out on their own, raising demand for apartments.

With home prices high, more higher-income Americans are renting, too, thereby enabling landlords to charge higher rents and crowding out other renters. Asking prices for new apartment leases jumped nearly 11% last fall compared with a year earlier, the Harvard study found. That increase will take time to feed through the inflation figures, because it measures all rents, including renewals.

Wage growth, by some measures, is still accelerating, which will maintain the pressure on small and large companies to either offset the increases through greater efficiencies or raise prices. Average hourly wages rose 5.7% in January from a year earlier, the government said last week. That was up from 5.3% in January 2021.

There are some signs that inflation drivers may be cooling a bit. Adam Ozimek, chief economist at Upwork, a freelancing website, said that as more Americans resume their job searches as COVID fades, the increased competition for jobs could slow wage growth. The proportion of Americans either working or looking for work jumped in January, though it is still below pre-pandemic levels.

"Labor supply is increasing quickly, and that will put downward pressure on wages and prices," Ozimek said.

And prices for new and used cars, which have been some of the biggest drivers of inflation in the past year, are showing tentative signs of slowing. A shortage of computer chips has cut production of new cars even as demand for autos has been strong.

Used car prices soared nearly 41% in January from a year earlier, while the cost of a new car leapt 12.2%, Thursday's report showed. Yet from December to January, the price of a new car was unchanged and rose just 1.5% for a used vehicle — much lower than in previous months.

The used car supply is increasing, and automakers are starting to raise production, said Kevin Roberts, director of industry analytics for cargurus.com.

"We're not going to go back to pre-COVID level prices, but we could see some giveback in new vehicle prices as automakers start to make lower-priced vehicles again," Roberts said.

Black NFL coaches lament hiring policies that fall short

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

Veteran NFL coach Anthony Lynn designed a personal defense in response to the league policy that requires teams to interview minority candidates for their top jobs.

While he appreciates the intent of the policy, Lynn, who is Black, long ago added his own amendment to it: As his star rose as one of the league's top assistants in the mid-2010s, Lynn would only meet with teams to discuss a head coaching vacancy if they had already brought in at least one other minority candidate, something the so-called Rooney Rule didn't require until 2021.

"I just didn't want to be a token interview," Lynn, the Black assistant head coach of the San Francisco 49ers told The Associated Press. "I really believe in the spirit of the Rooney Rule, but I just saw how people were abusing it and I didn't want to be a part of that."

The rule is named after former Steelers owner Dan Rooney, who oversaw the league's diversity committee, and it was revolutionary in 2003. It was almost universally praised as a good idea that would help diversity.

Today, it's often viewed as a policy that is followed by the letter, but not in spirit. It can be a humiliating process for those it was designed to help and falls far short of its goal: There were three non-white head coaches when the rule went into effect in 2003; today, there are five.

The racial discrimination lawsuit filed this month against the NFL and several teams by former Miami Dolphins head coach Brian Flores has magnified attention on the league's hiring practices and stirred up

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long-simmering frustrations with the Rooney Rule. It has also prompted comparisons from Lynn and others to corporate America, which has also struggled to diversify its leadership ranks.

What drove Flores to file the lawsuit, he said, was a string of text messages with Patriots coach Bill Belichick three days before a scheduled interview about a head coaching job with the New York Giants. Those texts led Flores to believe that Brian Daboll already had been chosen as the new coach.

"It was humiliating to be quite honest," Flores said. "There was disbelief, there was anger, there was a wave of emotion for a lot of reasons."

For Lynn, perseverance paid off in 2017 when the Los Angeles Chargers made him the first Black head coach in team history.

The candidates Lynn beat out for the job included Teryl Austin, who is now a defensive coordinator for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Austin's interview with the Chargers was one of 11 occasions where he earned a face-to-face meeting, but failed to land the head coaching job.

There were times when Austin felt like he was really in contention, and others when he felt he "was one of those guys where they were checking a box" to comply with the mandate.

"You can't say for sure," Austin said. "Maybe I'm not what the owners see when they look in the mirror and they see leadership positions."

Austin's personal journey is included in Flores' lawsuit as evidence of a discriminatory system that is failing qualified job candidates.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell partially pushed back on Wednesday, saying the league has made a "tremendous amount of progress in a lot of areas." He acknowledged, though, that the league is lagging when it comes to head coaches.

"We have more work to do and we've got to figure that out," Goodell said in Los Angeles ahead of Sunday's Super Bowl at SoFi Stadium. Goodell said the NFL has already engaged "outside experts" to help it review hiring policies and he didn't rule out the possibility of eliminating the Rooney Rule.

The two teams playing in this year's Super Bowl — the Cincinnati Bengals and the Los Angeles Rams — are led by offensive-minded, white head coaches in their 30s. There is considerable diversity, however, among the dozens of coaches that oversee their offenses, defenses and special teams. Half of the assistants working for Rams coach Sean McVay are Black.

Art Rooney II — Dan's son and the current Steelers president — defended the impact of his father's eponymous hiring policy.

"While I acknowledge that we have not seen progress in the ranks of head coaches, we have seen marked improvement in the hiring of women and minorities in other key leadership roles," he said.

In many cases, there was nowhere to go but up.

Roughly 70% of NFL players are Black, but the NFL is running in place in terms of diversifying its most visible leadership positions. While over a third of assistant coaches are Black, only two teams employed Black offensive coordinators this season, considered the final rung of the ladder before becoming a head coach. Nearly 85% of the league's general managers and player personnel directors are white, according to a report by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

"This is a willingness and heart issue," said Troy Vincent, a former player who is now the league's executive vice president of football operations. "You can't force people, so we have to continue to educate and share with those in the hiring cycle."

Players also have a role in promoting change, says Richard Lapchick, the director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

Lapchick points to the NBA, where players have taken an increasingly public role in social activism. Nearly half of the NBA's 30 teams are led by Black coaches and over a quarter employ Black general managers.

"I don't think that the (NFL) office can do it on their own," Lapchick said. "The impact will only take place ... when the athletes themselves raise their voice and say it's important."

Corporate America has run into many of the same diversity challenges as the NFL, and the same legal problems.

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"The NFL is no different than the rest of society," said Lynn of the 49ers. "Look at the top Fortune 500 companies. How many minority CEOs do you have in that industry versus ours? Our percentage may be higher."

Over 90% of Fortune 500 presidents and CEOs are white and only 3% are Black, according to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

Former Morgan Stanley chief diversity officer Marilyn Booker sued the bank in 2020 for racial discrimination and retaliation. She alleged that the company's overwhelmingly white executives stymied her plans to diversify its management structure. The two sides eventually settled out of court.

Last year, five of the largest banks — J.P. Morgan Chase, Bank of America, Citigroup, U.S. Bancorp and Wells Fargo — agreed to make public commitments to policies that echo the Rooney Rule, according to a spokesman at the AFL-CIO, which helped secure the agreements.

But experts say many of the biggest companies still have further to go.

"Many companies are engaging in these types of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) efforts as performance-art theatrics," said Nicholas Pearce, clinical professor of management and organizations at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management.

Whether in sports or business, Pearce says one easy way for hiring managers to reduce the effects of implicit bias would be to require more diverse panels to conduct job interviews.

The NFL's ownership ranks are overwhelmingly white. Of the league's 32 teams, the only minorities to have a controlling ownership stake are the Jacksonville Jaguars' Shad Khan and the Buffalo Bills' Kim Pegula, who co-owns the team with her husband, Terry.

Jerod Mayo, a 35-year-old linebackers coach for the New England Patriots, has ambitions of one day becoming a head coach. And Mayo, who is Black, is optimistic that by the time he's ready, many of the challenges that veterans such as Lynn, Austin and Flores have faced, will be a thing of the past.

"You know, that's a beautiful day where we don't need the Rooney Rule."

Olympian flashes 'No War in Ukraine' sign after competing

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — A Ukrainian skeleton athlete flashed a small sign that read "No War in Ukraine" to the cameras as he finished a run at the Beijing Olympics on Friday night, a plea for peace at a time of rising tensions between his country and Russia.

Vladyslav Heraskevych's sign was printed on a blue-and-yellow piece of paper, matching the colors of his country's flag. He did not display the message after his second run of the night, which was his fourth and final run of the Olympics.

"It's my position. Like any normal people, I don't want war," Heraskevych said after he finished competing. "I want peace in my country, and I want peace in the world. It's my position, so I fight for that. I fight for peace."

The gesture came as Russia has amassed over 100,000 troops near Ukraine, stoking fears in the West that Moscow is planning an invasion. Russia insists it has no such designs but doesn't want Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to be allowed to join the western NATO alliance.

"In Ukraine, it's really nervous now," Heraskevych said. "A lot of news about guns, about weapons, what's to come in Ukraine, about some armies around Ukraine. It's not OK. Not in the 21st century. So I decided, before the Olympics, that I would show my position to the world."

Shortly after the race, the International Olympic Committee said there would be no repercussions for the athlete. There had been a question of whether the body might consider Heraskevych's act a violation of Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter. That rule, in part, states that "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

"This was a general call for peace. For the IOC the matter is closed," the Games' governing body said Friday night.

Heraskevych earlier said he was not concerned about any possible repercussions.

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"I hope the Olympics will (support) me in this situation. Nobody wants war," said Heraskevych, who was not a medal contender. "I hope it helps ... make peace in our country."

The IOC relaxed its rule against protests before the Tokyo Games, allowing athletes to express themselves politically before competitions start.

In the runup to these Games, many braced for potential protests against the host country, China, which has been accused of widespread abuses against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs. It has also come under fire for its policies toward Tibet, its crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong and the near-total disappearance from public view of tennis player Peng Shuai after she accused a former Communist Party official of sexual assault.

Concerns over human rights abuses led some countries to stage a diplomatic boycott of the Games, while Chinese organizers warned foreign athletes that any statement that goes against Chinese law could be punished.

Meanwhile, the heightened tensions over Ukraine cast a pall over last week's opening ceremony, when IOC President Thomas Bach implored participating countries to uphold the long-running Olympic Truce, which calls for a cessation of hostilities during the Games.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was in attendance when Bach spoke, has drawn closer to China and some have suggested he may not want to invade Ukraine during the Olympics so as to avoid embarrassing his ally, Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Why cage-free eggs becoming norm: It's what people want

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Without much fuss and even less public attention, the nation's egg producers are in the midst of a multibillion-dollar shift to cage-free eggs that is dramatically changing the lives of millions of hens in response to new laws and demands from restaurant chains.

In a decade, the percentage of hens in cage-free housing has soared from 4% in 2010 to 28% in 2020, and that figure is expected to more than double to about 70% in the next four years.

The change marks one of the animal welfare movement's biggest successes after years of battles with the food industry. The transition has cost billions of dollars for producers who initially resisted calls for more humane treatment of chickens but have since fully embraced the new reality. Pushed by voter initiatives in California and other states as well as pressure from fast food restaurant chains and major grocers, egg producers are freeing chickens from cages and letting them move throughout hen houses.

"What we producers failed to realize early on was that the people funding all the animal rights activist groups, they were our customers. And at the end of the day, we have to listen to our customers," said Marcus Rust, the CEO of Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms, the nation's second-largest egg producer.

Josh Balk, vice president for farm animal protection at the Humane Society of the United States, noted the abruptness of the about face. This is "an entire industry that at one point fought tooth and nail not to make any changes," he said.

To a great extent, the industry concluded it didn't have another choice.

Beginning in about 2015, McDonald's, Burger King and other national restaurant chains as well as dozens of grocers and food manufacturers responded to pressure from animal welfare groups by announcing their commitment to cage-free eggs. That was followed by laws requiring cage-free housing in California and similar rules in at least seven other states — Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.

McDonald's, which buys about 2 billion eggs annually, said it gradually shifted to cage-free after concluding it was desired by customers. Many companies widely promoted their move to cage-free as good for their brand's image.

Earlier, animal welfare groups, especially the Humane Society, had organized shareholder campaigns, conducted undercover investigations of chicken farms and filed federal complaints. A Gallup poll from 2015 found that nearly two-thirds of Americans thought animals deserved protection from harm and exploitation.

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Animal rights groups have made allowing animals room to move a priority in their campaigns but the results have been mixed. The pork industry is fighting to block the California initiative that required more space for breeding pigs and veal calves, and a state judge recently delayed implementation of new rules.

The egg industry also initially sought national standards that would allow larger cages but ultimately relented, said J. T. Dean, president of Iowa-based Versova, a leading egg producer. Egg companies house about 325 million laying hens, so shifting many out of cages where they couldn't move and into spaces where they could walk and roost was an expensive proposition, Dean said.

Besides building structures with more space, companies had to figure out how to feed birds that could move about and how to collect their eggs. More workers and more feed were also needed because hens moving around would work up more of an appetite.

The key, said Dean, was getting long-term commitments for guaranteed buyers of eggs at a higher price and then finding financing that would work for his company.

"When you start talking about needing billions of dollars, you have to try every avenue you can," Dean said.

The exact cost of the switch on egg producers is hard to estimate, in part because some updating of buildings and equipment is done periodically anyway. The cost to people at grocery stores is clearer.

Jayson Lusk, who heads the Agricultural Economics Department at Purdue University, found that after a mandatory shift on Jan. 1 to cage-free in California, the price of a dozen eggs in the state jumped by 72 cents — or 103% — over the average U.S. price, although the gap could shrink as the market adapts.

At Des Moines' Gateway Market, which specializes in organic and specialty food, shoppers said they think it's worth paying more for eggs if it improves lives for hens.

"I feel as though I want the chicken to be happy," said Mary Skinner, of Des Moines. "How would we feel if we were stuck in a cage?"

Gregg Fath, a Des Moines resident who enjoys eating three eggs for breakfast, said he thinks "people are learning to be more aware."

Looking years into the future, egg company leaders said they think the demand for cheaper eggs from caged hens will remain roughly 25% or more of the market, but Balk at the Humane Society said he expects it to become a tiny percentage of overall sales.

Balk notes that hundreds of national retailers, restaurants, grocers and food manufacturers either have implemented cage-free requirements or plan to do so within a few years.

"This is the future of every state in America," he said.

Beijing punishes traders in Olympic souvenir crackdown

BEIJING (AP) — Police are punishing Chinese traders for cashing in by reselling scarce dolls of Olympics mascot Bing Dwen Dwen at up to 10 times retail price.

Buyers stood in line overnight in freezing weather and emptied store shelves after the Winter Games opened Feb. 4. News reports say factory employees were called back from their Lunar New Year holiday to make more panda mascots.

Three people in Beijing were sentenced to unspecified "administrative penalties" for reselling souvenirs at prices deemed too high, police announced. Punishment can include detention, fines and confiscation of goods.

Plush toys of Bing Dwen Dwen, a panda in a clear plastic suit, sold for 192 yuan (\$30) at the Gongmei Emporium in central Beijing. The shop on the Wangfujing pedestrian mall and other authorized outlets also sell Olympics-themed pens, badges and other souvenirs.

Customers standing in line included traders who bought for clients or to resell at higher prices.

"It started to be sold a long time ago but didn't generate a buzz," said a customer at Gongmei who would give only her surname, Zhu. "Now the media are promoting it."

Gongmei and other shops posted signs saying they had as a few as 300 Bing Dwen Dwen dolls per day and buyers were allowed one each. Shoppers said they sold out in as little as 30 minutes.

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"The secondhand market is hot," said the newspaper Beijing News. "Bing Dwen Dwen has surged to 10 times the original price."

One afternoon, employees walked along a line of customers asking them not to stay overnight, when temperatures fall below freezing.

Reporters saw a trader taken away by police on Wangfujing after a teenager complained he was reselling an Olympic keychain for 20 yuan (\$3) above retail price.

Merchants online offer unauthorized Olympics-themed keychains, mobile phone cases and other goods with Bing Dwen Dwen's image.

Authorities have tried to calm frenzied buying by promising there will be adequate supplies and Olympics souvenirs will be on sale through June.

Some customers complain they paid deposits for souvenirs but traders disappeared with their money, according to news reports.

"Please consume rationally and do not buy at high prices from scalpers," the Beijing police department said on its social media account.

One of three companies identified by the press as being licensed to make Bing Dwen Dwen dolls, Beijing Yuanlong Yatu Culture Communication Co., referred questions to the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee. Phone calls to the other two producers weren't answered.

The organizing committee didn't respond to questions about how many dolls it planned to sell and whether any would be exported.

Olympics Live: IOC won't act on 'No War in Ukraine' sign

BEIJING (AP) — The Latest on the Beijing Winter Olympics:

The International Olympic Committee says there will be no repercussions for the Ukrainian skeleton athlete who flashed a small sign urging peace in his homeland at the end of a run.

The message Vladyslav Heraskevych displayed Friday read: "No War in Ukraine." The sign was printed on a blue-and-yellow piece of paper, matching the colors of Ukraine's flag.

It was possible that the IOC could have considered Heraskevych's act a violation of Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter. That rule, in part, states that "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

But the IOC characterized the sign late Friday as "a general call for peace." They consider the matter closed.

Heraskevych ultimately finished 18th in a field of 20.

Russia's stance is that it does not plan to invade Ukraine but wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet countries out of NATO. In an interview Thursday with NBC News, U.S. President Joe Biden repeated his warning that any Americans still in Ukraine should leave as soon as possible.

Germany has its first Olympic skeleton champion.

Christopher Grotheer was a runaway winner in the men's skeleton event that ended Friday night, the first German to win gold in the discipline where sliders navigate the icy chute headfirst at speeds that can exceed 80 mph.

Grotheer's four-run time over two days of competition was 4:01.01. Axel Jungk, another German, won the silver medal in 4:01.67 and Yan Wengang of China won the bronze in 4:01.77.

It was China's first Olympic medal in a sliding sport.

A Ukrainian skeleton athlete ended his third run at the Beijing Olympics by revealing a small sign to the cameras urging peace in his homeland.

The message from Vladyslav Heraskevych read: "No War in Ukraine." The sign was printed on a blue-and-yellow piece of paper, matching the colors of Ukraine's flag.

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Heraskevych's action came on the same day that Britain's defense secretary visited Moscow for talks on easing tensions amid massive Russian war games near Ukraine and a buildup of over 100,000 troops that has stoked Western fears of an invasion.

Russia's stance is that it does not plan to invade Ukraine but wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet countries out of NATO. In an interview Thursday with NBC News, U.S. President Joe Biden repeated his warning that any Americans still in Ukraine should leave as soon as possible.

Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands has defended her title in 1,000-meter short track speedskating. She set the world and Olympic records in the quarterfinals. She wasn't as fast in the final Friday, finishing in 1 minute, 28.391 seconds.

Choi Minjeong of South Korea took silver. Hanne Desmet of Belgium earned bronze. Arianna Fontana of Italy was penalized for a lane change that caused contact with American Kristen Santos. Both skaters went down and slid on their sides into the padding. Fontana was chasing an 11th career medal, having already won two medals in Beijing. Schulting was the silver medalist behind Fontana in the 500.

American Kristen Santos qualified fastest for the 1,000-meter final in short track speedskating at the Beijing Olympics.

Santos' time Friday of 1 minute, 26.783 seconds topped defending champion Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands. Schulting was timed in 1:28.108.

Schulting set the world and Olympic record of 1:26.514 earlier in the quarterfinals. Also making the A final later Friday are 10-time Olympic medalist Arianna Fontana of Italy, Choi Minjeong of South Korea and Hanne Desmet of Belgium. American teammates Maame Biney and Corinne Stoddard made the B final.

Defending Olympic champion Wu Dajing of China has easily qualified in the heats of 500-meter short track speedskating.

Also moving on to the quarterfinals on Sunday are Ren Ziwei of China, Steven Dubois of Canada and Hwang Daeheon of South Korea. Liu Shaolin Sandor and his brother, world champion Liu Shaoang, of Hungary moved on. Their American-born teammate, John-Henry Krueger, qualified, too.

Lee Juneseo of South Korea crashed and was penalized in his heat. American Ryan Pivrotto was eliminated.

Defending Olympic champion Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands has advanced to the semifinals of the 1,000 meters in short track speedskating.

Schulting broke the 10-year-old world record in her quarterfinal, winning in 1 minute, 26.514 seconds. She also lowered her own Olympic record set in the heats two days ago.

Arianna Fontana of Italy moved on in pursuit of her 11th career medal. She already won the 500 in Beijing and earned a silver in the mixed team relay.

Also moving on were Americans Kristen Santos, Maame Biney and Corinne Stoddard.

Nils van der Poel of Sweden has broken his own world record and captured his second gold medal of the Beijing Olympics with a dominating victory in men's 10,000-meter speedskating.

Van der Poel added to his victory in the 5,000, which was a much closer affair. On Friday, it was just him against the clock.

He crossed the line in 12 minutes, 30.74 seconds, easily breaking the world mark of 12:32.95 he set

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in February 2021, and was more than nine seconds ahead of the Olympic record set four years ago by Canada's Ted-Jan Bloemen.

The silver medal went to Patrick Roest of the Netherlands (12:44.59), the same spot he took behind van der Poel in the 5,000. The bronze went to Italy's Davide Ghiotto in 12:45.98.

Defending champion Bloemen finished eighth.

Van der Poel's victory came after he ripped the Dutch federation over a report that it was trying to influence ice makers at the oval to set up conditions that benefit its skaters.

While saying he had nothing against athletes from the Netherlands, van der Poel called the report a sign of "corruption" that needed to be investigated by the IOC and the International Skating Union.

Dutch officials shrugged off the complaints.

Finland's Iivo Niskanen maintained his classic skiing dominance, winning gold in the 15-kilometer cross country race at the Beijing Olympics.

Niskanen crossed the line and collapsed, spread eagle, with a time of 37 minutes, 54.8 seconds. It was his third Olympic gold. He won the 50-kilometer classic race in Pyeongchang and the classic team sprint at the 2014 Sochi Games.

Alexander Bolshunov of Russia won silver 23.2 seconds back, while Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo of Norway secured the bronze 37.5 seconds behind the Finn.

Both Bolshunov and Klaebo have won gold medals at the Beijing Olympics — Bolshunov in the skiathlon and Klaebo in the sprint.

Niskanen had a 28.8 second lead over Bolshunov at the 10.5-kilometer mark and was 52.5 seconds faster than Klaebo at that point in the race, and held it to the finish.

The defending champion U.S. women's hockey team rallied to defeat the Czech Republic 4-1 in the quarterfinals of the Beijing Olympics on Friday.

The Americans survived what would have been a major upset in a game where their offense continued to struggle.

The U.S., whose only losses in six previous Olympics have been against Canada (six times) and Sweden (once), managed just four goals on 59 shots.

Hilary Knight had a goal and assist, and Savannah Harmon and Kendall Coyne Schofield also scored for the Americans. Alex Cavallini stopped five shots.

Czech goalie Klara Peslarova was the star of the game, stopping 55 shots, including the first 22 she faced.

The Russian Olympic Committee says it will fight to keep the figure skating gold medal won by a team that included Kamila Valieva, who failed a doping test in December.

An urgent hearing at the Court of Arbitration for Sport will decide whether the 15-year-old can compete next week in the women's event at the Beijing Olympics, where she is the heavy favorite.

The decision about whether the team keeps its medal is a separate process that could take months.

The International Testing Agency confirmed reports that Valieva tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine at the Russian national championships in St. Petersburg six weeks ago.

Valieva will likely be disqualified from her Russian national title in December but could still be cleared to compete in the individual Olympic competition.

"The Russian Olympic Committee will take comprehensive measures to defend the rights and interests of the ROC team and to keep the honestly-won Olympic gold medal (in the team event)," the ROC said in a statement. It added that a doping test Valieva took while at the Olympics came back clean.

After winning a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics, U.S. figure skater Nathan Chen said he's looking forward to going back to school and is undecided about what's next for him in the sport.

Chen said at a Friday press conference that his immediate next step after the Winter Games is getting

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ready to resume his studies in August at Yale University, where he is majoring in statistics and data science. He's been on leave since the fall of 2020, when the pandemic began.

The "Quad King" said he's unsure if he'll compete at the world championships next month in France, and undecided on whether or not he'll set goals to master even more difficult jumps after landing five quads in his winning free skate program Thursday.

It's not uncommon for figure skaters to skip the world championships in an Olympic year, choosing to take a break from a long grind that begins early in the fall and continues with the Grand Prix season rather than continuing to train.

Chen will skate next in the Figure Skating Gala Exhibition on the closing day of the Winter Games on Feb. 20.

The Czech Republic became the sixth women's hockey team, and first since Italy at the 2006 Torino Games, to fail to register a shot on net in a period at the Winter Games.

The Czech Republic, making their Olympics debut, was out-shot 18-0 by the United States in the opening period of their quarterfinal playoff game. Despite the lopsided edge in shots, Czech goalie Klara Peslarova stopped all 18 shots to keep the game scoreless through 20 minutes.

The Czech team scored on their second shot on goal 4:59 into the second period. Hilary Knight tied it 48 seconds later.

Italy was held without a shot twice in a period during the 2006 Games, once in the third period of an 11-0 loss to Sweden on Feb. 13, and also two days earlier against Canada

Japan was held without a shot in a period twice, and China once during the 1998 Nagano Games.

Lara Gut-Behrami of Switzerland is in first place in the women's super-G at the Beijing Games and on the brink of capturing her first Olympic gold medal with only lower-ranked skiers remaining.

Two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin is out of the medal places in ninth. The American failed to finish in either of her two previous races in Beijing.

It would be Gut-Behrami's first Olympic gold and comes after two successive fourth-place finishes in super-G at the Winter Games.

The 30-year-old has two bronze medals from the Olympics, including one from Monday's giant slalom.

Mirjam Puchner of Austria is 0.22 seconds behind in second in her first Olympic race and Michelle Gisin is 0.30 behind her Swiss teammate in third.

Defending champion Ester Ledecka of the Czech Republic failed in her bid to win an unprecedented back-to-back double. She is 0.43 behind in fifth.

An urgent hearing at the Court of Arbitration for Sport will decide whether Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva can compete in the women's event at the Beijing Olympics, where she is a heavy favorite.

The International Testing Agency said Friday it will lead an appeal on behalf of the IOC against a decision by Russia's anti-doping agency to lift a provisional ban imposed on the 15-year-old Valieva for failing a doping test in December.

The ITA confirms reports that Valieva tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine at the Russian national championships in December.

The ITA says the positive test was flagged by a laboratory on Tuesday after Valieva helped the Russians win the team event but before the medal ceremony, which was then postponed. Whether the Russians will lose their gold medal in the team event will be decided later.

Valieva has been continuing to practice in Beijing. For the second straight day, she worked out early at Capital Indoor Stadium as if nothing was amiss. She was flanked during the 45-minute session by Russian teammates Alexandra Trusova and world champion Anna Shcherbakova, both of whom are also coached by Eteri Tutberidze.

Despite missing on that combo at the Rostelecom Cup last fall, when she did a quad-double, Valieva still set a world record there for her free skate. She also set the world record for the short program and total

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score at the same Grand Prix event in Russia.

Mikaela Shiffrin completed the super-G at the Beijing Olympics way out of medal contention — but for the first time in three races at the 2022 Games, she made it across the finish line.

The two-time Olympic Alpine gold medalist crossed the line at the bottom of a course known as The Rock in an unofficial time of 1 minute, 14.30 seconds. That left the 26-year-old American more than a half-second behind early leader Lara Gut-Behrami of Switzerland.

That put Shiffrin in eighth place after only 11 of the 44 entrants had taken their turns down the slope.

Shiffrin had never entered a super-G at an Olympics before, although she did win a gold in the event at the 2019 world championship and a bronze at last year's worlds.

She failed to finish her opening run in the two-run events that preceded the super-G in Beijing: the giant slalom and the slalom. She has won both at past Olympics.

Japan's Ayumu Hirano has won gold with a boundary-pushing run in the men's halfpipe at the Beijing Olympics. Three-time gold medalist Shaun White was fourth in what he has said would be his final competition.

There was no doubt over the winner after Hirano's electric performance as the last rider to go. His run included an intricate and unprecedented series of flips and spins that pushed a sport obsessed with progression to new heights. His score of 96 reflected that and the two-time Olympic silver medalist moved past Scotty James of Australia. Jan Scherrer of Switzerland took bronze.

White fell on the final run of a career that's seen the American star win three Olympic titles. He lifted up his goggles and waved to the crowd on his way down the halfpipe. He teared up as the sparse crowd bid adieu and his fellow riders lined up to hug him.

"I wanted it," White said. "My legs were giving out on me every hit."

The stage was being set for some controversy after the second run. James took over the lead with his second attempt. Hirano followed with an impressive run that included the difficult-to-do triple cork, but wasn't rewarded by the judges. The crowd booed and social media was buzzing.

Shaun White remained in fourth place after his second run in his final Winter Games as Scotty James of Australia jumped into the lead.

The three-time Olympic champion White scored an 85 and was momentarily in second before strong runs by James and Ayumu Hirano of Japan. There's one run to go.

The 35-year-old White executed his same run as he did in the opening, including his patented Double McTwist 1260 and then a frontside 1260 at the end, but this time made no mistakes. He pumped his board in excitement after finishing.

Hirano turned in the most difficult run but couldn't surpass James. The sparse crowd booed over the scoring by the judges. The announcer called it one of the greatest runs ever.

First-run leader Taylor Gold fell to fifth.

American snowboarder Taylor Gold grabbed the lead after the first run of the Olympic halfpipe competition, with Shaun White sitting in fourth place in his final Winter Games appearance.

Gold scored an 81.75, earning the judge's respect with his stylistic performance in the first of three runs. He may not have gone as big as other riders but was technically solid all the way through his run.

White started off strong in his bid for a fourth Olympic gold medal. The 35-year-old executed his patented Double McTwist 1260 and then a frontside 1260 at the end. His only real mistake was landing on his heel edge after his second trick, which slowed him down.

Ayumu Hirano of Japan set the bar high by landing his difficult-to-do triple cork 1440, which would've been good enough for first, but he fell later on the run. Hirano sat in ninth place.

Many of the top riders struggled on their opening run, including Scotty James of Australia. Wearing his trademark red boxing-glove mittens -- he views competitions as a title fight -- he fell on his first run.

Mikaela Shiffrin is ready to have some “fun” when she returns to Olympic action in the super-G.. Shiffrin posted on Twitter early Friday morning in China to say she’s grateful “to have the opportunity to refocus on a new race, in the sport that I love so much.”

The two-time Olympic gold medalist is off to a rough start at the Beijing Games.

She went off-course within about 10 seconds in the giant slalom on Monday and after about half as much time in the slalom on Wednesday.

“I’ve had a lot of support over the last 48 hours,” Shiffrin wrote Friday, “and I have to thank everyone for that.”

The 26-year-old American won each of those events at past Games.

She has never entered an Olympic super-G before but did win that race at the 2019 world championships.

Doping hearing to decide Russian skater’s Olympic fate

By GRAHAM DUNBAR and JAMES ELLINGWORTH AP Sports Writers

BEIJING (AP) — Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva’s right to compete in the women’s event at the Beijing Olympics will be decided at an urgent hearing at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

Both the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Testing Agency — on behalf of the IOC — said Friday they would fight the decision by Russia’s anti-doping agency to allow the 15-year-old Valieva to skate. The Russian agency provisionally banned Valieva on Tuesday because she failed a doping test in December. After an appeal, the agency lifted the ban Wednesday.

Valieva is the heavy favorite in her event, which begins Tuesday. She set world record scores this season and landed the first quad jump by a woman at an Olympics as the Russian athletes competing as ROC, short for Russian Olympic Committee, won the team event. The ROC said it will fight to keep that gold medal, and Valieva has passionate support from the Kremlin.

The ITA confirmed reports that Valieva tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine at the Russian national championships in St. Petersburg six weeks ago.

The positive test was flagged by a laboratory in Sweden only on Tuesday — the day after Valieva helped the Russians win the team event and just hours before the medal ceremony, which was then postponed. Whether the Russians will lose that gold medal will be decided later.

The Russian anti-doping agency said it was told the delay was caused by the coronavirus, with lab staff in Sweden having been either ill or in isolation. The agency, known as RUSADA, added that it was also investigating Valieva’s entourage “to identify all the circumstances involved in a possible breach of anti-doping rules.”

It also said it was first told of the positive result by lab on Monday, not Tuesday, as reported by the ITA.

The hospital that oversees the Swedish lab said in an emailed statement that “the laboratory is not allowed in any way to comment on a pending case,” when asked by The Associated Press to explain the weeklong delay in testing the sample. It is not clear when Russian anti-doping officials sent the sample or when it arrived at the lab.

Valieva was hit with an immediate interim ban from the Beijing Olympics by RUSADA, which oversaw testing at the national championships. On Wednesday, a RUSADA disciplinary panel upheld her appeal and overturned the skater’s interim ban.

The rushed hearing at CAS will only consider the question of the provisional ban at these Olympics, said the International Testing Agency, which is prosecuting on behalf of the IOC. The ITA was formed by the IOC in 2018 in the wake of the Russian doping scandal to manage international testing and to design the anti-doping program for the Olympics.

“The IOC will exercise its right to appeal and not to wait for the reasoned decision by RUSADA, because a decision is needed before the next competition the athlete is due to take part in,” the testing agency said.

As a 15-year-old, Valieva has protections in the World Anti-Doping Code. Under the guidelines, she could ultimately receive just a simple reprimand.

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When a minor is implicated in doping rules violations, the rules say her entourage, such as coaches and team doctors, must be investigated, too. That isn't typically the case for athletes 18 and over.

"Such cases are not helpful to the Games," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said. "These cases need to be prosecuted properly, taken care of properly and due process needs to be gone through. Otherwise I think the confidence of people would be even less. So I think it's very important for everybody concerned, not least the 15-year-old athlete that's concerned, that we have due process, that it's seen to be done properly and that people can have confidence in the decisions that are taken."

Valieva will likely be stripped of her Russian national title from December.

The Russian Olympic Committee said it would defend Valieva and fight to keep the team event gold she contributed to. It added that a doping test Valieva took while at the Olympics came back clean. All medalists are tested at the Olympics.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was vocal in calling for support for Valieva.

"We're waiting for the proceedings to end. And infinitely, absolutely infinitely, and completely and in any case we are supporting our Kamila Valieva," he told reporters Friday.

"And we call on everyone to support her. And we say to Kamila: 'Kamila, do not hide your face, you are a Russian woman, walk proudly everywhere and most of all, compete and win against everyone.'"

For the second straight day, Valieva worked out early at the main rink inside Capital Indoor Stadium as if nothing was amiss. She was flanked by Russian teammates Alexandra Trusova and world champion Anna Shcherbakova, both of whom are also coached by Eteri Tutberidze.

During the 45-minute session, Valieva threw down four quad jumps, including one in a potentially high-scoring combination with a triple salchow. She returned later in the day for another practice.

Despite missing on that combo at the Rostelecom Cup in November, when she did a quad-double, Valieva still set a world record there for her free skate. She also set the world record for the short program and total score at the same Grand Prix event in Russia.

A ruling on the Olympic team event likely will take much longer, preventing any medals from being awarded in Beijing. RUSADA will first investigate the full merits of the doping case and give a judgment. That verdict would lead to an appeal and could also end up at CAS.

"The decision on the results of the ROC team in the Team Figure Skating event can be taken by the ISU only after a final decision on the full merits of the case has been taken," the ITA said.

The latest doping case involving a Russian athlete could have broader implications for the country's sports program.

Russia is competing in the Beijing Olympics as ROC without its anthem or flag. That's because of the fallout from years of doping disputes including steroid use and cover-ups at the 2014 Winter Olympics, which Russia hosted.

Another scandal could extend its two-year ban beyond the scheduled December end.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 12, the 43rd day of 2022. There are 322 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 12, 1809, Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, was born in a log cabin in Hardin (now LaRue) County, Kentucky.

On this date:

In 1554, Lady Jane Grey, who had claimed the throne of England for nine days, and her husband, Guildford Dudley, were beheaded after being condemned for high treason.

In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded.

In 1912, Pu Yi (poo yee), the last emperor of China, abdicated, marking the end of the Qing Dynasty.

In 1914, groundbreaking took place for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (A year later on this

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date, the cornerstone was laid.)

In 1973, Operation Homecoming began as the first release of American prisoners of war from the Vietnam conflict took place.

In 1983, composer-pianist Eubie Blake, who wrote such songs as "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Memories of You," died in Brooklyn, New York, five days after turning 100.

In 1999, the Senate voted to acquit President Bill Clinton of perjury and obstruction of justice.

In 2000, Charles M. Schulz, creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip, died in Santa Rosa, California, at age 77.

In 2002, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic (sloh-BOH'-dahn mee-LOH'-shuh-vich) went on trial in The Hague, accused of war crimes (he died in 2006 before the trial could conclude).

In 2006, figure skater Michelle Kwan effectively retired from competition as she withdrew from the Turin Olympics due to injury (she was replaced on the U.S. team by Emily Hughes). Snowboarder Shaun White beat American teammate Danny Kass to win the Olympic gold medal.

In 2019, Mexico's most notorious drug lord, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, was convicted in New York of running an industrial-scale smuggling operation; a jury whose members' identities were kept secret as a security measure had deliberated for six days. (Guzman is serving a life sentence at the federal supermax prison facility in Florence, Colorado.)

In 2020, Holland America Line said a cruise ship, the MS Westerdam, which had been barred from docking by four governments because of fears of the coronavirus, would arrive the next day in Cambodia. In Japan, officials confirmed 39 new cases on a cruise ship that had been quarantined at Yokohama, bringing the total number of cases on the Diamond Princess to 174.

Ten years ago: State governor Henrique Capriles won Venezuela's first-ever opposition presidential primary by a wide margin. Adele emerged as the top winner at the Grammy Awards, winning six trophies, including record and song of the year (for "Rolling in the Deep") and album of the year (for "21"), in a ceremony shadowed by the death of Whitney Houston the day before.

Five years ago: Northern California authorities ordered the evacuation of some 200,000 people from communities near the Oroville Dam, where an emergency spillway was in danger of flooding. (After officials drained water from the lake behind the dam and made emergency repairs, residents were allowed to return.) At the Grammy Awards, Adele took home all five awards she was nominated for, including album ("25"), as well as record and song of the year ("Hello"). Grammy-winning jazz singer Al Jarreau, 76, died at a Los Angeles hospital, just days after announcing his retirement from touring because of exhaustion.

One year ago: Lawyers for Donald Trump defended him against impeachment at his Senate trial by accusing Democrats of waging a campaign of "hatred" against the former president and manipulating his words in the lead-up to the deadly siege of the U.S. Capitol. The nation's top public health agency said in-person schooling could be done safely amid the pandemic, with mask use, social distancing and other strategies; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also said vaccination of teachers, while important, was not a prerequisite for reopening.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Costa-Gavras is 89. Basketball Hall of Famer Bill Russell is 88. Actor Joe Don Baker is 86. Author Judy Blume is 84. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak is 80. Country singer Moe Bandy is 78. Actor Maud Adams is 77. Actor Cliff DeYoung is 76. Actor Michael Ironside is 72. Rock musician Steve Hackett is 72. Rock singer Michael McDonald is 70. Actor Joanna Kerns is 69. Actor Zach Grenier is 68. Actor-talk show host Arsenio Hall is 66. Actor John Michael Higgins is 59. Actor Raphael Sbarge is 58. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh is 57. Actor Christine Elise is 57. Actor Josh Brolin is 54. Singer Chynna Phillips is 54. Rock musician Jim Creeggan (Barenaked Ladies) is 52. Actor Jesse Spencer is 43. Rapper Gucci Mane is 42. Actor Sarah Lancaster is 42. Actor Christina Ricci is 42. Actor Jennifer Stone is 29. Actors Baylie and Rylie Cregut (TV: "Raising Hope") are 12.