

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Wednesday, Feb. 16

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Thursday, Feb. 17

Parent-Teacher Conference, 4-8 p.m.
Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

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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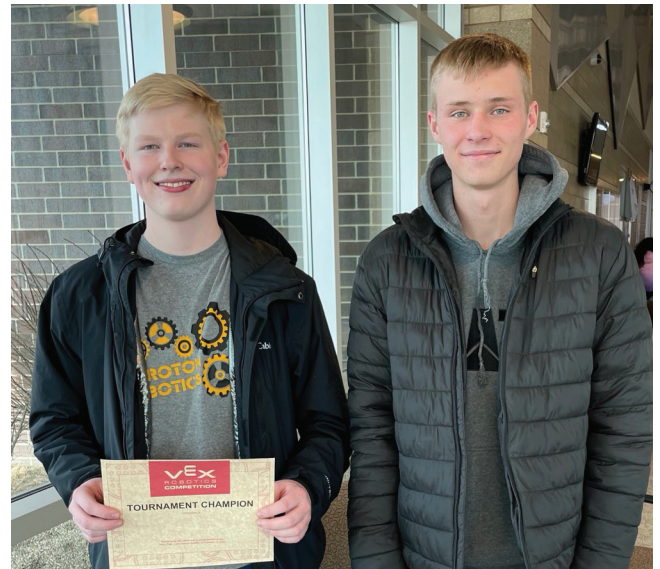
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Happy ending to a brutal battle for the FIRST-PLACE trophy to Groton Robotics Senior team!

Groton Robotics sent 4 teams down to Sioux Falls for their last regular season tournament held at the CTE (Career and Technical Academy) on Saturday, February 12th competing against 12 other teams. G-Force 9050A (Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll) Gear Heads 9050B (Jack Dinger, Ethan Clark, Axel Warrington) Galaxy 9050E (Kiana Sanders, Corbin Weismantel, River Pardick and Isaac Higgins) and the Gladiators 9050F (Garrett Schultz, Bradyn Wienk).

The competition started off with 26 qualifying matches, with the 17 teams competing 6 times. At the end of the 26 qualifying matches G-Force ranked 4th, Gladiator's 9th, Gear Heads 12th, Galaxy 17th.

Lots of demolition derby style battling occurred during this tournament and near tipping of robots. Defensive moves were seen frequently throughout the day by stealing mobile goals right out of another robots' hands to tipping over another team's platform causing all their hard-earned points to slide down their platform. These are all legal moves, but in the last 30 seconds of the match it's illegal to touch another team's platform, if robots do, they will be disqualified and earn 0 points for that match.



Tournament champions! Congratulations to our Seniors Travis Townsend and Jace Kroll! (Courtesy photo)



Jace Kroll and Travis Townsend from G-Force verifying their winning score of the tournament finals! They were able to get a robot and two mobile goals on their robot balanced on their platform with just seconds remaining! (Courtesy photo)

Gladiators, Galaxy, and Gear Heads journey for the day ended in the quarter finals.

Robotics is a very self-motivating, self-learning, mentoring program in which games and rules change every year. Kids can enter in 6th grade, but during the first couple years their role is shadowing and learning from the older teams. This can get very



Groton' G-Force (blue)-Jace Kroll and Travis Townsend competing against Groton's Gladiators (red)-Corbin Weismantel and River Pardick during a qualifying match. (Courtesy photo)

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frustrating, but as the years pass, they learn more and become more independent. The process takes a lot of patience and motivation. These kids are handed pieces of metal, wires, screws, nuts, bolts and a computer in which they have to learn how to build and program their robot. The not knowing how to in the beginning makes the success as Juniors and Seniors a wonderful thing to watch unfold for parents and coaches.

Congratulations to all the robotists who participated! Groton Robotics will be headed down to Rapid City for the South Dakota VRC State Championship, held at Douglas High School on Saturday, February 26th. For more information check out the Vex VRC robotics website, download the VEX via app and follow Groton Tiger Robotics on Facebook. Thanks to all who support Groton Robotics!

Submitted by Groton Robotics



Axel Warrington, Ethan Clark, Jack Dinger paired with Garrett Schultz and Bradyn Wienk attempting to get robots and goals up on the platform during a match. (Courtesy photo)

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Groton Area boys fall to Sisseton

The Northeast Conference race got more interesting as Sisseton handed Groton Area its second conference loss. Several teams now have two losses in the conference as Groton Area watched its 16-point lead fall in the second half as the Redmen pulled out a 54-53 win.

The Tigers held a 15-9 lead after the first quarter and a 35-22 lead at halftime. The Tigers jumped out on top, 40-24 early in the third quarter before the bottom fell out. While Groton Area had five turnovers in the first half, they had four in the third period and five in the fourth. Groton's lead dwindled to five after the third period, 46-21. The Redmen tied the game at 46 with 5:38 left in the game, but Groton still held the upper hand. Then its 50 second left, Sisseton took the lead for the first time, 54-53. Sisseton turned the ball over with six seconds left in the game but a last second shot did not materialize and Sisseton hung on for the win.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 17 points which included five three-pointers in the first half. Kaden Kurtz had 14, Jacob Zak 10, Jayden Zak six, Tate Larson five and Logan Ringgenberg had one.

Ty Langager was the main threat for Sisseton and he solely kept the Redmen in the game and finished as high scorer of the game with 22 points. Riley BraveBull had 13, Mikah Hamm eight, Jairus Chance four, Nate Tchida three and Parker Hanson and Jason Fisher each had two points.

Lane Tietz - 17 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal, 2 fouls.
Kaden Kurtz - 14 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal, 1 foul.
Jacob Zak - 10 points, 6 rebounds, 5 assists, 3 steals, 2 fouls.
Jayden Zak - 6 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist.
Tate Larson - 5 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assist, 2 fouls.
Logan Ringgenberg - 1 point, 2 rebounds.
Wyatt Hearnen - 1 rebound, 3 fouls.
Taylor Diegel - 1 assist.

Groton Area made 12 of 26 field goals for 44 percent, eight of 18 three-pointers for 44 percent, five of nine free throws for 56 percent, had 20 rebounds, 14 turnovers, 12 assists, five steals and 10 team fouls.

Sisseton made 23 of 50 field goals for 46 percent, two of four free throws for 50 percent, had 12 team fouls and 11 turnovers.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Dacotah Bank, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Groton Ford, MIke-N-Jo's Body-N-Glass, John Sieh Agency and Matt's Tree Service.

Sisseton won the junior varsity game, 41-35. Logan Ringgenberg had 13 points while Taylor Diegel had eight, Cade Larson and Keagan Tracy each had four, Holden Sippel had two and Dillon Abeln and Colby Dunker each had one point.

The junior varsity game livestream was sponsored by Ed and Connie Stauch.

Groton Area won the C game, 40-12. The Tigers led at the quarterstops at 10-2, 19-4 and 27-8.

Rutgear605 was the sponsor of the livestream on GDILIVE.COM.

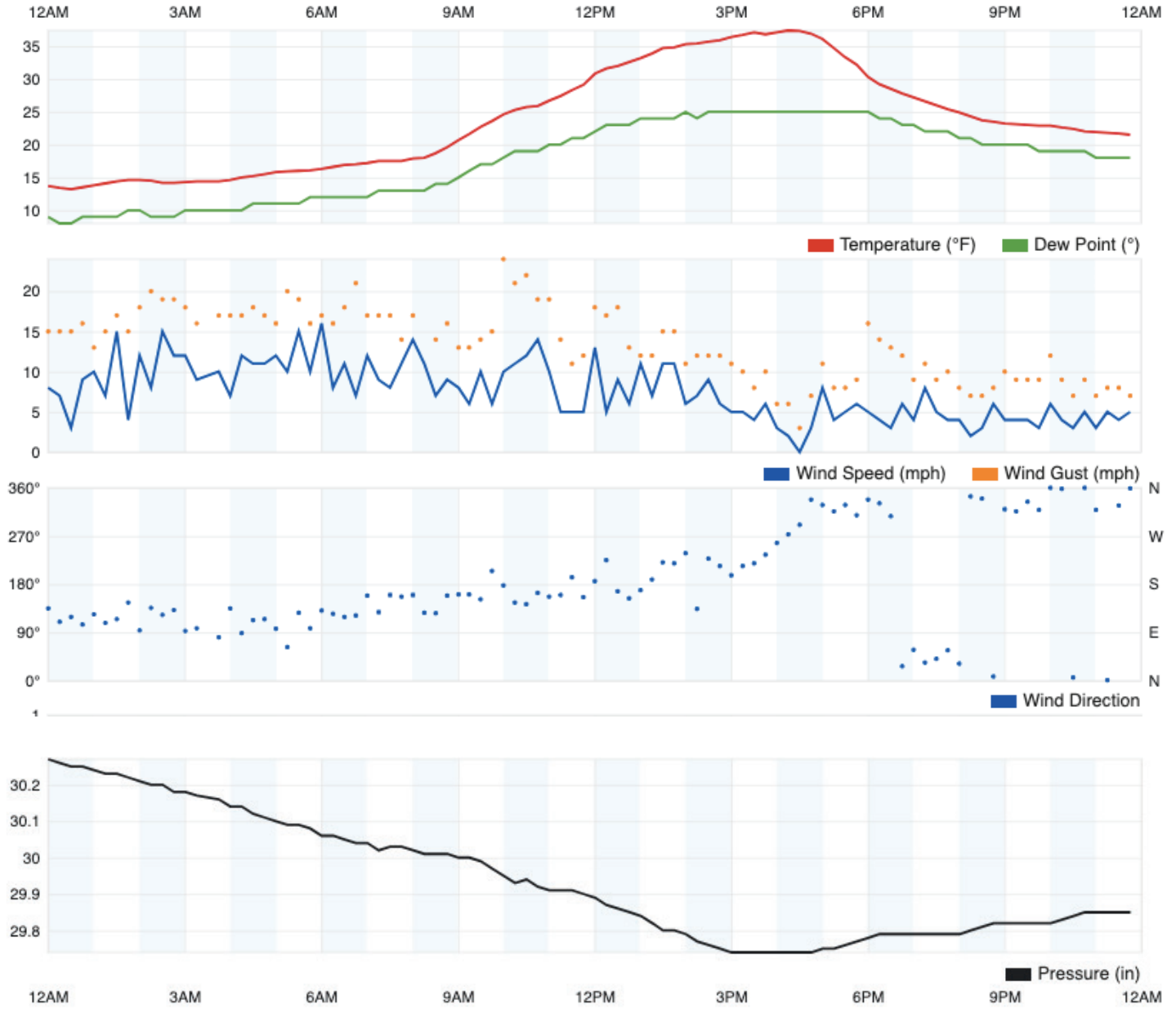
Caden McInerney led the Tigers with seven points followed by Keagan Tracy and Ryder Johnson with six each, Dillon Abeln and Gage Sippel each had four points, Turner Thompson and Logan Warrington each had three points, JD Schwan, Blake Pauli and Karter Moody each had two points and Holden Sippel made a free throw. Warrington made the only three-pointer in the game.

Dana BraveBull and Gage Hanson each had four points for Sisseton while Kade Hruby and Christian Sheppherd each had two points.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



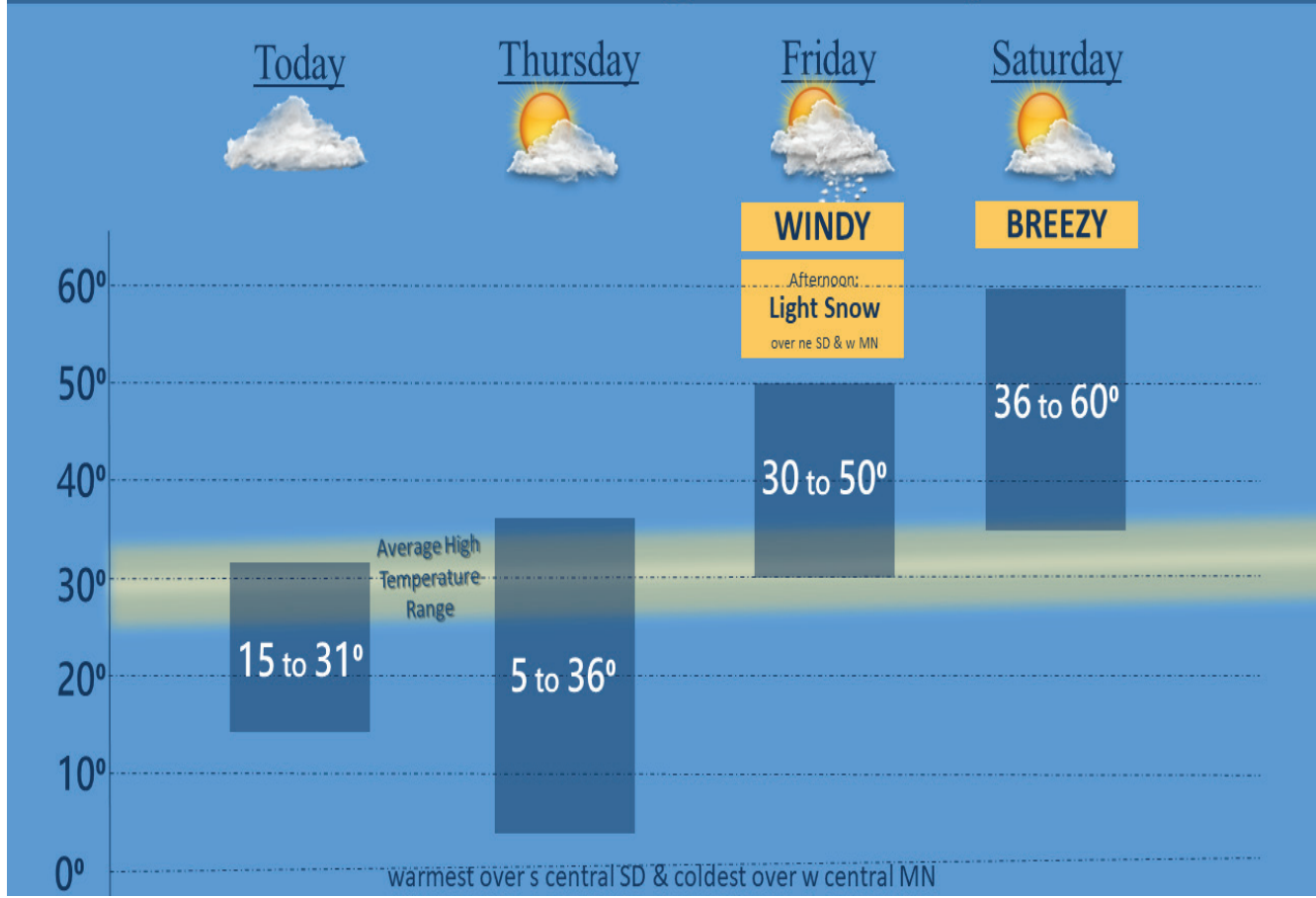
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| Today | Tonight | Thursday | Thursday Night | Friday |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Partly Sunny then Mostly Cloudy and Blustery | Mostly Cloudy | Mostly Sunny | Mostly Cloudy | Partly Sunny and Breezy |
| High: 22 °F | Low: -7 °F | High: 19 °F | Low: 13 °F | High: 37 °F |

Brief Cool Down through Thursday

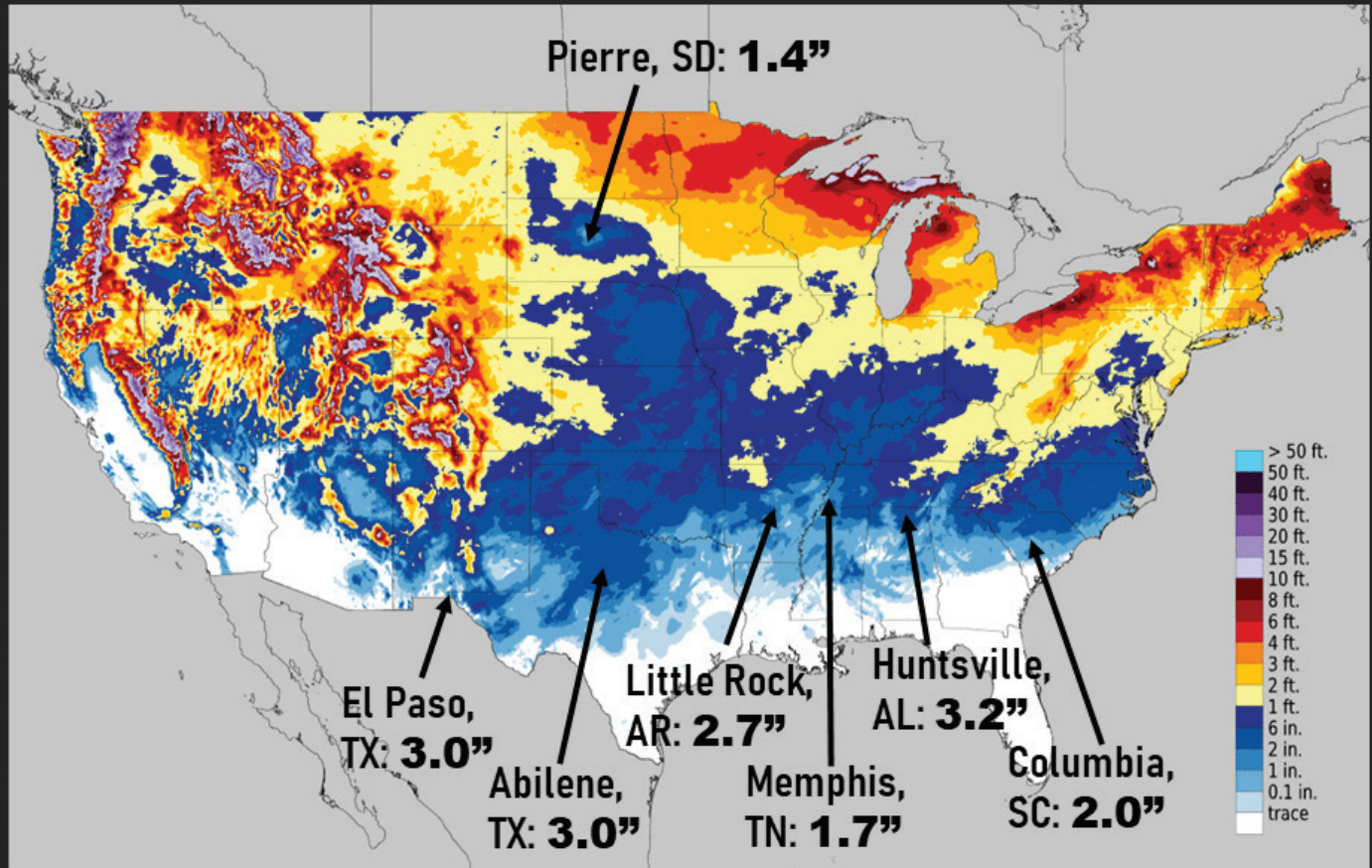
National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD 



The brief cool down will continue through Thursday, followed by warmer air and stronger winds for Friday and Saturday. There's a slight chance of light snow over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota Friday. The warmest air will remain over central South Dakota.

Snowfall 2021-2022 Cold Season

National snowfall analysis from Sept 30th, 2021 – Feb 15th, 2022



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

With just 1.4", Pierre has had less snow so far this season than many cities across the southern United States! The next best chance for accumulating snow across central SD is early next week - we'll keep you updated. Map from <https://www.nohrsc.noaa.gov/snowfall/>.

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Today in Weather History

February 16th, 1969: Freezing drizzle and thick fog formed a heavy glaze on utility lines resulting in several broken power and telephone lines across northern South Dakota.

1898: A series of wildfires swept through South Carolina on February 16-17, 1898. Unconfirmed reports indicate that 14 people were killed, numerous homes and sawmills burned, and up to 3,000,000 acres of forest land were charred from Aiken County, S.C. to Chatham County, N.C., and east to Marlboro County, S.C. There were probably a dozen wildfires raging at the same time driven by a 40 mph wind.

1903: Pokegama Dam, Minnesota saw three straight days with low temperatures 50° below zero or colder, including 59° below zero on the 15th. The minus 59° established a state record for the lowest measured temperature in Minnesota. Pokegama Dam held the record until February 2nd, 1996 when the temperature fell to 60° below zero at Tower.

1943: Record cold prevailed in the northeastern United States. The mercury plunged to 37°F below zero at Concord, New Hampshire, and to -39 degrees at Portland, Maine. The morning low of -32°F at Falls Village, Connecticut, established a state record. The Connecticut record low was tied on January 22nd, 1961, when Coventry fell to -32°F.

1989: A surge of arctic air on February 16-17th produced all-time record high barometric pressure readings of 31.08 inches at Duluth, Minnesota, 30.97 inches at Chicago, Illinois, and 30.94 inches at South Bend, Indiana. Readings of 31.00 inches at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and 30.98 inches at Rockford, Illinois, tied their all-time records. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the southeastern U.S. Highs of 81 degrees at Athens, Georgia, 87 degrees at Charleston, South Carolina, 85 degrees at Macon, Georgia, and 86 degrees at Savannah, Georgia, were records for February.

1899 - Washington D.C. received 1.26 inches of rain in six hours atop a snow cover more than 30 inches deep making it the soggiest day of record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1903 - The temperature at Pokegama Dam MN plunged to 59 degrees below zero to establish a state record. (David Ludlum)

1943 - Record cold prevailed in the northeastern U.S. The mercury plunged to 43 degrees below zero at Concord NH, and to -39 degrees at Portland ME. The morning low of -32 degrees at Falls Village CT established a state record, yet the afternoon high that day was 20 degrees above zero. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm produced snow and ice in the Ohio Valley and the Appalachian Region. Snowfall totals in Virginia ranged up to 14 inches around Farmville, while Granville NC reported eight inches of sleet and ice. Freezing rain in eastern North Carolina caused extensive damage to power lines. Gales lashed the coast of Virginia and North Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Santa Ana winds in southern California gusted to 50 mph in the Rancho Cucamonga area. Quiet weather prevailed across the rest of the nation. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A surge of arctic air produced all-time record high barometric pressure readings of 31.08 inches at Duluth MN, 30.97 inches at Chicago IL and 30.94 inches at South Bend IN. Readings of 31.00 inches at Milwaukee WI and 30.98 inches at Rockford IL tied their all-time records. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the southeastern U.S. Highs of 81 degrees at Athens GA, 87 degrees at Charleston SC, 85 degrees at Macon GA, and 86 degrees at Savannah GA were records for February. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Strong thunderstorms developing ahead of an arctic cold front produced severe weather across the southeastern U.S. between mid morning on the 15th and early evening on the 16th. Thunderstorms spawned thirteen tornadoes, including one which, prior to dawn on the 16th, injured eleven persons near Carrollton GA. There were also 121 reports of large hail or damaging winds. A late afternoon thunderstorm on the 15th produced baseball size hail at Jackson MS, and prior to dawn on the 16th, a thunderstorm produced high winds which injured four persons at Goodwater AL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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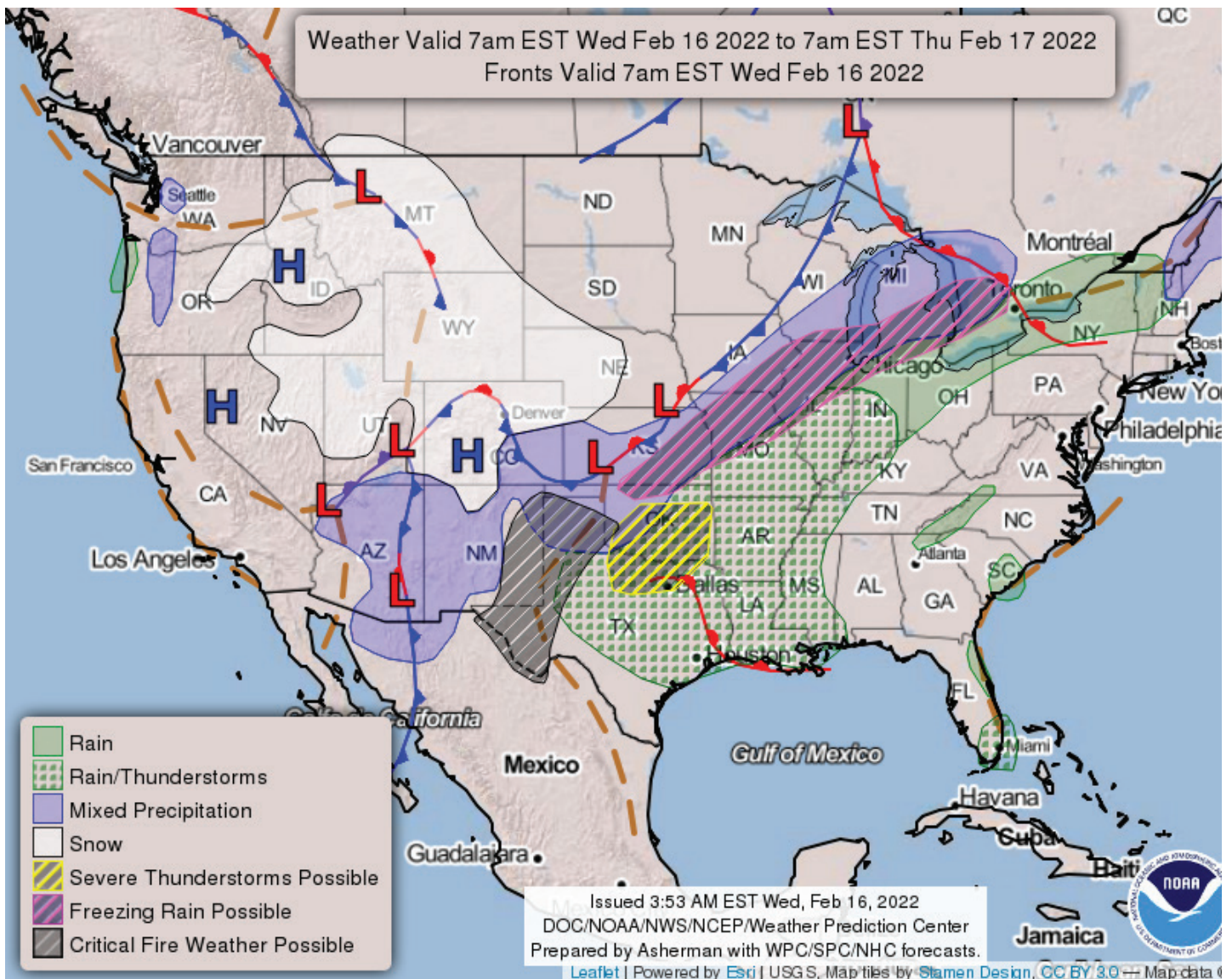
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 4:35 PM
Low Temp: 13 °F at 12:24 AM
Wind: 24 mph at 5:32 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 1981
Record Low: -40 in 1936
Average High: 29°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.33
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.88
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 6:02:29 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:28:45 AM



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Making His Message Known

God chose many ways to make Himself known. We hear Him speaking through His prophets and writing His standards in stone. There was a bush that burst into flames and birds that brought food to starving people. There were clouds that led people in the day and pillars of fire that led them at night. Angels were sent to speak on His behalf and announce the birth of His Son. A sea was once parted and His "chosen" walked through it to safety. In many ways and on many separate occasions, He did what He had to do to get the attention of people to hear or see His message of love, salvation, and hope.

But, one method that no Christian can ignore is contained in the final words of Jesus: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel." If we remove the letter "p" we have the word "reach." Then, if we remove the letter "r" we have the word "each." So, Jesus is commanding us to "preach" His message so that we may "reach" "each" person He brings into our lives.

The Psalmist took this responsibility seriously. So seriously, in fact, that he started at the "top" of the ladder: "I will speak of Your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame!" Imagine him standing before a king and saying, "Excuse me, Sir, but I need to begin our conversation with a message from the Lord. It is rather brief and will only take a few minutes."

The limitless love of God is not limited by one's title or address. His message is for kings and servants, family members and friends. Wherever we are, we are to preach His message.

Prayer: Lord, it is difficult to share Your Word. But if we take our responsibility seriously, we have no choice. Embolden us so we might speak without shame. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame. Psalm 119:46

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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

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 62, Watertown 43

Aberdeen Christian 57, Langford 42

Belle Fourche 60, Douglas 56

Bison 68, Takini 54

Brandon Valley 58, Tea Area 49

Burke 76, Colome 55

Castlewood 59, Sioux Valley 52

Chester 72, Arlington 45

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 83, St. Francis Indian 50

Clark/Willow Lake 72, Britton-Hecla 45

Colman-Egan 46, Lake Preston 37

Corsica/Stickney 55, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 38

Dakota Valley 89, Sioux City, West, Iowa 41

Dell Rapids St. Mary 63, Centerville 51

Deubrook 57, Webster 45

Ethan 77, Freeman 42

Faulkton 56, Miller 28

Flandreau 78, Baltic 48

Freeman Academy/Marion 65, Alcester-Hudson 23

Garretson 60, Parker 43

Hamlin 71, Deuel 44

Harding County 78, New England, N.D. 44

Howard 49, Canistota 42

Ipswich 66, Hitchcock-Tulare 37

Irene-Wakonda 57, Bridgewater-Emery 43

Lakota Tech 67, Crow Creek 54

Lemmon 61, Faith 55

Lennox 76, Beresford 50

Leola/Frederick 64, Waverly-South Shore 44

Lyman 45, Chamberlain 42

McCook Central/Montrose 57, Tri-Valley 52

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62, Bon Homme 40

Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 76, Great Plains Lutheran 42

Pierre 66, Brookings 48

Rapid City Christian 58, Spearfish 55

Redfield 70, Northwestern 59

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 65, Harrisburg 53

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 56, Sioux Falls Lincoln 51

Sioux Falls Washington 71, Mitchell 66

Sisseton 54, Groton Area 53

St. Thomas More 53, Hot Springs 20

Standing Rock, N.D. 55, McLaughlin 54

Stanley County 46, Mobridge-Pollock 36

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Sully Buttes 72, Sunshine Bible Academy 32
Timber Lake 67, Tiospaye Topa 29
Tri-State, N.D. 61, Wilmot 52
Vermillion 73, Wagner 31
Viborg-Hurley 59, Menno 27
Wall 62, Oelrichs 58
Wessington Springs 62, Kimball/White Lake 51
West Central 85, Canton 76
Winner 54, Platte-Geddes 50, OT
Wolsey-Wessington 48, Warner 36

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 57, Watertown 55
Aberdeen Christian 61, Langford 25
Aberdeen Roncalli 52, Florence/Henry 38
Alcester-Hudson 57, Freeman Academy/Marion 34
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 33, Parkston 29
Arlington 67, Chester 47
Bison 66, Wakpala 56
Britton-Hecla 67, Clark/Willow Lake 65, OT
Castlewood 48, Sioux Valley 42
Centerville 55, Dell Rapids St. Mary 49
Colman-Egan 58, Lake Preston 28
Corsica/Stickney 51, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 21
Deubrook 63, Webster 61
Edgemont 45, Hot Springs 32
Elkton-Lake Benton 59, Flandreau Indian 23
Ethan 64, Freeman 43
Flandreau 63, Baltic 31
Garretson 55, Parker 22
Hamlin 58, Deuel 19
Herreid/Selby Area 63, Potter County 35
Highmore-Harrold 57, Ipswich 33
Hill City 44, Custer 41
Irene-Wakonda 50, Bridgewater-Emery 48
Jones County 68, White River 57
Kadoka Area 49, Stanley County 35
Lakota Tech 80, Crow Creek 53
Lennox 38, Beresford 23
Milbank 50, Madison 37
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62, Bon Homme 48
Newell 42, New Underwood 40
Philip 39, Faith 36
Pierre 66, Brookings 48
Rapid City Christian 71, Spearfish 60
Redfield 30, Northwestern 27
Scotland 55, Canistota 44
Sioux Falls Christian 67, Yankton 41
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 64, Harrisburg 35
Sioux Falls Washington 55, Mitchell 18

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Sisseton 65, Dakota Valley 62
St. Thomas More 51, Douglas 10
Sully Buttes 69, Sunshine Bible Academy 21
Timber Lake 60, Tiospaye Topa 44
Todd County 70, Little Wound 41
Viborg-Hurley 55, Menno 35
Wall 82, Oelrichs 31
Wessington Springs 47, Kimball/White Lake 31
West Central 65, Canton 39
Winner 59, Platte-Geddes 43

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 Tuesday:

Mega Millions

02-04-15-21-63, Mega Ball: 19, Megaplier: 3

(two, four, fifteen, twenty-one, sixty-three; Mega Ball: nineteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$53 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

SD House votes to shield students from racial 'discomfort'

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House on Tuesday approved a pair of proposals initiated by Gov. Kristi Noem that would ban university trainings and public K-12 school curricula that make students feel "discomfort" on account of their race.

Republicans overwhelmingly supported the bills, which would apply separately to higher education and K-12 public schools, though a few joined Democrats to cast dissenting votes. Noem has championed the bills this year, casting them as a way of ensuring so-called "critical race theory" does not enter classrooms, though House lawmakers struck any mention of the lightning rod concept from the bills. They will next be considered in the Senate.

The Republican governor has said the bills, which would prohibit a list of "divisive concepts" from university trainings and K-12 curricula, are meant to ensure "our students are not taught that they are responsible for (the) different actions of our ancestors."

But critics said the effort was censorship that will discourage teachers from addressing the most painful facts of the state's history.

"Once you learn what happened in this county and on this land, it should distress you, it should cause psychological distress," said Democratic Rep. Peri Pourier, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. "They are not going to want to teach the Massacre of Wounded Knee because it is going to ignite a divisive feeling."

The Board of Regents has welcomed the bill applying to universities, asserting that it would not change how it already operates. However, organizations representing teachers, school administrators and school boards opposed the bill for K-12 schools, arguing that it sought to address situations that rarely come up in schools and put more unnecessary regulations on teachers who are already governed by a code of ethics.

Republican Rep. Sue Peterson, who pushed the bills, pointed out that the proposals would not restrict what is taught in university courses and argued that maintained academic freedom. However, the bill would ban public elementary and high schools from allowing any curricula that promote a list of "divisive concepts."

"It would not prevent difficult lessons," she said, but also rattled off a list of terms, including "equity,

inclusion, racial injustice, environmental injustice and white supremacy” that she claimed were signs that critical race theory was being embedded in classroom lessons.

The bills do not name any of those terms or mention critical race theory. Instead, they list eight divisive concepts, which include ideas that individuals are “inherently responsible” for past actions or “should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account” of their race, religion or national origin.

House Democratic leader Rep. Jamie Smith criticized the bill as turning the state government into “thought police” in classrooms.

“Sometimes discomfort helps you learn,” he said.

SD Senate rejects Medicaid expansion, leaving it to election

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A proposal to expand Medicaid health coverage eligibility was defeated in the South Dakota Senate Tuesday, leaving the decision to voters in the November election.

Republican Sen. Wayne Steinhauer had brought a proposal to the Legislature to make Medicaid, a federal-state health insurance program for low-income people, available to people who live below 133% of the federal poverty level. That is currently about \$17,000 annually for an individual or \$35,000 for a family of four.

“This thing is about people,” he said in an effort to counter arguments from his fellow Republicans that it would grow the size of government and drain money from elementary and high schools.

The Republican-controlled Senate rejected his bill on a 12 to 23 vote.

But a campaign backed by South Dakota’s major health care systems is trying to get voters to pass a constitutional amendment to expand Medicaid eligibility on the November ballot.

“It’s clear that the only path to expanding Medicaid in South Dakota is by letting the people vote on it directly,” said Zach Marcus, the manager for the campaign, in a statement.

He asserted that the proposal would allow 42,500 more people to access health care coverage and bring \$1.3 billion in federal money to the state.

US bird flu case puts chicken, turkey farms on high alert

By DAVID PITT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Farms that raise turkeys and chickens for meat and eggs are on high alert and taking steps to increase biosecurity, fearing a repeat of a widespread bird flu outbreak in 2015 that killed 50 million birds across 15 states and cost the federal government nearly \$1 billion.

The new fear is driven by the discovery announced Feb. 9 of the virus infecting a commercial turkey flock in Indiana. The 29,000 turkeys in the flock were killed to prevent the spread of the virus.

Indiana officials said Tuesday a second flock of 26,473 turkeys near the first infected farm is suspected to have the same virus. Testing is underway to confirm. The second location already is within a quarantine zone established for the first farm.

The USDA also has confirmed the presence of bird flu in a flock of commercial broiler chickens in Fulton County, Kentucky, and are awaiting results of a potential second case about 124 miles northeast in Webster County, Kentucky. A backyard flock of mixed species birds in northern Virginia also is positive for the virus. State officials quarantined areas and the birds at the new positively identified sites will be killed and removed.

The poultry industry and government officials say they have plans to more quickly stop the spread that were learned from 2015, but they’re urging caution since the virus strain is potentially deadly to commercial poultry. Egg, turkey and chicken prices could rise and availability could drop if birds at enough farms were to be infected.

“It’s definitely considered a period of high risk now that we have a confirmed case of highly pathogenic avian influenza in the commercial poultry industry,” said Dr. Denise Heard, a poultry veterinarian and vice president of research for the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association. “I feel positive that we can tackle this situ-

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ation better and I have my fingers crossed that this will be an isolated case, however, I would hope for the best and be prepared for the worst.”

Health officials say no human cases of avian influenza viruses have been detected in the U.S. and the disease doesn't present an immediate public health concern. The virus can spread from infected birds to people but such infections are rare and haven't led to sustained outbreaks among humans.

The 2015 outbreak led producers to kill 33 million egg-laying hens in Iowa, the nation's leading egg producer, and 9 million birds in Minnesota, the nation's leading turkey producer, with smaller outbreaks in Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The disease caused egg and turkey prices across the country to soar for months, with the cost of eggs up 61% at one point and prices for boneless, skinless turkey breasts rising 75% between May and July 2015.

The outbreaks were deemed the most expensive animal health disaster in U.S. history, costing the government nearly \$1 billion for removal and disposal of infected birds and government indemnity payments to producers for the lost birds.

The strain now circulating is H5N1 and is related to the 2015 virus. It has been circulating for months in Europe and Asia and was found in wild birds in Canada a few weeks ago and in a commercial flock in Canada a week before the U.S. case was identified.

Migratory wild birds often carry strains of avian influenza and they're often low pathogenic, which means they don't kill the birds. Sometimes those strains can get into domestic flocks and mutate into more deadly viruses. The H5N1 now spreading from wild birds is already highly pathogenic, which means it is deadly from the start, said Dr. Yuko Sato, a veterinarian and assistant professor in the Department of Veterinary Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine at Iowa State University.

U.S. surveillance efforts have identified the virus in wild birds in recent weeks in New Hampshire, Delaware, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida and South Carolina, making it apparent that it is in the environment broadly.

The virus spreads easily from wild bird droppings and can be carried into commercial flocks on the feet of workers or on equipment, which is why high-level biosecurity protocol has been activated across the country in commercial operations. They've enacted new safeguards to prevent deadly bird flu infections, often referred to as HPAI, and isolate them when they occur.

“With the increased preparatory efforts USDA and its partners have put into place since the 2015 HPAI outbreak, we are fully prepared to handle this detection,” said Lyndsay Cole, a spokeswoman for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service at USDA, which deals with outbreaks on U.S.

Federal and state officials are working with the poultry industry and have initiated steps such as an immediate quarantine that restricts movement of poultry and equipment used to move birds in and out of specified perimeters around an infected barn — usually around 6 miles (10 kilometers) initially — and eradication of the virus by killing and removing birds at the infection site. Testing occurs in the quarantine area of both wild and domestic birds. Disinfection is done to kill the virus at the affected farm and testing is used to confirm it's free of the virus.

Producers who want to ensure eligibility for government indemnity payments in case of disaster must have a biosecurity protocol on hand that is updated regularly. To help with that, the USDA has developed a 14-point biosecurity plan for producers, which is audited yearly and reviewed every two years by state agriculture agencies, Sato said.

In Iowa, a state with 49 million chickens, egg farmers are working with state and federal authorities to keep the disease out of their flocks, said Kevin Stiles, executive director of the Iowa Poultry Association and the Iowa Egg Council.

“IPA is maintaining open communications specifically related to biosecurity best practices and is offering surveillance testing. We are confident in our producers preparedness and ability to manage their flocks,” he said.

It's Not Too Late to Find Vacation Deals: Book a Trip to One of

these 20 Affordable U.S. Destinations

Monica Fish undefined

After nearly two years of Covid restrictions and financial challenges, it may feel like you'll never be able to afford a family getaway again.

But rising costs, pent-up travel demand, and higher airfares don't mean you have to skip a vacation this year. With over 19,000 cities in America, there are many destinations for a vacation outside of expensive towns like New York City, Waikiki, San Diego, Washington D.C., or Chicago. You don't need a big budget to make memories in these 20 towns across the United States.

1. Florida's Jacksonville

Located in northeastern Florida, Jacksonville is less than a day's drive from major cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, Pensacola, Charleston, Birmingham, Mobile, as well as Florida. Whether you're an explorer, historian, beach, or salt-life lover, Jacksonville has 22 miles of beach, the largest urban park system in the nation, fishing, museums, and even a craft beer scene.

You don't have to spend a lot discovering Jacksonville's beauty, vibrant arts, and culinary scene. Bike along the Baldwin Trail, a lush, shaded path, before making your way over to Jacksonville Beach, a popular seaside destination with white-sand beaches. Stop by the Jacksonville Farmers Market, one of the oldest markets in Florida, where seafood, fresh produce, and local delights line the streets.

Afterward, walk The Riverwalk, take a scenic stroll along the St. Johns River before dropping into the Riverside Arts Market, a weekly arts festival free to visitors that features live entertainment. Make sure you check out the city's many fish camps (casual, inexpensive waterside fish restaurants) and try Mayport shrimp, chowder, and other authentic Florida seafood.

2. Florida's Ocala

If you've ever dreamt of sleeping under the stars, add Ocala in Marion County, Florida, to your bucket list. Full of picturesque campgrounds, R.V. parks, charming cabins, and other budget-friendly accommodations, it is known for big-city amenities with small-town charm.

Ocala offers many free things for visitors to do. First, stroll through the outdoor Tusawilla Art Park in the historic Art District, walk around the Ocala Historic Downtown Square, or explore the Fort King National Historic landmark. After working up a sweat, kids can cool down at Lily's Splash Pad or Citizens Circle Splash Pad. Finally, wrap up your trip with free Ocala Recreation and Parks Service events such as their monthly outdoor movie screenings and line dancing events at the community center.

3. Florida's Orlando

It may be surprising that USA Today ranked Orlando the #1 Most Affordable Vacation Destination Among Top U.S. Cities. With over 120,000 hotel rooms in the city, there's a wide range of accommodation options, with hotel rates averaging \$110 a night.

If you're having a no-park vacation, you can still get your Disney, LEGO, or Universal Studios fix for free at Disney Springs, Disney Boardwalk, or Universal City Walk. Golfers can play at the city's many public golf courses, including Winter Park, costing just \$18 per round.

Nature lovers can explore The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve and downtown's 43-acre Lake Eola Park with no admission fees. Or enjoy free admission to The Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, or CityArts.

4. Idaho's Twin Falls

Known as The City of Waterfalls, Twin Falls has over 30 of them, including The Niagara Falls of the West - Shoshone Falls, which is even taller than its New York counterpart. While you could spend your entire trip swimming, hiking, boating, or relaxing in Shoshone Falls Park for less than \$10 admission, this affordable destination has a long list of other free hiking and outdoor sites.

According to Idaho Tourism, hotel rates on average are \$120 a night, with options even under \$100 a night. With lava fields, summer fairs, historical sites, and cowboy culture, there's a wide range of attractions in Twin Falls.

5. Iowa's Council Bluffs

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Located on the east bank of the Missouri River, across from the city of Omaha, Nebraska, it's a great alternative in the region. With 25 hotel options in Council Bluffs alone, there are accommodation options for a range of budgets as well as free and inexpensive things to do. If you've always wanted to stand in two places at once, take a stroll over the beloved Bob Kerrey Pedestrian bridge connecting Council Bluffs to Omaha.

Train-lovers will enjoy the free-of-charge Union Pacific Railroad museum featuring 150 years of history and interactive exhibits. Or enjoy budget-friendly family vacation classics like disc golf, mini-golf, bowling, indoor go-karts, public art, and bike trails.

6. Iowa's Mason City

Architectural lovers and fans of Frank Lloyd Wright will enjoy a getaway to Mason City. Select nights are available for \$150 at the Historic Park Inn Hotel, the last remaining hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the world. Another Wright-designed property, the Stockman House, is also open for tours for only \$10 a person. Or enjoy a self-guided walking tour through The Rock Crest & Rock Glen neighborhood, showcasing the largest group of Prairie School-designed homes on a unified site.

7. Missouri's Branson

Branson is not only the #1 best value in U.S. travel according to Trivago but is described as the Orlando of the Midwest for its Disney World-meets-Nashville vibe. Drawing vacationers for over a century to its stunning scenery, outdoor activities, warm people, and a wide range of things to do, it's not a surprise that 9 million people a year visit Branson.

With 16,500 guest rooms across resorts, brand-name hotel chains, independent inns, cabins, condos, and vacation homes, you can find accommodations for your budget. Like other destinations on this list, plenty of hotel rooms often means great deals are available.

While Branson is known for its 100+ live shows, it also offers tons of free things to do. Explore historic downtown Branson on the hop-on-hop-off trolley, check out Branson Landings' hourly water spectacular show, take in Ozark Mountain views at scenic overlooks, or explore all that Table Rock Lake State Park and Lakeside Forest Wilderness Area have to offer.

8. Missouri's St. Louis

Home to the iconic Gateway Arch, St. Louis boasts an abundance of free fun and reasonably priced accommodations in an urban environment. It's been called the most affordable large city. With more than 40,000 hotel rooms ranging from \$54 to \$248, the average hotel room price in St. Louis is a wallet-friendly \$93.

Explore the city and all it offers with free activities. Explore the Gateway Arch National Park and its surrounding grounds and recently renovated Museum at the Gateway Arch. Then, spend the day at Forest Park, where visitors can stop by the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri History Museum, or the Saint Louis Science Center. Finally, visitors can stroll through the Laumeier Sculpture Park, one of the country's first and largest sculpture parks.

9. Nevada's Las Vegas

With affordable hotel accommodations, all-you-can-eat buffets, a range of happy hour specials, local casual restaurants, plus a long list of free activities, Vegas is another urban, budget-friendly vacation. With over 150,000 rooms in town, there is a wide range of options. If you're looking for hotel deals, consider a mid-week stay or check-out well known affordable options such as New York, New York, Luxor, Excalibur, and Flamingo located right on The Strip.

Fill your day in the Entertainment Capital of the World touring attractions without paying for admission. Whether it sees Chihuly's stunning blown glass sculptures, touring a botanical garden, or catching the infamous water fountain show, it's all available free of charge at the Bellagio Hotel. At night head to historic Fremont Street to watch the pedestrian area studded with more than 14 million lights come alive and check out one of the city's free concerts with acts like Three Doors Down and Plain White T's.

10. New York's Catskills

A go-to escape for centuries, there's always been magic in a back-to-nature Catskills vacation. Less than 2 hours from New York City and about 3 hours from Boston, you'll feel away, even if you're close to home.

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See for yourself why it's a Lonely Planet Top 10 region in America.

The resorts depicted in *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* are long gone, as millennial entrepreneurs, hoteliers, and restaurateurs from New York and other cities help modernize the region once again. There are many budget-friendly options in the area, such as Jesse's Harvest House Restaurant and Lodge in Tannersville. Opened by former staff from the best restaurant in the country, at Michelin-rated Blue Stone at Stone Barns, you can stay in a room for around \$125 a night and enjoy a delicious, elevated meal for a fraction of Manhattan prices.

There are so many affordable things to do around the Catskills, from month-long free Octoberfest Festivals, to hiking the infamous Kaaterskill Falls, to the no-fee Mountain Top Arboretum. Art lovers can step into the infamous Hudson River School of Art by visiting the exact public locations of their paintings from 200 years ago. Three of the Art Trail locations are in North/South Lake, a 1,000-acre state park named "America's First Wilderness" with so many activities you could spend a whole week there alone.

11. North Carolina's Fayetteville

Known for decades as America's Hometown, it's not just one of the most accessible cities on the East Coast (located halfway between New York City and Miami), but its low cost of living translates into a great vacation on a budget.

In Fayetteville, you'll find two regional parks, more than 1,000 acres of recreation space, trails, lakes, and a new minor league ballpark with affordable tickets. Chock full of historical sites like The Airborne & Special Operations Museum, The Fayetteville Area Transportation and Local History Museum, and The African American Heritage Trail have free admission.

12. North Dakota's Fargo

Near the Minnesota border, Fargo, North Dakota, is a destination with city amenities available at a fraction of the cost and with smaller crowds. Downtown Fargo is nestled along the Red River, providing a scenic backdrop to the region's best bars, 400 breweries, and 400 restaurants. Take a flight into their international airport, or surprise your train-lover with an Amtrak trip right into their downtown station.

In addition, Fargo is known for being extremely dog-friendly. You can even bring your furry friend to the brand new Jasper Hotel. The modern design and architecture of Jasper Hotel complement its historic mission to celebrate the heritage and spirit of Fargo as a pioneer town. The Hotel Donaldson's 17 unique artist-inspired rooms with luxurious furnishings offer complimentary wine and cheese tastings and a complimentary turndown truffle service daily.

13. Oklahoma's Chickasaw Country

Tucked into the rolling hills of south-central Oklahoma, Chickasaw Country is a low-budget destination that provides a high-quality outdoor experience. In addition to an abundance of picturesque campgrounds and R.V. parks, the area boasts a wide array of charming boutique accommodations for a serene, romantic getaway.

Couples can stay at Cedar & Stone, Pecan Valley Inn, or Acorn Vacation Homes, with hotel rates under \$200 a night on average. The Arbuckle Mountain Range provides not only stunning vistas, but plenty of free or low-cost outdoor adventures to keep visitors busy. Hike, bike, or run through the endless miles of trails found in the Chickasaw National Recreation Area to catch glimpses of nearby natural wonders, including the Lake of the Arbuckles, Turner Falls, and Veteran's Lake.

14. Pennsylvania's Lancaster County

Located in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, Lancaster County is a great value destination and within driving distance from Pittsburgh, New York, New Jersey, Washington D.C., and Virginia. There's a wide range of lodging options with many motels, hotels, farm stays, country bed and breakfasts, and house rentals in the \$100 to \$150 a night range. Cheeky couples can stay in one of the many accommodations in the town Intercourse, PA.

There are enough things to do in Lancaster to keep busy for months. For starters, learn about the Amish way of life at Kitchen Kettle Village or Lancaster Central Market, the nation's oldest continuously operating farmers market. Then, take a bike ride along the 14-mile Northwest Lancaster County River Trail or explore Lancaster County Central Park. After you've worked up an appetite, go out to dinner at one of the many

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Pennsylvania Dutch reasonably priced all-you-can-eat smorgasbords like the family favorite Good 'N Plenty.

15. Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains

For more than 50 years, the Poconos Mountains welcomed honeymooners to their famous heart-shaped tubs. But its proximity to major metro areas, 2,400 square miles of natural beauty, year-round activities, and wide range of accommodations lands it on this list of cheap travel destinations for families or group trips as well.

The large region offers a range of budget-friendly accommodations - camping, glamping, inns, resorts, and vacation rentals. For example, you can rent a cabin at Promised Land State Park for about \$40 a night, or stay at Wayne Inn for around \$75 a night. Featuring many national, state, and local parks, bring a picnic lunch and explore Lehigh Gorge State Park, Prompton State Park, Promised Land State Park, Tobyhanna State Park, or The Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, to name a few!

16. South Dakota's Hot Springs

Located in the Southern Black Hills, explore the historical Mammoth Archaeological Site, Angostura Reservoir State Recreation Area, and Wind Cave National Park from this small town. There are options for every budget with a wide range of chain hotels, R.V. sites, KOA cabins, small inns, and bed and breakfasts. Couples will love to get away and relax in the mineral health spas and can enjoy adult-only budget-friendly accommodations like Bluebird Mesa Cabins, which offers glamping, teepee, and cabin rentals at affordable prices.

17. South Dakota's Yankton

Both outdoor enthusiasts and history buffs will enjoy the small town of Yankton. Located along the Missouri River, take your pick of water recreation activities, fishing, or exploring the Lewis and Clark Recreation Area, one of the state park system's most popular parks.

Located on the northern shore of the 31,400-acre Lewis and Clark Lake, it features over 20 budget-friendly activities. The downtown is bursting with history, budget-friendly dining, and breweries and offers a range of accommodations.

18. Tennessee's Smoky Mountains

The Smoky Mountains ranks among the Top 10 Most Affordable Travel Spots by Lonely Planet, only one of two American cities to make the list. It's home to not only the most visited National Park in America, but also the family favorite Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge towns, and the oldest mountains in the world.

Smoky Mountains National Park not only contains some of the tallest mountains in North America, including Clingmans Dome, Mount Guyot, and Mount LeConte, but all of its 500,000 acres can be explored free of charge! Don't forget about the iconic amusement park Dollywood, TripAdvisor's Best Amusement Park in the World, and Budget Travel's Best Value Theme Park.

19. Tennessee's Chattanooga

One of the most popular cheap travel destinations for families in the Southeast, it's been named by Lonely Planet as one of the Best Destinations in the U.S and a New York Times Top 45 Places to Go in the World. While outdoor enthusiasts have been coming here for decades, a recent urban revitalization has drawn a growing number of people to this city tucked between mountains along the stunning Tennessee River.

There are accommodations to meet a wide range of budgets: hip modern hostels, cabins, romantic bed and breakfasts, chain hotels, and even railroad sleeper cars. Explore the city on a bicycle, pedaling over the longest pedestrian bridge in the world to reach Coolidge Park, or hike the stunning mountains at Point Park or Coker Creek Falls.

20. Virginia's Shenandoah Valley

Even in high-cost living areas, you don't need to go far to find an affordable vacation. If you're one of the 6 million people who live in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area or the Northeast, you don't need to spend an arm and a leg for a weekend getaway or fun-filled family vacation. About 75 miles from D.C., the Shenandoah Valley features a national park, caverns, history, water parks, music, art festivals, wineries, breweries, and distilleries.

Go on a day-long road trip along the 105-mile Skyline Drive to marvel at the Blue Ridge Mountains and

its vistas. Next, explore the Shenandoah National Park's 500 miles of hiking trails or 200,000 acres of protected lands for just \$30 a car. Then retire back to a wide range of chain hotels, cabins, campsites, or resorts like Massanutten, the Mid-Atlantic's Premiere Four Season Resort Destination, where you can score condo rental travel deals from owners for as low as \$100 a night on trusted rental sites.

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Fund Your 2022 Family Vacation with Just 3 Realistic Spending Swaps

Miami to Key West Road Trip: 12 Iconic Stops

This post was produced by Savoteur and syndicated by Wealth of Geeks.

Armed man arrested at Watertown fire station

WATERTOWN, S.D. (AP) — Police in Watertown were called to a downtown fire station early Tuesday on a report of an armed man who appeared to be intoxicated and was threatening to take his own life.

Capt. Steve Rehorst said officers responded about 2:40 a.m. and found the man in the station's lobby with a pistol. The man was coming out of the station lobby as police arrived.

Rehorst said the man refused officers commands to drop the weapon and threatened to kill himself.

Officers fired bean bag rounds at the man and were able to take him into custody, KWAT reported.

The captain said although the pistol looked like a regular weapon, it turns out that it was an airsoft gun.

The man was taken to a facility where his mental health needs could be address, Rehorst said.

"We are incredibly grateful this incident did not result in serious injury or death to the responding officers, the male, or anyone from the public. Our officers showed great restraint in this high-stress situation, allowing for a successful conclusion," he said.

Police identified Pierre motel homicide victim

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Police have released the name of a man whose body was found at a motel in Pierre last week.

Authorities say 49-year-old Christopher Mexican was a homicide victim. His body was discovered after police responded to a disturbance call at the Pierre Inn and Suites early Wednesday.

Officers were called to a unit on the second floor around 3:45 a.m. when police discovered an open door and Mexican's body inside.

Authorities arrested a 38-year-old woman the following day. She is being held in the Hughes County Jail on a second-degree murder charge.

Hughes County States Attorney Jessica LaMie says she is planning on taking the case before a grand jury, KCCR reported. LeMie says more charges in the case may be possible.

South Dakota lawmakers boost revenue estimate by \$92 million

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers on Tuesday set a tax revenue estimate for the state budget that anticipates \$92 million more than Gov. Kristi Noem laid out ahead of the legislative session.

Amid better-than-expected sales tax revenue, the Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations adopted a revenue projection of \$2.067 billion for fiscal year 2023, which starts on July 1. The projection will allow lawmakers more say in how state funds are used in the next year, while potentially leaving a smaller margin for the governor to work with.

"These are conservative estimates," said Republican Rep. Chris Karr, who is the committee's co-chair.

However, his Senate counterpart, Republican Sen. Jean Hunhoff, voted against the revenue projection along with two other Senate Republicans. They had pushed for lower projections, arguing that the billions in federal pandemic relief were a temporary windfall that will not last.

The revenue projections give lawmakers a baseline to craft the state budget, which is due to be finalized next month. It is expected to top \$6 billion once funds from the federal government and other sources are factored in.

NATO sees no sign Russia is pulling back troops near Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU and LORNE COOK Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia said Wednesday it was returning more troops and weapons to bases, but NATO declared it saw no sign of a drawdown as fears that Moscow could invade Ukraine soon persisted.

Russia has massed about 150,000 troops east, north and south of Ukraine, sparking Western concerns it was planning an attack. Moscow denies it has any such plans and this week said it was pulling back some forces and weapons, though it gave few details. Those claims have been met with skepticism from the U.S. and its allies — even as they seemed to lower the temperature following weeks of escalating East-West tensions.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry released a video showing a trainload of armored vehicles moving across a bridge away from Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. A day earlier, the ministry reported the start of a pullback of troops following military exercises near Ukraine.

But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg threw cold water on those statements, saying the military organization does not see any sign that Moscow is decreasing its troop levels around Ukraine.

“At the moment, we have not seen any withdrawal of Russian forces,” he said, before chairing a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels.

“If they really start to withdraw forces, that’s something we will welcome but that remains to be seen.”

Countries in the alliance have also expressed doubt, as have leaders in Ukraine. Caught between Russia and the West, Ukrainian leaders have repeatedly sought to project calm but also strength during the crisis.

In a show of resolve, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared Wednesday — tipped by some officials as a possible start for an invasion — a “day of national unity.” To mark the day, demonstrators unfolded a 200-meter (656-foot) national flag at a sports arena in Kyiv.

“We are united by a desire to happily live in peace,” Zelenskyy said in a video address to the nation. “We can defend our home only if we stay united.”

The Russian military hasn’t given the number of troops or weapons being withdrawn and offered few other details. And while Russian President Vladimir Putin has signaled he wants a diplomatic path out of the crisis, he hasn’t committed to a full withdrawal.

Putin has emphasized that he did not want war and would rely on negotiations to achieve his key goal of keeping Ukraine from joining NATO.

While those comments seemed to change the tenor, Western leaders insisted that the crisis was far from over. President Joe Biden said Tuesday that American officials had not verified Russia’s claim, and British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace also said “it’s too soon to tell” whether the pullback is genuine, noting that the Russians “haven’t taken the foot of the gas.”

“I think what we haven’t seen is evidence of withdrawal that has been claimed by the Kremlin,” Wallace told Sky News. “In fact we’ve seen continued buildup of things like field hospitals and strategic weapons systems. Until we see a proper de-escalation, I think we should all be cautious about the direction of travel from the Kremlin.”

On Wednesday, Russian fighter jets flew training missions over Belarus that neighbors Ukraine to the north and paratroopers held shooting drills at firing ranges there as part of massive war games that the West feared could be used as cover for an invasion of Ukraine.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei reaffirmed that all Russian troops and weapons will leave the country after the maneuvers wrap up Sunday.

Russia has denied having any invasion plans and has mocked Western warnings about an imminent invasion as “paranoia” and “madness.”

Asked by German daily Welt if Russia was going to attack Wednesday, Russia’s ambassador to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov quipped: “Wars in Europe rarely start on a Wednesday.”

“There won’t be an escalation next week either, on in the week after, or in the coming month,” he said.

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Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also pointed sarcastically at warnings of Wednesday's invasion, saying that Russian officials had a good sleep on that night.

Russia wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet nations out of NATO, halt weapons deployments near Russian borders and roll back forces from Eastern Europe. The U.S. and its allies have roundly rejected those demands, but they offered to engage in talks with Russia on ways to bolster security in Europe.

Speaking after meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin said Tuesday that the West agreed to discuss a ban on missile deployment to Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures — issues that Moscow put on the table years ago. He added that Russia was willing to discuss those issues, but only in conjunction “with the main issues that are of primary importance for us.”

While Scholz reiterated that NATO's eastward expansion “is not on the agenda — everyone knows that very well,” Putin retorted that Moscow will not be assuaged by such assurances.

“They are telling us it won't happen tomorrow,” Putin said. “Well, when will it happen? The day after tomorrow? We want to solve this issue now as part of negotiation process through peaceful means.”

On Tuesday, a series of cyberattacks knocked out the websites of the Ukrainian army, the defense ministry and major banks, and Serhii Demediuk, the No. 2 official at Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, blamed it on Russia.

In Moscow, Russian lawmakers on Tuesday sent an appeal to Putin urging him to recognize rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine as independent states — where Russia has supported rebels in a conflict that has killed over 14,000 since 2014. Putin signaled that he wasn't inclined to back the motion, which would effectively shatter a 2015 peace deal that was a diplomatic coup for Moscow.

Xi urges Hong Kong to get control as COVID-19 cases surge

By ALICE FUNG and DAVID RISING Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hospitals in Hong Kong were struggling Wednesday to keep up with an influx of new coronavirus patients amid record numbers of new infections as the city doggedly adheres to its “zero-COVID” strategy, and China's leader Xi Jinping said the local government's “overriding task” was to control the situation.

Hong Kong is facing its worst outbreak of the pandemic, topping 2,000 new COVID-19 cases each day this week. The city government has already instituted strict rules banning gatherings of more than two households.

But health care facilities are beginning to overflow, forcing the city's Caritas Medical Center on Wednesday to treat some patients in beds outside the building.

Xi directed Vice Premier Han Zheng to express to Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam the concerns that Chinese Communist Party leaders have about the city's ongoing outbreak, according to Wen Wei Po, a pro-Beijing news outlet.

Zheng said the Hong Kong government “should earnestly assume the main responsibility and regard the rapid stabilization and control of the epidemic as the current overriding task,” the outlet reported.

China's central government agencies and neighboring Guangdong province will provide Hong Kong with resources to fight the outbreak, including rapid antigen tests, medical expertise and supplies, Zheng said.

China has been able to control the virus within its borders by maintaining a strict “zero-tolerance” policy that involves total lockdowns, extensive contact tracing and mass testing millions of people. The strategy seeks to contain outbreaks as soon as they are detected.

Lam has stuck to the policy despite geographical and other differences between Hong Kong and other parts of China. Last week, the entire upscale Discovery Bay neighborhood in Hong Kong was ordered to undergo testing after authorities found traces of the virus in its sewage.

The comments from Xi and Zheng were the latest pressure from Beijing for her to stay the course.

Thousands of people in the city have tested positive for COVID-19 and are waiting to be admitted into hospitals or isolation facilities, said Dr. Sara Ho, the chief manager for patient safety and risk management

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at the Hong Kong Hospital Authority.

"This situation is undesirable. Therefore, we are looking for ways with the government to set up more isolation facilities. We hope to shorten the patients' waiting time," she added.

People who test positive are required to quarantine either in hospitals if they have serious symptoms or in government-run facilities for light or asymptomatic cases. The record number of new cases, driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant, has led to the current overcrowding.

Some Hong Kong residents expressed concerns about the government's response to the outbreak.

"The reason why our society has become chaotic like this today is all because of this policy. The organizational skill of the government has made Hong Kong people feel so hopeless," said Daisy Ho, a 70-year-old housewife.

Yancey Yau, a 40-year-old construction worker, said the city's hospital workers are facing heavy stress.

"They are working so hard. But the government is not doing what they should do," Yau said. "The hospital workers are just miserable. I hope more citizens will support them. I don't have any hope for this government."

By contrast, the city-state of Singapore, which is similarly sized to Hong Kong with a population of some 5.7 million compared to 7.5 million, undertook strict lockdown measures early in the pandemic but is now pursuing a "living with COVID" approach.

The number of new cases per capita in Singapore has skyrocketed with the arrival of omicron, with 1,911 new cases per million people reported on Monday, versus 66 per million in Hong Kong, according to Our World in Data.

But people testing positive who have no symptoms or only mild symptoms just need to self-quarantine at home, and even those who have more severe symptoms are told to see a physician for medical advice before going to the hospital.

Consequently, it is not suffering the stress on its health care system that Hong Kong is now experiencing.

Singapore also boasts one of the world's highest vaccination rates, with 88% of its population fully vaccinated, compared to Hong Kong's 64%.

Risk of a Ukraine war spreading in Europe rests on unknowns

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Russian invasion of Ukraine would be devastating, and a wider European war even worse. Whether a larger war happens would depend partly on President Vladimir Putin's ambitions, partly on the West's military response, and partly on plain luck.

Although U.S. and European officials have said for days that a Russian invasion appeared imminent, Putin's government on Tuesday publicly welcomed further security talks with the West. It also announced that some of its forces bracketing Ukraine will be returning to their regular bases, although U.S. and other Western officials said it was too early to tell whether the invasion threat had receded.

War by its nature is unpredictable, and the stakes are enormous, not just for an overmatched Ukraine but for Europe and the United States. At risk, arguably, is the European security order established after World War II and then altered peacefully with the reunification of Germany, the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of NATO.

President Joe Biden has said he will not fight Russia in Ukraine, nor would America's NATO allies. So a Russian invasion would not automatically trigger a wider war. But if Putin took his offensive beyond Ukraine's borders onto NATO territory, the United States could get drawn into it. That's because Washington is obliged by the North Atlantic Treaty to defend its allies, some of whom fear they are Russian targets.

"Make no mistake. The United States will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power," Biden said Tuesday. "An attack against one NATO country is an attack against all of us."

Biden also said that if any American in Ukraine is targeted by Russia, "We will respond forcefully."

Beyond the seemingly unlikely scenario of Putin deliberately extending an invasion beyond Ukraine, there is a risk that even a limited war could spread as a result of an accident, a miscalculation or a misunder-

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standing. Once the fighting started, a bit of bad luck could lead to more conflict.

Even if Putin were to back off in coming days and pursue a negotiated path to his security goals, the enormous tension created by his buildup of forces on Ukraine's borders could have a lasting impact elsewhere in Europe. U.S. allies on NATO's eastern front, particularly the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which were once part of the Soviet Union, may press for a bigger and more permanent U.S. military presence.

A full range of scenarios for ending the Ukraine crisis and managing relations with Russia will be on the table Wednesday when U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin joins a two-day meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels. Austin is expected also to meet jointly with his counterparts from the three Baltic states.

Biden has ordered about 5,000 extra troops, including a senior Army general, to Europe to demonstrate U.S. commitment to eastern flank allies like Poland and Romania that share borders with Ukraine. Some of those extra soldiers include elements of an airborne infantry combat brigade in southern Poland, not far from the Ukrainian border, preparing for the possibility of being asked to temporarily house and assist civilians who would flee Ukraine in the event of a Russian invasion.

Aside from the risk of an unintended or unexpected incident along Ukraine's western borders, the scope of Russia's military buildup and its options for disrupting Ukrainian and Western communications offer possibilities for an escalation that could draw in the United States.

James Stavridis, a former chief commander of NATO forces in Europe and a retired Navy admiral, says two wild cards in the Ukraine crisis are the prospect of an escalation to cyberwar and the possibility of an unintended escalation in the Black Sea, where Ukraine's small fleet is caught between the bigger navies of Russia and NATO nations.

"A missile that goes astray and strikes a non-combatant, say a U.S. destroyer, could be explosive," Stavridis said.

He believes cyber warfare would be a central feature of any Russian attack on Ukraine, with the United States and its allies attempting to protect the Ukrainian military's ability to communicate with and command forces in the field, and to preserve the electric grid and other civilian infrastructure.

"That could easily lead to Russian retaliation in the cyber world, broadening the conflict quickly and dangerously," Stavridis said.

Biden cited a similar unconventional danger. "If Russia attacks the United States or our allies through asymmetric means, like disruptive cyber attacks against our companies or critical infrastructure, we're prepared to respond," he said.

Jim Townsend, who was the Pentagon's top Europe and NATO policy official throughout the Obama administration, said he sees little chance that Putin would deliberately extend an offensive beyond Ukraine unless he believed Biden would be unwilling to go to war to defend NATO allies. More likely, he said, is an unintended scenario such as a Western military aircraft getting shot down along the border.

"My great fear is that we go down a slippery slope that nobody wants," he said.

Olympics Live: Norway duo wins gold in cross-country sprint

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

Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo completed a second straight cross-country double Wednesday by teaming with Erik Valnes to give Norway the gold medal in the team sprint race at the Beijing Games.

Klaebo won the individual sprint and has become the second man to win both the team and individual sprint twice. He did the same in 2018. Klaebo and teammate Erik Valnes skied to the win in 19 minutes, 22.99 seconds.

Joni Maki of Finland stayed ahead of Alexander Terentev of the Russian Olympic Committee to take silver, 2.46 seconds behind Norway. Terentev took the bronze 4.29 seconds back.

Maki was partnered with Iivo Niskanen, who won gold in the 15-kilometer classic race. Terentev's team-

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mate was Alexander Bolshunov, who won gold in the skiathlon.

The three broke away from a group of eight on the final lap and stayed ahead for the medals. Sweden came in fourth.

Cross-country skiers Victoria Carl and Katharina Henning of Germany won gold in the women's team sprint at the Beijing Olympics.

Their time was 22 minutes, 9.85 seconds. Carl outpaced Swedish sprint champion Jonna Sundling, who won silver with Maja Dahlqvist .17 seconds back.

Natalia Nepryaeva of Russia crossed the line just behind Sundling at .71 seconds. She and Yulia Stupak won the bronze medal.

Finland finished fourth and the U.S. women, the reigning team sprint Olympic champions, were fifth.

Elvira Oeberg anchored the Swedish team to Olympic gold in the four-person biathlon relay, skiing fast and shooting clean to win her third medal of the Beijing Games.

Oeberg, who also won silver in the sprint and pursuit races in her Olympic debut, put the Swedes across the line in 1 hour, 11 minutes, 3.9 seconds.

Russian biathlete Uliana Nigmatullina trailed Oeberg by about 24 seconds after the final shooting range and ended up finishing 12 seconds behind for silver. Denise Herrmann finished third to give Germany bronze, 37.4 seconds behind Oeberg. Herrmann also won gold in the individual race.

Germany, Sweden and Italy went out front early in the 4x6-kilometer race and the teams shuffled positions several times, but the Swedes had the most consistent shooting.

Norway finished fourth, 50.7 seconds behind.

American figure skater Vincent Zhou is out of quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19 at the Beijing Games, and he plans to perform in the exhibition gala that traditionally closes the Olympic program on Sunday.

Zhou had just helped the U.S. win team silver on Feb. 7 when he got a phone call that he had tested positive. The timing of the result, the day before the men's short program, left him no choice but to withdraw from the event.

Zhou said he didn't watch it because "it was too emotionally difficult," but he kept track of the results and was happy to see teammate Nathan Chen win the gold medal. He spent his time instead "watching Netflix for the first time" in an isolation hotel about 30 minutes from the Olympic Village.

Among those that reached out to Zhou was singer Josh Groban, whose music is used in his short program. Zhou said that made him feel "appreciated and supported" while he spent the long days locked in his room.

French skier Clement Noel put down a blistering second run to win the slalom at the Beijing Olympics by a large margin on Wednesday.

Noel moved up from sixth following the first leg to beat first-run leader Johannes Strolz of Austria by 0.61 seconds after posting the fastest second run.

World champion Sebastian Foss-Solevaag of Norway held his position and picked up the bronze, finishing 0.70 behind.

Noel finished fourth in the slalom at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

Strolz also won the gold medal in the combined last week.

The United States is out of the men's hockey tournament at the Olympics in stunning fashion after blowing a late lead.

Marek Hrivik scored with 43.7 seconds left in regulation, Peter Cehlarik had the winner and Slovakia beat the U.S. 3-2 in a shootout Wednesday to knock the top-seeded Americans out in the quarterfinals.

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The U.S. led for almost half the game before the tying goal when Slovakia pulled its goaltender for an extra attacker to play 6-on-5.

The U.S. had gotten accustomed to playing tight games in the tournament, beating Canada by two goals and Germany by one. But blown coverage in front allowed Hrivik to knock a loose puck past goalie Strauss Mann, who was impressive until that point.

Coming up empty on four power plays, including three in the third period, came back to bite the Americans. Matty Beniers hit the post on one of the best scoring chances the U.S. had in the third, but the team could not crack Patrik Rybar, who was playing a second consecutive day in net for Slovakia.

U.S. bobsledder Elana Meyers Taylor is thinking about retiring after 15 years in the sport.

She has raced on at least 15 different bobsled tracks in 11 countries. She's had no fewer than 41 different teammates in her sleds.

She possesses more Olympic medals than any bobsledder in U.S. history, with a chance at one more this weekend. She has become an advocate, fighting for equality for women in sports. And she became a wife and mother along the way.

Meyers Taylor hasn't said for sure what her plans are, but she is thinking about retirement and hinted that the women's race at the Beijing Olympics — it starts Friday and ends Saturday — may represent her final official time in a sled.

"There's a good chance that it's my last one," Meyers Taylor said.

Mikaela Shiffrin was fastest in a downhill training session ahead of Thursday's Alpine combined race at the Beijing Olympics.

The American skier finished 0.93 seconds ahead of Wendy Holdener of Switzerland and 0.94 ahead of Ester Ledecka, who is attempting to win a second event at a second straight Olympics after successfully defending her gold in snowboarding's parallel giant slalom.

Shiffrin was second in the combined at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and won the event at the world championships last year.

Defending Olympic champion Michelle Gisin was a second slower than Shiffrin.

The 26-year-old Shiffrin is still seeking her first medal at the Beijing Games. The two-time Olympic champion didn't finish the giant slalom or the slalom, was ninth in the super-G and 18th in Tuesday's downhill.

Only 14 skiers trained on Wednesday, with 12 of those listed on the start list opting out.

Canada beat the United States 7-6 in the Olympic women's curling tournament and moved ahead of the Americans in the race for the four-team playoff.

Jennifer Jones' Canadian foursome (4-3) took the lead with back-to-back two-point ends in the second and third. The Americans tied it with two in the eighth and a steal of one in the ninth when Jones missed a takeout with the last stone and slammed her broom to the ice in frustration.

Canada retained the last-rock advantage in the 10th and final end, though, and delivered an easy draw to win it.

The Americans (4-4) could still qualify for the semifinals with five wins, if they beat Japan on Wednesday night and get some help.

Johannes Stolz of Austria is leading the first run of the men's slalom with only lower-ranked skiers remaining as he bids for a second gold medal at the Beijing Games.

Stolz will take a 0.02 second advantage over Henrik Kristoffersen of Norway into the second run. World champion Sebastian Foss-Solevaag of Norway is third, 0.06 behind.

The 29-year-old Stolz won the Alpine combined on Thursday in his first ever Olympic race. Before a win in Adelboden, Switzerland, last month, he had a career-best finish of 10th in more than eight years of World Cup racing and was dropped from the powerhouse Austrian team at the end of last season.

There have been six different winners in six World Cup slaloms this season.

Lucas Braathen leads the discipline standings but he straddled a gate and is out of the race. Another pre-race favorite, Manuel Feller, did the same.

Freestyler skier Alex Hall led a 1-2 American finish in the men's Olympic slopestyle competition with a trick on his first run where he completely stopped his rotation mid-air and went the other direction.

Hall's opening run earned a score of 90.01 and it stood up throughout the competition. His teammate Nick Goepper turned in a creative run on his second pass to earn silver. Jesper Tjader of Sweden took home bronze.

The Americans have now earned six of nine Olympic medals since the event made its debut in 2014. Goepper has three of them, including silver from the 2018 Pyeongchang Games and bronze from the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Valieva listed two legal oxygen boosters on Olympic forms

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — Two legal substances used to improve heart function are listed on an anti-doping control form filled out for Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva before her drug case at the Olympics erupted, according to documents submitted in her case.

The World Anti-Doping Agency filed a brief in the Valieva case stating that the mention on the form of L-carnitine and Hypoxen, though both legal, undercuts the argument that a banned substance, trimetazidine, might have entered the skater's system accidentally.

Hypoxen, a drug designed to increase oxygen flow to the heart, was a substance the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency recently tried, without success, to get placed on the banned list. L-carnitine, another oxygen-boosting performance enhancer, is banned if injected above certain thresholds. The supplement was the focal point of the doping case involving track coach Alberto Salazar.

Combining those with 2.1 nanograms of trimetazidine, the drug found in Valieva's system after a Dec. 25 test, is "an indication that something more serious is going on," USADA CEO Travis Tygart said.

"You use all of that to increase performance," he said. "It totally undermines the credibility" of Valieva's defense.

Two people with knowledge of the case told The Associated Press that a brief seen by AP that was filed by the World Anti-Doping Agency in a hearing on Valieva's case was authentic. The people spoke on condition of anonymity because the document was not publicly available. WADA did not immediately respond to an email left by AP asking for comment on the brief.

The brief describes Valieva's mother as arguing that the skater's grandfather was a regular user of trimetazidine, which would explain how it got into her system.

WADA said while that explanation involves "some form of exposure" to trimetazidine, it is not an argument that she had taken a "contaminated product," which can be used as a defense.

In addition, WADA said there was no attempt to argue that the legal substances listed on the form were contaminated, either, so "the athlete necessarily cannot meet the criteria to have her" suspension lifted via the contaminated-product rule.

Valieva's positive test came to light after she had led the Russians to a gold medal in the team skating event last week. Russia's anti-doping agency at first suspended her, then lifted the suspension. That led WADA and the IOC to appeal to CAS, which determined Valieva could skate in the women's event that began Tuesday.

Because she is 15, she is considered a "protected person" under anti-doping rules and could escape major sanctions. Her coaches and other members of her entourage are subject to automatic investigation and bigger penalties.

The larger case involving the positive test, and resolving whether Russia will get its gold medal, will be decided later. In the meantime, the IOC has said there will be no medals ceremony for events in which

Valieva makes the podium. She's a favorite for gold, and was leading after the short program.

S. Korea to give out rapid tests as omicron shatters record

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea will distribute free coronavirus rapid test kits at schools and senior care facilities starting next week as it weathers an unprecedented wave of infections driven by the fast-moving omicron variant.

Health officials on Wednesday reported its highest daily jump in coronavirus infections with 90,443 new cases, shattering the previous one-day record set on Tuesday by more than 33,000 cases. The figure represents more than a 20-fold increase from the levels seen in mid-January, when omicron emerged as the country's dominant strain, and some experts say the country could see daily cases of around 200,000 in March.

While experts say omicron appears less likely to cause serious illness or death compared to the delta variant, which rattled the country in December and early January, hospitalizations have been creeping up amid the greater scale of outbreak.

Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, Seoul's No. 2 official behind President Moon Jae-in, said officials will start distributing free rapid test kits next week at kindergartens, elementary schools and senior care facilities, including nursing homes and neighborhood welfare centers, to strengthen protection for unvaccinated children and high-risk groups.

Education Minister Yoo Eun-hye said schools will be getting enough kits for students to use twice a week, but added that such tests won't be mandatory.

"We ask for students to be tested at home with the rapid antigen test kits on the evenings of Sunday and Wednesday before coming to school," Yoo said during a briefing. "When testing positive from those tests, please visit the local health office to get PCR (lab) tests."

Health workers have diagnosed a daily average of 60,230 new coronavirus cases in the past seven days, which translates to 116.64 infections per 100,000 people, as the national caseload grew over 1.55 million.

The fast-developing omicron surge has left officials debating whether the country should maintain strict social distancing rules, including a six-person limit on private social gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew for restaurants.

Struggling business owners have called for the measures to be removed, questioning whether they are meaningful when cases are growing rapidly.

But health experts warn that easing social distancing may allow transmissions to veer further out of control, which would further stretch worn-out health and government workers and threaten high-risk groups and children younger than 12 who have yet to be vaccinated.

The country has already eased quarantine restrictions significantly starting this month to prevent major disruptions at workplaces and essential services, which may occur if huge numbers of people are constantly forced into isolation.

There are also concerns that transmissions could worsen as campaigning and political rallies began on Tuesday ahead of the March 9 presidential elections.

Prime Minister Kim said officials will consider both the pandemic's growing economic strain and threats posed by the omicron surge before announcing new social distancing measures on Friday.

While omicron more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had COVID-19 previously, experts say vaccination and booster shots still provide strong protection from serious illness and death.

More than 86% of South Koreans have been fully vaccinated and 58% have received booster shots. Health officials plan to offer fourth vaccination shots at nursing homes and other long-term care settings starting later this month.

The country also started offering Novavax's coronavirus vaccine at hospitals and public health offices this week, adding another tool in a mass immunization campaign that has mainly depended on Pfizer and Moderna's mRNA vaccines.

Officials hope that the Maryland company's protein vaccine, which is similar to shots used for years against the common flu or hepatitis B, would appeal to people who have been hesitant to use other vaccines based on newer technologies.

EU can withhold funds from Hungary, Poland, top court rules

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union's highest court ruled on Wednesday that the 27-nation bloc can suspend support payments to member states if they breach rule of law principles, and dismissed a challenge by Hungary and Poland.

The right-wing governments of both nations had argued that such action lacked a proper legal basis. Both nations, large recipients of EU funds, have come under increasing criticism over the past few years for veering away from the Western principles of the respect for democratic values in their nations.

"The Court dismisses the actions brought by Hungary and Poland in their entirety," the European Court of Justice said in a statement.

The ruling was hotly anticipated by many who had accused the two nations of democratic backsliding and had seen the linkage measure as the EU's most potent weapon to prevent a democratic legitimacy rift deepening within the bloc.

When it comes to democratic principles, "the European Union must be able to defend those values, within the limits of its powers," the court said.

The EU's executive Commission said it would await Wednesday's ruling before committing on whether to withhold funds but its president Ursula von der Leyen immediately welcomed the ruling.

"The Commission will defend the Union's budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law. We will act with determination," von der Leyen promised.

Hungary's reaction was swift. Justice Minister Judit Varga slammed the ruling on her Facebook page, calling it a "political judgement" and proof that the EU was abusing its power.

"The ruling is another application of pressure against our country because we passed our child protection law during the summer," Varga wrote, referring to contentious Hungarian legislation last year which forbids the depiction of homosexuality or gender change to minors in media content. But the EU's passage of the rule of law mechanism pre-dates that Hungarian law, which many critics have decried as a violation of LGBTQ rights.

Both Hungary and Poland have in the past reasoned that the court was overstepping its authority in approving a new mechanism that is not described in the EU's own treaties. They said making such a link between finances and the legal decisions of independent member states amounted to blackmail from Brussels.

The court argued however that democratic backsliding had not only a political impact but also affected budgetary matters.

"The sound financial management of the Union budget and the financial interests of the Union may be seriously compromised by breaches of the principles of the rule of law committed in a member state," it said.

Poland and Hungary have faced criticism in the EU for years over allegations that they have been eroding judicial and media independence, among other democratic principles. The EU had found itself unable to do much to alter the course of either nation, and therefore turned to linking money to their adherence to democratic behavior.

Respecting democratic rule of law principles is a beacon of the EU admission criteria and the court insisted that, once in, those principles should stick.

"The Court specifies, first, that compliance with those values cannot be reduced to an obligation which a candidate state must meet in order to accede to the European Union and which it may disregard after accession," it said.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been pushing what he calls "illiberal democracy," which his critics say amounts to stifling democracy. In Poland, the Law and Justice party overwhelmingly dominates

government and has also increasingly faced criticism from other EU member nations. The rightwing-government has broken the nation's own laws in order in order to gain political control over courts and judges.

Hungary and Poland initially sought to block the budget because of the introduction of the new mechanism, but eventually agreed to the plan on condition that the European Court of Justice would review it.

This time, Tibet stands silent as Olympics return to China

By DAKE KANG and SAM McNEIL Associated Press

GARZE COUNTY, China (AP) — As a speedskating team was winning China's first Olympic gold medal of the Beijing Games, all seemed quiet in the villages that line the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau.

A bus flew past gold-roofed monasteries on freshly paved asphalt. Red-robed monks rode motorcycles over windswept plains under snow-capped mountains.

It was a stark difference from 14 years ago, when China hosted its first Olympics. That summer, foreigners filmed deadly clashes between Tibetans and security forces in Lhasa, the regional capital. News of the violence ricocheted online, fueling protests, hunger strikes and self-immolations across the Tibetan region.

Today, Tibet has fallen quiet. There are no monks marching on police stations. No overturned cars or hurled stones.

Far more international attention and outrage is directed at Xinjiang in China's far northwest, where some human rights groups and Western governments say the Chinese government has been carrying out a campaign of genocide against the region's Uyghur population.

The once-relentless waves of protesters setting themselves afire has slowed. No self-immolations have been reported in the past two years; over the prior decade, there were more than 150.

That is, at least as far as the outside world knows. In China, where the government tightly controls information and limits access to areas seen as politically sensitive, it's always hard to know what's really happening.

And few areas in China are considered as politically sensitive as Tibet.

As the bus carrying an Associated Press journalist traveled through the rugged borderlands in Sichuan close to Tibet, it suddenly ground to a halt.

Police officers filed onboard and ordered him off. Even though he had tested negative for the coronavirus three times in the previous five days, the officers ordered him expelled due to pandemic controls.

"No foreigners are allowed in," said Jampa, the deputy head of Garze county's foreign affairs office, before ordering the journalist taken by car to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, a 10-hour drive away, where he was released.

Why have Tibetans seemingly acceded to Chinese rule after centuries of self-governance and decades of fervent protest and civil disobedience? The answer, based on interviews with more than a dozen Tibetans inside and outside of China, is that in many ways Beijing's plan to tame Tibet is working.

Older Tibetans remain resentful. But after decades of struggle, many have resigned themselves to being part of China. Younger Tibetans are split: Some still secretly long for independence, while others call themselves proud Chinese citizens.

Abroad, activists continue to agitate for autonomy but now find their calls falling on deaf ears as Beijing uses its economic might to punish countries and companies that voice support for Tibetan independence.

Ever since China's People's Liberation Army marched into Tibet in 1951, the region had been locked in a bitter cycle of revolt and repression. Beijing's harsh controls only prompted Tibetans to cry harder for autonomy, causing ever more severe crackdowns.

As the first Olympics approached in early 2008, and the world's attention turned toward China, the familiar cycles of protest and crackdown accelerated. That March, five months before the opening ceremony, police beat and arrested monks in Lhasa who were clamoring for religious freedom.

Tibetans turned violent, throwing rocks and setting fire to flags, cars and shops. They killed more than a dozen people, most of them civilians of the country's majority Han Chinese ethnicity.

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State security opened fire. Activist groups reported over 100 deaths while authorities said they were only warning shots. Leaked internal government documents later revealed that at least 26 Tibetans had been killed.

As word of the bloodshed spread, demonstrations erupted across the Tibetan plateau. One day, they came to Drago county, which borders Garze on the plateau's eastern reaches in Sichuan.

Tsewang Dhondup was volunteering at a monastery when he and hundreds of others witnessed an officer beating a nun. When they rushed forward to confront the police, they were met with gunfire. A bullet went through Dhondup's stomach.

These demonstrators weren't the usual rabble-rousers — students and city dwellers with ties abroad. They were herders and farmers, working-class people who were supposed to be the bedrock of Communist Party support.

"I took part because I felt the struggles my family and I were facing shouldn't be passed on to my children," Dhondup said from Canada, where he fled in 2012 after 14 months hiding from Chinese police.

After the Olympics, Beijing launched a sweeping campaign to control the hearts and minds of Tibetans. "People in Tibet have been leading a happy life," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters ahead of these latest Olympics.

Many areas have been targeted for the government's signature anti-poverty campaign. Billions have been poured into airports, highways, schools and other construction in Tibet. Electricity and subsidized healthcare have come to vast swaths of the region.

Such efforts have helped win support from some young Tibetans, said one Tibetan from a poor, rural part of the plateau, who agreed to speak anonymously in order to be candid. Generational rifts are emerging, as memories of an independent Tibet recede into the past and young urban Tibetans adopt Han Chinese manners and attitudes.

At public schools, the curriculum cultivates a sense of belonging to the Chinese nation. On a state-chaperoned trip to Lhasa last year, foreign journalists were shown a boarding school for Tibetans, where many parents are required to send their children. The students, many of them far from home, studied in Mandarin; Tibetan was relegated to a single class. Hundreds of thousands now study at such schools — a sharp change from a decade ago, when most Tibetans studied largely in their own language.

With jobs and investment come stepped up security and surveillance.

"There's always a carrot and stick approach," said Robbie Barnett, a Tibet expert in London.

Phones and the internet, once used to organize protests, have become tools to monitor and control. Those who criticize the state or speak up about the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader-in-exile, find their movements restricted. Some are placed under house arrest or imprisoned.

"We're unhappy, but we don't dare say anything," said the Tibetan who agreed to speak anonymously.

He recalled being interrogated, and a friend detained, over a banned book about Tibetan Buddhism that was sent on China's WeChat instant messaging app.

"We still want to fight to preserve our language, for traditional culture," he said, "but everyone is scared. Nobody wants to die."

In 2011, up-and-coming Communist Party leader Chen Quanguo became the top government official in Tibet. He pioneered new forms of state control, dividing urban areas into grids for police surveillance, and building hundreds of 24-hour police stations and a few extrajudicial detention centers for rebellious monks and nuns.

Gradually, Chen's measures succeeded in pacifying the unrest. Five years later, he was transferred to neighboring Xinjiang where he deployed the same tactics on a vastly wider and more extreme scale, overseeing a draconian campaign of mass incarceration against the Uyghurs.

Kesang Lamdark, a Tibetan artist living in Switzerland and the son of a renowned monk from Garze, said the dream of a free Tibet crashes against the reality of the Chinese police state.

"If you protest and protest, what's it going to bring? If they catch you, you'll go to prison," he said. "There's nothing much you can do."

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During these Olympics, the human rights focus has shifted to Xinjiang. Beijing has waged a ruthless crackdown on the Uyghurs, imprisoning an estimated million or more in prisons and detention camps. The government says they are for job-training; former inmates describe them as brutal indoctrination centers.

At times, though, Tibetan dissidents still smuggle out news of arrested monks or images of cultural destruction. It's a high-stakes endeavor, as the Chinese authorities mete out harsh sentences to those accused of leaking state secrets.

In Drago county, images from late last year of authorities demolishing a 30-meter (100-foot) tall Buddha statue and a monastery school were leaked to the Tibetan government-in-exile. The demolitions were first reported by Radio Free Asia, a U.S.-funded news agency, and confirmed by AP and others using satellite imagery.

Jampa of the Garze county foreign affairs office said he had not heard of the demolitions, and denied any restrictions on faith. Religious freedoms are protected by the Chinese constitution, he said, "like in America."

It's true that the authorities have tolerated a degree of religious freedom — unlike in Xinjiang, where many mosques now stand virtually empty after thousands were imprisoned for praying and owning Qurans.

Tibetan Buddhism has long been fashionable among Han Chinese seeking spiritual solace, and monasteries are popular tourist destinations. But officials in "temple management offices" keep close tabs, watching out for troublemakers.

As the car driven by state officials carried the AP journalist through Drago on the way to Chengdu, Lunar New Year lanterns dangled over empty streets. "Skynet" surveillance cameras gazed down on closed shops and restaurants. Looming above Drago, on the side of a mountain, were huge Chinese characters: "Thank the Party, Love the Motherland."

In a neighboring county, five soldiers in camouflage marched down a street. Village roads were manned by officials checking papers, and the drive passed at least a half-dozen police checkpoints.

Arriving in the Tibetan quarter of Chengdu, where tens of thousands of Tibetans live under the state's watchful gaze, officers with pikes and batons stand sentry while police lights flash red and blue. Checkpoints and cameras line the roads.

But residents seem to pay little heed. Monks amble the streets, thumbing prayer beads. The devout spin handheld prayer wheels. Han Chinese shopkeepers bargain with Tibetan customers over incense and images of Buddha.

Here, many young Tibetans are forging a new bicultural identity — one that celebrates their culture without challenging Beijing's rule. It's evident in a plaza where crowds gather each evening, dancing to Tibetan tunes infused with Buddhist mantras and set to a thumping beat.

"I am a true Tibetan, and at the same time I am also a true Chinese," said Kunchok Dolma, 28, a Tibetan in Chengdu who is a devout Buddhist and also teaches modern dance in flawless Mandarin. "There's no conflict between these things."

She is bothered that Tibetans can no longer obtain passports, by job postings that openly bar Tibetans from applying, and by restrictions on travel to Lhasa. But, given the region's troubled past, she largely accepts state policy as being for the greater good.

"When we're treated differently, I do feel like it's rather unfair," she said, "but I understand why it is the way it is."

Despite loosening rules, few women figure skaters pick pants

By SALLY HO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — She wore the pants. And on this day, she was the only one.

In a dramatic black one-piece that felt like classic Audrey Hepburn — white accents and rhinestones, high bun, smoky eyes — Swedish figure skater Josefina Taljegård stood out Tuesday as the only athlete in a field of 30 who wore pants for the short program on the first day of the Beijing Olympics' marquee

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women's figure skating competition.

"I chose it because it fits the music, and also because I feel very strong and confident in this kind of clothes," Taljegård said.

Though women in the singles and pairs contests have for years been free to don trousers in their performances, few actually opt for pants at the most high-stakes competitions such as the Olympics.

Here, the ballerina aesthetic of flowy skirts, pastel colors, sparkles and glitter continues to dominate alongside the classical music that is synonymous with the traditional look and feel of women's figure skating.

"Even a rule change may not necessarily change the cultural expectations if it's a central part of the scoring," said Cheryl Cooky, an author and Purdue University professor who studies gender and sports. "People here – specifically judges – know what they find aesthetically pleasing is kind of wrapped up in a feminine image."

While there's been a step toward edgier and more offbeat music at the Capital Indoor Stadium during these Olympics, the artistic choices in the women's competition have so far proved less progressive in both music and costume.

That stands in contrast to the women in ice dance — one of four figure skating disciplines at the Beijing Games — where there was a critical mass of women wearing pants after a change in performance rules. On the first day of that competition last week, six out of 23 women – more than a quarter of them — wore pants for their rhythm dances.

They all returned to more standard dresses two days later, for the free dance that determined the medals.

Russian ice dancer Victoria Sinitsina wore an all-black outfit featuring a sparkly, one-shouldered, midriff-baring top with hip-hugging trousered bottoms that gave '90s New York supermodel vibes. And it fit with the performance that she did with partner Nikita Katsalapov to "Brick House" by American funk and soul band The Commodores.

"It brings something different because usually girls wear dresses, skirts," Katsalapov said. "The music for this year's rhythm dance, it let us do costumes like that, with pants for the ladies. And it looks sexy and beautiful, too."

In addition to comfort, practicality and a chic look, skaters in pants said they saw it as a way to match their male partners, as well as align with the music for this season. The International Skating Union chose "Street Dance Rhythms," with style options including hip hop, disco, swing, krump, popping, funk, jazz, reggae, reggaeton and blues.

Canadian ice dancer Piper Gilles wore a orangesicle-colored, carnivalesque, Elton John-inspired one-piece for the ice dance competition, though she previously wore a skirt version of it for the medley team event the first week of the Games.

"I was actually kind of nervous about wearing pants this year. That was something that I'd never done before," Gilles said. "We've always been told to wear skirts so it's kind of fun to be able to break out of that."

While few figure skaters wear pants in competition, nearly all do so during practice sessions.

"You don't have the weight of the skirt, like when you turn and stuff, and it feels more like practice because in practice, I just wear pants. So I find it, I think, (it is) more comfortable," said Marjorie Lajoie, a Canadian ice dancer who wore a black unitard accented by a teal-colored, sash-like ruffle in a nod to Hollywood red carpet glamour in her "Funkytown" rhythm dance performance. "You shouldn't be forced to wear a skirt."

Cooky said there are parallels between figure skating, golf and tennis — all sports where women are traditionally seen competing in skirts, skorts or dresses. The outfits in the women's competitions become culturally-enforced gender markers because the sports themselves are identically performed by their male counterparts.

"There is still sort of cultural anxiety around women's athleticism and women's physicality despite the tremendous progress we've made in that space," Cooky said. "Sports today is kind of the last cultural site where that (gender) difference is both accepted and celebrated."

The parameters among those sports diverge, however, when considering the subjectivity of figure skat-

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ing. Half of the scoring is based on how judges view their performance — the music, the costume, the flow and the overall feel.

That may be why there's no push toward uniform equality in figure skating as there was last year for the Norwegian female beach handball team. Those women refused to wear the required bikini bottoms at the European Beach Handball Championships in Bulgaria and instead defied the rules by — and were punished for — wearing shorts like the male players.

Back at the women's singles competition Tuesday night, Taljegård said she's not morally opposed to skirts and incorporates all costume styles into her other performances. A skirt that can ripple through the air can provide a striking element in figure skating that pants just can't quite match.

Still, the 26-year-old from Sweden hasn't worn a skirt to practice since she was 12 years old.

"It's because it's more comfortable. Sometimes if you want to go to the restroom, it's easier," Taljegård said. "Where I skate in Sweden, we have a lot of cold rinks. If I skate with just a skirt and stockings or tights you have underneath the skirt, it's usually pretty thin. So for me, it's definitely nicer to have pants."

And while her Olympic showcase featured lightning fast spins and music from The Fugees, Taljegård didn't advance to the free skate Thursday night. But there's no doubt that she remains confident as ever in the skin — and pants — she's in.

"I'm a mature woman," Taljegård said. "And I think I look great."

Valieva case boosts drive to raise age limit at Olympics

By JAMES ELLINGWORTH AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The doping case involving Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva has led to many more questions than answers.

Some skaters think it's time to ask another: Should a 15-year-old be in the Olympics at all?

"You want these athletes to have an opportunity to have this be a profession, not a one-year run at it," Mariah Bell, at 25 the oldest U.S. national champion in nearly a century, said after skating Tuesday.

"If we had an age (minimum) limit, I think it would promote that idea of longevity and somebody being 25 wouldn't be shocking at an Olympics."

Valieva was allowed to skate Tuesday in the short program partly because her age gives her extra rights as a "protected person" in a doping case. It comes as some skating officials push to raise the minimum age for her event from 15 to 17 in time for the 2026 Milan-Cortina Olympics. Bell suggested a minimum of 18.

Reformers argue a change would protect the wellbeing of child athletes and reduce the risk of injuries from straining the body into ever-more spectacular jumps.

"I think that (the Valieva case) really will push this forward and hopefully it will also put this question forward to other sports federations," Norwegian Skating Federation president Mona Adolfsen, who supports the change, told The Associated Press.

Valieva, she added, "is a child, so whatever happened, we feel sorry for her."

The issue is expected to go to a vote at the International Skating Union congress in June. It's unclear if it will pass. Russia is opposed and the United States and Canada declined to say how they'll vote.

The Valieva doping case has put the spotlight on Russian coach Eteri Tutberidze, who transformed the sport with a "Quad Squad" performing risky but high-scoring quadruple jumps. Her skaters often have blink-and-you'll-miss-it careers, and it's not unusual to retire at 18 or 19, sometimes with severe injuries. Almost all quads ever landed in women's international competitions were performed by under-18s.

"If they raise the age, the motivation to create a skater who has longevity is higher," Swiss skater Alexia Paganini said. "You are forced to think about a technique that can be maintained throughout your entire adult career."

Others argue younger skaters deserve the limelight and shouldn't have to wait for an Olympic chance. Raising the minimum could mean more cases like that of Alexandra Trusova, now one of Valieva's teammates in Beijing. Trusova won the world junior title in 2018 at the age of 13, and her score would also have won the senior world title that year, but she wasn't eligible.

Figure skating has long struggled to balance artistic performances against athleticism in its often-disputed

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scoring system. Adolfsen argues the artistry is what connects best with the public, and that comes with experience.

"I hope that the development will be that it's possible to learn the quads also for the women later, but maybe in the big picture that's not the most important thing in figure skating," Adolfsen said. "They remember (1984 and 1988 Olympic champion) Katarina Witt still, and that's not because of the difficult jumps. It was because of the performance."

Age affects male and female skaters differently. Men tend to develop later and have longer careers, but still face injury risks. Only six of 30 skaters in the women's short program Tuesday were also at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. The men's event had twice as many returnees from four years ago, and Michal Brezina of the Czech Republic skated at his fourth Olympics.

Adolfsen is concerned about other sports, too, and would ideally like the same minimum age for all Olympic athletes.

That might face opposition from the International Olympic Committee. It eagerly promoted the youngest athletes at last year's Tokyo Olympics, like 13-year-old skateboarding medalist Sky Brown, who competed a year after suffering a fractured skull in a training accident. Different sports set their own minimum ages. Women's gymnastics requires competitors to turn 16 in the year the Olympics are held — though some teams have faked gymnasts' ages. Olympic boxers must be at least 18.

Bell believes a higher minimum age would allow skaters more time to become known to a wider audience and could give figure skating back the high public profile it enjoyed in the United States when she was a child.

"If you look at (2006 Olympic silver medalist) Sasha Cohen and (five-time world champion) Michelle Kwan, they were competing at a time where they did it for so many years they had people that can back them," Bell said. "I think it gave a great outlook for the sport because people could really follow their careers."

After blow of Beijing, Olympians ask: What about Africa?

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Victory, of sorts, for Eritrea's sole Winter Olympian — one of just six athletes competing for African countries at the Games in China — was achieved even before his feat of surviving two runs in blizzard conditions down a hazardous course aptly named The Ice River.

Before flying to China for his Olympic ski race in the mountains northwest of Beijing, Shannon-Ogbnai Abeda learned of a cross-country skier living in Germany who has been so inspired by Abeda's trailblazing that he's aiming to qualify for their East African nation at the next Winter Games in 2026.

"It was because of all the interviews that I did and, you know, me coming and doing this again," Abeda, who also raced at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, said after his 39th-place finish in the giant slalom that only 46 of 87 starters completed in Sunday's snowstorm.

"He wants to now carry the torch," Abeda said.

So just imagine: How many other enthused young wannabes could emerge from the African continent of 1.3 billion people, and from the African diaspora spread around the world, if they only had more than a handful of Olympic pioneers leading the way, showing that barriers of racial prejudice, inequality and geography are surmountable?

That question is more pertinent than ever at the Beijing Games, because African representation has shrivelled since a record eight African nations, fielding twice as many athletes as in Beijing, competed in 2018. Eritrea, Ghana, Morocco, Madagascar and Nigeria are back; Kenya, South Africa and Togo are not.

Skiing — Alpine and cross-country — was the only sport Africans qualified for. There was just one African woman: Mialitiana Clerc, born in Madagascar and adopted by a French couple as a baby, is now a two-time Olympian. Having broken through in Pyeongchang, she raced in Beijing to 41st place, out of 80 starters, in giant slalom and 43rd, out of 88, in slalom.

Elsewhere, at the skating rinks, snow parks and sliding track, there was no African representation at all. African sliders were thwarted by less inclusive qualifying rules, despite making history in Pyeongchang.

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There, Nigeria fielded Africa's first-ever bobsled team; Simidele Adeagbo, also Nigerian, became the first African and Black woman in skeleton; and Ghana's Akwasi Frimpong blazed trails on the men's side.

Adeagbo, frustrated to have been left on the sidelines for Beijing, says the plunge in African representation requires an Olympic response. The movement's five rings are meant to symbolize the five inhabited continents. But in Beijing, Africa's presence feels barely bigger than a dot. Adeagbo notes that the Summer Olympics "see a rainbow of nations represented" and wonders why that's less the case in winter, given that "sport is supposed to be democratic for all."

"Is this the European Olympics or is this an Olympics that reflects the world?" she asked in a video interview with The Associated Press. "So hopefully this will be a catalyzing moment to help everybody kind of regroup and think about a different way forward."

"We're talking about the Olympics; we shouldn't have complete exclusion," Adeagbo said. "Given the resources and support, Africans are just as capable."

Looking ahead to 2026, the International Olympic Committee says it will reexamine qualification rules and quotas, which African Olympians want used to carve more space for them. But there's no sign of IOC dismay about Africa's retreat in Beijing.

"There are five continents represented here," said James Macleod, head of an IOC sponsorship program that helped fund athletes on their Beijing journeys.

The IOC gave individual scholarships to 429 athletes. Europe, with 295 beneficiaries, got the lion's share. Africa, with 16, got the least. Five African recipients qualified for Beijing. The Americas (50), Asia (47), and Oceania (21) got the remainder. The IOC says its aim is Winter Games that are more competitive, rather than "artificially" more universal.

African recipients say the funding was vital for them. They argue that increased financing for African winter athletes would see more qualify. Abeda — born in Canada, where his parents resettled in the 1990s, fleeing war in Eritrea — said US\$1,500 per month in IOC funding helped cover his living, training, coaching and equipment costs. He wants private businesses "to step up," too.

"At Pyeongchang, it was really great to see more Africans," he said. "At these Games, there's very little. So I am disappointed."

Adeagbo said her bobsled alone, cost \$40,000.

"I don't think any sport should be just for the privileged and these are the things that we need to have real conversations about," she said. "Sport is not meant to be just for one group."

The IOC says COVID-19 disruptions that played havoc with athlete preparations could partially explain Africa's slump. Frimpong's hopes of qualifying again for Ghana in skeleton were dashed by coronavirus positives that forced him out of races ahead of Beijing. South Africa also likely would have sent athletes had it not been for the pandemic, says Cobus Rademeyer, head of social sciences at South Africa's Sol Plaatje University, who has written on Africa's history at the Winter Games.

"The pandemic has definitely broken the momentum," Rademeyer said by email to The AP. He expects Africa to bounce back for 2026, writing: "Although some people see the participation of African athletes at the Winter Olympics as 'glory-hunters,' it has been an inspiration for many others."

Skier Carlos Maeder, born in Ghana and adopted by Swiss parents, says he's been amazed by a flood of messages from supportive Ghanaians. Also an IOC scholarship recipient, he raced in the snow-hit giant slalom but skied out in the first run.

At 43, he'd like to find other Ghanaians to follow in his footsteps and "will ski as long as it's necessary to find some."

"I hope that these games will be a door opener," he said. "It's not just about the African continent: We are spread around the world. So that makes it important that our continent is represented."

No 'Fauda': Hamas TV series glorifies fight against Israel

By WAFSA SHURFA Associated Press

BEIT LAHIYA, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Palestinian militants scrambled out of the tunnel and attacked an

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Israeli tank in broad daylight as gunfire and explosions echoed across the Gaza frontier.

This time it wasn't the start of another war, but an action scene filmed for a TV series produced by the territory's militant Hamas rulers.

The 30-episode series, titled "Fist of the Free," presents the fighters as scrappy heroes outwitting a better-armed Israeli military. Unlike "Fauda," the hit Israeli drama that deals with some of the same subject matter, it is unlikely to get picked up by Netflix.

It's the latest such production by the media arm of Hamas, which has invested heavily in its offerings despite a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade on Gaza since the Islamic militant group seized power in 2007.

The shows are aired on Hamas-run TV, and "Fist of the Free" will debut during the upcoming holy month of Ramadan, when viewership soars after the dawn-to-dusk fast and networks across the Muslim world debut big-budget offerings.

"The idea of our films and series centers on our struggle with the enemy," says Sadi al-Attar, the assistant director. He says the latest show is a response to "Zionist aggression."

The storyline centers on a real-life botched Israeli raid in Gaza in 2018. An undercover unit disguised as Palestinian aid workers aroused suspicions in a town near the border. When their cover was blown, a gun battle ensued in which seven Hamas fighters and an Israeli commander were killed.

In real life, the undercover unit was detected by local residents, the death toll was lopsided and Israel successfully evacuated 16 undercover agents. In the dramatization, Hamas brilliantly outwits the Israelis and scores a major victory.

Al-Attar rejects any comparisons to "Fauda," which centers on an undercover Israeli unit that poses as Palestinians and conducts daring raids against militants. That series presents complex characters confronting moral tradeoffs, but has been criticized for its far-fetched plot twists and for reducing Palestinians to the bad guys in a cop drama-like shoot-'em-up.

"We are not responding to them in their Fauda program," al-Attar said. He acknowledged having watched a few scenes of the Netflix thriller, calling it "lying and misleading."

Hamas and Israel have fought four wars and dozens of more limited skirmishes over the years. Israel and Western countries view Hamas as a terrorist group because of its long history of attacks on Israeli civilians. Hamas, which won Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, portrays itself as the "resistance" to military occupation, a view reflected in its media productions.

The group has produced seven series and several movies centered on the conflict, most of them aired on its Al-Aqsa satellite TV network during Ramadan.

In 2017, it built an entire movie set based on Jerusalem's Old City, including a replica of the Dome of the Rock — part of a holy site that is sacred to Jews and Muslims and has been a persistent flashpoint for Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Al-Attar declined to say how much was being spent on the latest series, which he said was funded by donations.

There were no cranes on set, so overhead shots were taken by drone or by a cameraman sitting on another man's shoulders. Crew members used their camera batteries to detonate mock explosives. The filming took place at a Hamas military base near the frontier.

The cast is recruited locally, from a population that has had little contact with Israelis since the Hamas takeover and the tightening of the blockade.

Zohair al-Bebisi, a 64-year-old who has never set foot in Israel, was cast as David, an Israeli commando tasked with sneaking into Gaza to recover high-tech equipment captured by wily Hamas militants.

"It's the first time I play the role of an Israeli intelligence officer," al-Bebisi said as he rested between takes. He described his character as "very cunning," with a knack for getting out of dangerous situations — until his luck runs out.

Spoiler alert: David is killed by friendly fire.

The propaganda goes largely unchecked inside Gaza, where Hamas does not tolerate dissent. Since taking power in 2007, Hamas has jailed journalists and activists, banned newspapers, shuttered rival TV

stations and restricted movie screenings.

Its rivals in the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, which is confined to parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, have also cracked down on dissent.

Hamas is hoping to gain a wider viewership of its latest production, offering the rights for free to channels in Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Turkey. But it will struggle to break through the Ramadan lineup, when production houses across the region crank out top-quality dramas with marquee actors.

It is also likely to face barriers online, as Facebook, YouTube and streaming services censor content perceived as inciting violence.

But al-Attar says they wouldn't take a meeting with Netflix even if it asked, because the streaming service "is biased toward the occupation."

For high court nominees 'When's your birthday?' matters

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Help wanted: Well-respected liberal jurist. Black. Female. Seniors need not apply.

President Joe Biden's search for a nominee to the Supreme Court isn't just limited by credentials, race and gender. The reality for the nation's oldest president — and for any president — is that for a lifetime appointment on the nation's highest court, youth is particularly prized.

It's simple math. The younger Biden's nominee, the longer she is likely to serve as a justice. The longer she serves as a justice, the longer liberals can expect to hold a seat on the court now dominated 6-3 by conservatives.

While a nominee's experience and academic and work credentials may be most important in the selection, how long the person can serve is clearly significant for the 79-year-old Biden in what may well be his only chance to nominate a justice.

"Younger is considered better, but not so young that you don't have a track record," said C. Boyden Gray, White House counsel to former President George H.W. Bush. And the age issue extends to nominating federal judges at all levels, he said.

Age may be most significant at the Supreme Court. It is often said that a president's picks are among his most lasting legacies, with recent justices serving 25 years or more. Retiring Justice Stephen Breyer, nominated by President Bill Clinton at 55, is retiring at 83.

Balancing age and experience, recent presidents have picked nominees in their late 40s and 50s, with 60 generally seen as the very upper end of the range. All three of Biden's most talked-about potential nominees are in that age window, but there's also a decade between the youngest and oldest.

California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger is 45, while South Carolina federal Judge J. Michelle Childs is 55. In between is Washington, D.C., federal appeals court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, 51.

On Tuesday the court transparency group Fix the Court tweeted that Republicans are pushing Childs for the seat "in part because she's the oldest of the potential nominees & more likely to die sooner." The group then voiced support for 18-year term limits, which would make age less a factor.

Breyer's fellow Clinton nominee Ruth Bader Ginsburg was nominated at 60 and served until her death in 2020 at 87.

"Some people thought I was too old for the job," Ginsburg said in 2019 at an event with Clinton. Noting that she was starting her 27th year on the court, she told the former president: "If you worried about my age, it was unnecessary."

"I did worry about it," the Democrat acknowledged, describing age as a "serious issue."

The concern about a nominee's potential longevity cuts across party lines. In 1991, when Justice Thurgood Marshall announced his retirement at 82, then-President George H.W. Bush said he would look for a nominee who "believes in the Constitution of the United States" and also "somebody who will be able to serve for a while."

He chose Clarence Thomas, then 43. No nominee since has been younger. Last year, Thomas marked 30 years on the bench. The Supreme Court's youngest-ever nominee was 32-year-old Joseph Story, who

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joined the court in 1812 and served for more than 30 years.

Former President Donald Trump also picked young nominees. Neil Gorsuch was the youngest in a quarter century when he was nominated at 49. He was followed by Brett Kavanaugh, then 53, and Amy Coney Barrett, then 48. The remaining members of the court — Chief Justice John Roberts, Justice Elena Kagan, Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Justice Samuel Alito — were nominated at 50, 50, 54 and 55 respectively.

Knowing he was facing an uphill confirmation fight in 2016 to replace conservative Justice Antonin Scalia who died unexpectedly, President Barack Obama picked a moderate who was also older. Merrick Garland was 63. Still, Republicans controlling the Senate refused to hold a hearing for Garland, now Biden's attorney general.

For Biden, age may be of particular significance. While Trump appointed three justices, Biden is unlikely to be able to leave the same stamp on the court, even if he runs for and wins a second term. After Breyer, the court's two oldest members — Thomas, 73, and Alito, 71 — are conservatives unlikely to retire during a Democratic administration. The court's remaining liberals, Sotomayor and Kagan, are 67 and 61 and could still serve at least a decade longer or more.

As Biden decides whom to nominate, he'll be weighing multiple factors: candidates' records, Ivy League versus state school educations, prosecutor versus defense attorney backgrounds.

"I think younger ages are definitely a factor, and rightly, but not the only factor," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat on the Judiciary Committee and one of the senators who have met with Biden about the nomination.

Biden himself has acknowledged the role that age can play. In a 2010 interview as vice president, defending Obama's choice of Kagan, he brushed off criticism that the president had chosen another Harvard graduate and pointed out that she was then the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer.

He described her as "ready, willing, able" and, adding another key quality: "the right age."

A stunning fall for ex-Honduran president wanted in US

By MARLON GONZÁLEZ and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — The arrest of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández and the images that followed — a leader shackled and paraded before the cameras like a common criminal — were a stunning reversal for a man who for years seemed impervious to growing allegations of corruption.

While president from 2014 until last month, he had the support of U.S. officials waging the war on drugs and some diplomats who did not see a better option. But less than three weeks out of office, his utility exhausted, the U.S. government moved for his extradition and the chance to make him an example in a region wracked by corruption.

Hernández was scheduled to make his initial court appearance in Tegucigalpa on Wednesday. He was arrested Tuesday at the request of the U.S. government on charges of drug trafficking, using weapons for drug trafficking and conspiracy to use weapons in drug trafficking.

U.S. prosecutors in the Southern District of New York have accused Hernández in recent years of funding his political rise with profits from drug traffickers in exchange for protecting their shipments.

For years, images were Hernández's crutch. Accusations of ties to drug traffickers would stream from a New York City courtroom and Hernández would soon pop up in the United States or at an event with U.S. Embassy officials in Honduras, reinforcing the idea that he had U.S. government support and it was just bitter drug traffickers telling stories to seek revenge for his efforts against them.

All the while, popular discontent with his government grew in Honduras. There weren't enough jobs, street gangs controlled entire towns and neighborhoods, drought and hurricanes hit swaths of the country in a devastating one-two punch and Hernández began to symbolize all their troubles.

Hondurans fled by the thousands, literally walking out of the country with nothing but a change of clothes in their knapsacks. Migrant caravans drew international attention and never lacked groups of young migrants shouting "Get out JOH!" using his initials.

"How great that they arrested him, he was very corrupt," said Ilchis Álvarez, a Honduran migrant in

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southern Mexico.

"He was in the government for 12 years, caused a lot of people to migrate, there was a lot of corruption, there was a lot of unemployment," said Alvarez, who was protesting Tuesday in Tapachula for Mexican authorities to give legal passage for migrants like himself to the U.S. border.

Alvarez said he lost his job in a wire factory during Hernández's presidency because the president raised taxes. He spent two years looking for another job before becoming a cab driver, but still couldn't support his two kids so a month ago he set out hoping to reach the United States.

Another migrant, Zayda Vayadares, hadn't even heard of Hernández's arrest, but expressed joy. She was traveling with her 6-year-old autistic son. She said she never received help from the government.

"The country was bad economically (under Hernández), you could never find a job," said Vayadares, who camped with other migrants in downtown Tapachula. "The gangs were always extorting and killing people."

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, who had pushed for sanctions against Hernández, said in a statement, "It was completely unacceptable that the U.S. government was supporting former President Hernández despite his extensive ties to narco-trafficking, including an alleged pattern of using campaign funds and taxpayer resources to protect and facilitate drug shipments to the United States."

When Xiomara Castro's third run for president gained traction with the help of timely alliances, Hondurans' dissatisfaction coalesced around her candidacy. They swept her into office in last November's elections intent on punishing Hernández and his National Party.

A catchy song played on a loop at Castro campaign events predicted that Hernández was headed for trial in New York.

On Tuesday, Castro's Vice President Salvador Nasralla shared video of Hernández being led away from his home in shackles, writing: "This is what awaits the accomplices of Juan Orlando Hernández who produced so much pain, emigration and death for the Honduran people."

José Heriberto Godoy, a 34-year-old Tegucigalpa businessman, said Hernández's arrest was bound to happen. "It's really what we expected."

Still, the images of the handcuffed former president were hard to watch. "I really felt sorry for him because we are human and we have a heart," he said.

Herson Vásquez said he thought of Hernández's mother, wife and children, but also how corrupt his arrest made Honduras look to the rest of the world.

"If he's guilty of all the crimes that they accuse him of he has to pay," the 43-year-old music teacher said.

Olympics Live: US wins gold, silver in ski slopestyle

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

Freestyler skier Alex Hall led a 1-2 American finish in the men's Olympic slopestyle competition with a trick on his first run where he completely stopped his rotation mid-air and went the other direction.

Hall's opening run earned a score of 90.01 and it stood up throughout the competition. His teammate Nick Goepper turned in a creative run on his second pass to earn silver. Jesper Tjader of Sweden took home bronze.

The Americans have now earned six of nine Olympic medals since the event made its debut in 2014. Goepper has three of them, including silver from the 2018 Pyeongchang Games and bronze from the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Companies revert to more normal operations as COVID wanes

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For the first time in two years for many people, the American workplace is transforming into something that resembles pre-pandemic days.

Tyson Foods said Tuesday it was ending mask requirements for its vaccinated workers in some facilities.

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Walmart and Amazon — the nation's No. 1 and 2 largest private employers respectively — will no longer require fully vaccinated workers to don masks in stores or warehouses unless required under local or state laws. Tech companies like Microsoft and Facebook that had allowed employees to work fully remote are now setting mandatory dates to return to the office after a series of fits and starts.

"There has been a sharp decline in COVID-19 cases across the country over the past weeks," Amazon told workers in a memo. "Along with increasing vaccination rates across the country, this is a positive sign we can return to the path to normal operations."

Microsoft, based in Redmond, Washington, on Monday announced plans to open its West Coast buildings on Feb. 28 with a hybrid mix of working in the office and home. Facebook parent Meta Platforms, which had planned to bring workers back to the office on Jan. 31, will now require them to return — with proof of a booster shot — on March 28.

That's a stark reversal from just weeks ago when the omicron variant of COVID-19 was peaking, prompting companies to double-down on mask requirements and enforce daily health screenings while delaying return-to-office plans for remote workers.

The U.S. has since seen COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations plummet. Cases have plunged from 455,000 a day two weeks ago to 150,000 on Monday. COVID-19 hospitalizations have fallen 45% from the peak one month ago and are now at levels similar to when the country was coming out of the delta variant surge in September. And nearly 65% of Americans are fully vaccinated.

"I think we are in a much better place than we were six months ago, or a year ago," said Jeff Levin-Scherz, an executive in the health practice of consulting firm Willis Towers Watson. "We are somewhat better protected than we were at any point in the past. But the new normal isn't going to be the old normal. It will be somewhat different."

Many office workers will still be required to wear masks in the office and get regularly tested. Front-line workers like store clerks and restaurant staff who were already physically going to work will have to adjust to maskless colleagues and customers — whether they like it or not.

Then there are the old realities of pre-pandemic routines for some: dealing with rush-hour commuter traffic, putting on dressier clothes again and working alongside co-workers for the first time in two years.

Megan Chichester, a 48-year-old graphic artist who works at a packaging company in De Soto, Kansas, received notice that she will have to return to the office in April. She has only stopped in the office a couple times since the pandemic began.

"I'm excited to see people in person because I have missed them," she said. "But then on the other side, it's also a little strange because I'm so used to not being around people that there's a little bit of anxiety about it."

Adding to the anxiety is the fact that she has seen return-to-office dates scuttled repeatedly over the past couple years when cases surged.

"It's kind of like you're getting whiplash because you don't know what month you're really returning," she said.

Several states, including New York and New Jersey, have retreated from some of their own restrictions as their case counts decline but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is not yet ready to tell everyone to take off their masks.

Many businesses — small and large — are figuring out what's best for them based on the attitudes of their customers and workers.

JPMorgan, which started requiring workers to return to the office in some form in early February, said that masking is now voluntary for employees who are fully vaccinated, except for those in cities or localities that still require it; unvaccinated workers will still need to wear a mask. Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley announced a similar policy in their U.S. offices.

Brian Anderson, marketing manager at a supplement store outside of Chicago, said they've been under a state mask mandate since last August. But as soon as Illinois lifts the mandate Feb. 28, they won't require customers to wear masks.

"Our customer base is more fitness-focused and definitely not mask wearers," he said. Store workers can wear a mask, but it won't be required.

By contrast, Jeff Moriarty, co-owner of Moriarty's Gem Art in Indiana, says they'll continue to ask customers to wear masks even though there hasn't been a mandate in his state since 2021. His business provides masks and hand sanitizers at the entrance.

"The reason behind this is because we do have older associates working in our store, and our owners are over the age of 65," he said. "We understand that some customers will choose not to wear masks, but we will continue to have it as a recommendation option."

Companies that have imposed their own vaccination requirements for staff also must navigate the changing dynamics surrounding the virus.

The Supreme Court last month knocked down a federal nationwide workplace mandate but companies are allowed to maintain their own requirements and many are keeping them in place. Others, like Starbucks, have decided to eliminate their mandate in the aftermath of the high court ruling.

Peter Naughton, a 46-year-old who works at the Walmart in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said most workers are worried about the mask requirement going away. He plans to keep wearing his mask because it protects him and other people.

"It's not over. It's still here. It's going to be here for a while," Naughton said of the pandemic. "So we need to, you know, take precautions ...You never know if another variant is coming, which is very possible."

US hasn't verified Russian pullback of troops near Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that he welcomed a security dialogue with the West, and his military reported pulling back some of its troops near Ukraine. But U.S. President Joe Biden said the U.S. had not verified Russia's claim and that an invasion was still a distinct possibility.

Putin said he does not want war and would rely on negotiations in his efforts to eliminate any chance that Ukraine could one day join NATO. At the same time, he did not commit to a full pullback of troops, saying Russia's next moves in the standoff will depend on how the situation evolves.

In remarks at the White House, Biden promised that the U.S. would continue to give diplomacy "every chance" to prevent a Russian invasion, but he struck a skeptical tone about Moscow's intentions. Biden also insisted that the U.S. and its allies would not "sacrifice basic principles" respecting Ukraine sovereignty.

"Two paths are still open," Biden said. "But let there be no doubt: If Russia commits this breach by invading Ukraine, responsible nations around the world will not hesitate to respond. If we do not stand for freedom where it is at risk today, we'll surely pay a steeper price tomorrow."

Putin's overtures soothed global markets that have been on edge amid the worst East-West tensions in decades. Washington and its European allies remained cautious, saying they want to see evidence of a Russian pullback. Biden said 150,000 Russian forces are now massed near Ukraine and in Belarus, an increase from an earlier U.S. estimate of 130,000 troops.

Russia's claim that it pulled back troops "would be good, but we have not yet verified that," Biden said. "Indeed, our analysts indicate that they remain very much in a threatening position."

The U.S. and NATO, which continue to warn that Russia could invade at any time, have sent troops and military supplies to shore up alliance members in Eastern Europe. Russia has denied having such plans. It wants the West to keep Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations out of the alliance, halt weapons deployments near Russian borders and roll back forces from Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and its allies have roundly rejected those demands, but offered to engage in talks with Russia on ways to bolster security in Europe.

Speaking after meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin said the West agreed to discuss a ban on missile deployment to Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures — issues that Moscow put on the table years ago.

He said Russia is open to discuss "some of those elements," but added that it would do so only in com-

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bination "with the main issues that are of primary importance for us."

Asked if there could be a war in Europe, Putin said Russia doesn't want it but that Ukraine's bid to join NATO posed a major security threat to his country.

While Scholz reiterated that NATO's eastward expansion "is not on the agenda — everyone knows that very well," Putin retorted that Moscow will not be assuaged by such assurances.

"They are telling us it won't happen tomorrow," Putin said. "Well, when will it happen? The day after tomorrow? What does it change for us in the historic perspective? Nothing."

Scholz also said diplomatic options are "far from exhausted," and he praised the announcement of a troop withdrawal as a "good signal," adding: "We hope that more will follow."

The Russian Defense Ministry released images of tanks and howitzers rolling onto railway platforms and more tanks rolling across snowy fields. It did not disclose where or when the images were taken, or where the vehicles were headed, other than "to places of permanent deployment."

Biden acknowledged the likelihood that sanctions imposed on Russia in retaliation for an invasion would have significant blowback on the American economy, including possible price hikes and disruption to the nation's energy supply.

"The American people understand that defending democracy and liberty is never without cost," Biden said. "I will not pretend this will be painless."

He said the administration was trying to preempt supply issues by working with energy producers and shippers on contingency plans. The president said he would work with Congress on unspecified "additional measures to protect consumers and address the impact of prices at the pump."

Russian forces continue to threaten Ukraine along the eastern border and from the Black Sea Crimean Peninsula that Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014, the year when it also backed a separatist insurgency in the country's east. More Russian troops loom over Ukraine in Belarus, where they were deployed for sweeping joint drills.

Ukraine expressed skepticism about Russia's statements of a pullback.

"We won't believe when we hear, we'll believe when we see. When we see troops pulling out, we'll believe in de-escalation," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that "so far, we have not seen ... any signs of reduced Russian military presence on the borders of Ukraine," adding that the alliance wants to see a "significant and enduring withdrawal" of forces, troops and heavy equipment.

Meanwhile, a series of cyberattacks on Tuesday knocked out the websites of the Ukrainian army, the defense ministry and major banks. There was no indication that the relatively low-level denial-of-service attacks might be a smokescreen for more serious cyber mischief. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the U.S. has not yet determined who was behind the attacks.

Few Russians expect a war, following the Kremlin's dismissal of Western warnings as "hysteria" and "absurdity."

In a village in Russia's Belgorod region, about 30 kilometers (18 miles) from Ukraine's border, residents carried on with life as usual, even as more military personnel have been passing through village streets.

"We are friends with Ukraine," villager Lyudmila Nechvolod said. "We are really on the border, we really have relatives here and there, everyone has somebody there (on the Ukrainian side). No one wants war."

Diplomatic efforts continued Tuesday.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Biden spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday about the evolving crisis.

Meanwhile, Russian lawmakers urged Putin to recognize rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine as independent states. The State Duma, Russia's lower house, voted to submit an appeal to Putin to that effect.

Putin said the request reflects the Russian public's sympathy for the suffering of people trapped in the conflict in eastern Ukraine that has killed over 14,000 since 2014. He noted, however, that Russia continues to believe a 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany should serve as the main vehicle for a settlement of the separatist conflict.

Putin's statement signaled that he wasn't inclined to back the parliament proposal that would effectively invalidate the 2015 agreement, which marked a major diplomatic coup for Moscow and asked Kyiv to offer broad self-rule to the separatist territories. It has been resented by many in Ukraine, and its implementation has stalled.

Sandy Hook families settle for \$73M with gun maker Remington

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — The families of nine victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting announced Tuesday they have agreed to a \$73 million settlement of a lawsuit against the maker of the rifle used to kill 20 first graders and six educators in 2012.

The case was watched closely by gun control advocates, gun rights supporters and manufacturers, because of its potential to provide a roadmap for victims of other shootings to sue firearm makers.

The families and a survivor of the shooting sued Remington in 2015, saying the company should have never sold such a dangerous weapon to the public. They said their focus was on preventing future mass shootings by forcing gun companies to be more responsible with their products and how they market them.

At a news conference, some of the parents behind the lawsuit described a bittersweet victory.

"Nothing will bring Dylan back," said Nicole Hockley, whose 6-year-old son was killed in the shooting. "My hope for this lawsuit," she said, "is that by facing and finally being penalized for the impact of their work, gun companies along with the insurance and banking industries that enable them will be forced to make their practices safer than they've ever been, which will save lives and stop more shootings."

President Joe Biden called the settlement "historic," saying, "While this settlement does not erase the pain of that tragic day, it does begin the necessary work of holding gun manufacturers accountable for manufacturing weapons of war and irresponsibly marketing these firearms."

Gun rights groups said the settlement will have little effect on rifle sales and gun makers, who continue to be shielded from liability in most cases under federal law. But some experts said it may prompt insurers to pressure gun makers into making some changes.

"We might expect to see increased pressure from insurance companies for gun manufacturers to avoid the kind of either design choices or marketing practices that gave rise to this litigation," said Timothy D. Lytton, a law professor at Georgia State University.

The settlement is not the first between victims and a gun manufacturer. Families of eight victims of the Washington, D.C.-area snipers won a \$2.5 million settlement in 2004, with \$550,000 coming from Bushmaster Firearms Inc. and the rest from the gun dealer. But Lytton said the impact of the Sandy Hook settlement could be greater because it is so much higher.

The civil court case in Connecticut focused on how the firearm used by the Newtown shooter — a Bushmaster XM15-E2S rifle — was marketed, alleging it targeted younger, at-risk males in advertising and product placement in violent video games. In one of Remington's ads, it features the rifle against a plain backdrop and the phrase: "Consider Your Man Card Reissued."

As part of the settlement, Remington also agreed to allow the families to release numerous documents they obtained during the lawsuit including ones showing how it marketed the weapon, the families said. It's not clear when those documents will be released.

Remington had argued there was no evidence to establish that its marketing had anything to do with the shooting.

The company also had said the lawsuit should have been dismissed because of the federal law that gives broad immunity to the gun industry. The Connecticut Supreme Court ruled Remington could be sued under state law over how it marketed the rifle, under an exception to the federal law. The gun maker appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined to hear the case.

Whether similar lawsuits can proceed against gun makers remains unsettled because the U.S. Supreme Court has not yet weighed in on the exception to the 2005 immunity law used by the Sandy Hook families, Lytton said.

In his statement Tuesday, Biden called on Congress to repeal the immunity law. Meanwhile, he said he would "continue to urge state and local lawmakers, lawyers, and survivors of gun violence to pursue efforts to replicate the success of the Sandy Hook families."

Remington, one of the nation's oldest gun makers founded in 1816, filed for bankruptcy for a second time in 2020 and its assets were later sold off to several companies. The manufacturer was weighed down by lawsuits and retail sales restrictions following the school shooting.

Adam Lanza, the 20-year-old gunman in the Sandy Hook shooting, used the rifle made by Remington and legally owned by his mother to kill the children and educators on Dec. 14, 2012, after having killed his mother at their Newtown home. He then used a handgun to kill himself as police arrived.

Lanza's severe and deteriorating mental health problems, his preoccupation with violence and access to his mother's weapons "proved a recipe for mass murder," according to Connecticut's child advocate.

Messages seeking comment were left for Remington and its lawyers Tuesday.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation, a Newtown-based group that represents gunmakers, said courts should not have allowed the case to proceed and it believes the plaintiffs would have lost at trial. It also said the settlement should have no effect on the The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, the 2005 federal law that shielded gun makers from liability.

"The plaintiffs never produced any evidence that Bushmaster advertising had any bearing or influence over Nancy Lanza's decision to legally purchase a Bushmaster rifle, nor on the decision of murderer Adam Lanza to steal that rifle, kill his mother in her sleep, and go on to commit the rest of his horrendous crimes," the group said in a statement.

Damages from the settlement will be paid only to the families who signed onto the lawsuit, and not other victims' families. The families have not decided yet what they will be doing with the money from the settlement, said their spokesperson, Andrew Friedman.

Four insurers for the now-bankrupt company agreed to pay the full amount of coverage available, totaling \$73 million, the plaintiffs said.

"Today is about what is right and what is wrong," said Francine Wheeler, whose 6-year-old son, Ben, was killed in the shooting. "Our legal system has given us some justice today. But ... David and I will never have true justice. True justice would be our 15-year-old healthy and standing next to us right now. But Benny will never be 15. He will be 6 forever because he is gone forever."

Alec Baldwin sued by family of cinematographer killed on set

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The family of a cinematographer shot and killed on the set of the film "Rust" sued Alec Baldwin and the movie's producers Tuesday alleging their "callous" disregard in the face of safety complaints led directly to her death.

At a news conference announcing the lawsuit, attorneys for the husband and 9-year-old son of Halyna Hutchins said that Baldwin refused training for the type of "cross-draw" he was performing when he fired the shot that killed her.

Baldwin's attorney responded that any claim the actor was reckless is "entirely false."

The suit filed in New Mexico's Santa Fe County in the name of Matthew and Andros Hutchins shows a text message exchange between a camera operator and a producer in which a complaint over gun safety was met with what the suit calls "callous sarcasm."

The operator, Lane Luper, texted unit production manager Katherine Walters saying: "We've now had 3 accidental discharges. This is super unsafe."

Walters responds: "Accidental discharge on the firearm? Awesome. Sounds good."

At least four other lawsuits have been filed over the shooting, but this is the first directly tied to one of the two people shot.

The defendants' "reckless conduct and cost-cutting measures led to the death of Halyna Hutchins," attorney Brian Panish said.

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Had proper protocols been followed, the suit says, "Halyna Hutchins would be alive and well, hugging her husband and 9-year-old son."

Baldwin, who was also a producer on the film, was pointing a gun at Hutchins inside a small church during the setup for the filming of a scene for the Western in New Mexico on Oct. 21 when it went off, killing Hutchins and wounding the director, Joel Souza. The attorneys showed an animated recreation of the shooting at the news conference.

Baldwin has said he was pointing the gun at Hutchins at her instruction and it went off without him pulling the trigger.

The suit says industry standards call for using a rubber or similar prop gun during the setup, and there was no call for a real gun.

It also says that both Baldwin and assistant director David Halls, who handed him the gun, should have checked the revolver for live bullets.

The suit also names as defendants Halls, Walters, the film's armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed, and ammunition supplier Seth Kenney.

"Any claim that Alec was reckless is entirely false," Aaron Dyer, attorney for Baldwin and other producers, said in a statement Tuesday. "He, Halyna and the rest of the crew relied on the statement by the two professionals responsible for checking the gun that it was a 'cold gun' – meaning there is no possibility of a discharge."

He added that "actors should be able to rely on armorers and prop department professionals, as well as assistant directors, rather than deciding on their own when a gun is safe to use."

Last month Baldwin turned over his cellphone to investigators, and Dyer said he continues to cooperate fully with the investigation.

Authorities have described "some complacency" in how weapons were handled on the "Rust" set. They have said it is too soon to determine whether charges will be filed.

Baldwin said he does not believe he will be criminally charged in the shooting.

Several crew members have filed lawsuits, including Gutierrez Reed, who blamed Kenney for the shooting.

Her attorney Jason Bowles did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the new lawsuit. An attorney for Kenney could not be found. He has said previously that he was sure his company did not send any live rounds to the set.

In an interview with ABC, Baldwin said Hutchins had asked him to point the gun just off camera and toward her armpit before it went off.

"I didn't pull the trigger," Baldwin said. "I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger at them. Never."

Panish said Tuesday that the assertion was unrealistic.

"I think it's clear what happened," he said. "Alec had the gun in his hand, he shot it, Halyna was killed."

The complaint does not cite a dollar amount, but Panish said it would be considerable.

"A longtime marriage, a soulmate is lost, and a boy to be raised without a mother at a young age is a tremendous loss," he said. "And anyone who's even been close to that experience knows, that that goes on forever and ever and ever."

The plaintiffs' attorney in New Mexico, Randi McGinn, said the lawsuit is likely to move much more quickly than if it were filed in California, as others have been.

"In New Mexico, we're used to people coming in from out of town to play cowboy, who don't know how to use guns," McGinn said.

Hutchins, 42, grew up on a remote Soviet military base and worked on documentary films in Eastern Europe before studying film in Los Angeles and embarking on a promising movie-making career.

On her Instagram page, Hutchins identified herself as a "restless dreamer" and "adrenaline junkie."

In 2019, American Cinematographer called her "one of the year's rising stars."

Dyer's statement said: "Everyone's hearts and thoughts remain with Halyna's family as they continue to process this unspeakable tragedy."

A gun in your carry-on? Some are calling for stiffer fines

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

With a surge in guns being discovered at airport checkpoints, some security experts are suggesting higher fines and even putting violators on a no-fly list to prevent firearms from getting on planes.

Airport screeners found 5,972 guns at checkpoints last year, easily breaking a record set in 2019 despite a drop in air travel, and 86% of those guns were loaded, according to the Transportation Security Administration.

Guns seizures are rising as airlines report record numbers of disruptive passengers on flights. Together, that "makes for a toxic combination," Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, D-N.J., said Tuesday.

It's against federal regulations to pack a gun in a carry-on bag. People who are caught are rarely prosecuted, but they can face civil penalties ranging from \$1,500 to \$13,910.

At a hearing Tuesday of the House transportation-security subcommittee, which Coleman chairs, airport officials and some lawmakers argued for raising the fines.

Balram Bheodari, general manager of Atlanta's main airport said fines should rise and violators should be required to attend gun-safety classes. He said Congress should also consider putting violators on the federal no-fly list until they complete safety training, and suspending them from quick-screening programs such as PreCheck.

Jason Wallis, police chief at the operator of the airport in Portland, Oregon, supported higher fines. He said maximum penalties are rarely if ever imposed, and the current fines are clearly not working as a deterrent.

However, Rep. Carlos Gimenez, a Florida Republican, said most people who bring a gun to the airport forgot it was in their carry-on bag — airport officials agreed that's what almost all passengers caught with a gun say — and that higher fines won't reduce the number of guns found at checkpoints.

"I'm not sure where heightened penalties are going to avert that, because it was a mistake," Gimenez said. "You could charge me \$100,000 if I forgot that there was something in there. I'm not sure that's going to avert anything."

Coleman responded that people should realize that they are taking their carry-on bag on a plane.

"It's hard for me to believe that everybody that gets caught ... forgot they had it," she said, "and even if they did forget they had it, it's still an illegal act and we need to treat it as such."

Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson had more guns detected than any other U.S. airport last year. In November, a passenger whose bag was pulled aside for more screening reached into it, and his gun discharged. Authorities believe it was an accident, but the incident — involving a convicted felon — set off a panicked melee and closed the busy airport for more than two hours.

Wallis said when a gun is discovered at an airport, authorities check to see if it was stolen or involved in a previous crime. They question the passenger, forward information to the FBI, but rarely file criminal charges — it's usually just a civil penalty. Sometimes authorities seize the gun, but more often they don't, which leads to another safety issue, he said.

The passenger who was questioned for having a gun "missed their flight, and now you have an armed person in a public area," Wallis said.

Federal rules allow unloaded guns to be placed in checked bags that go into the cargo hold. They must be in a locked case, and passengers are required to tell the airline about the gun.

Jan. 6 panel subpoenas 6 more in fake GOP electors scheme

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection subpoenaed six more people Tuesday, including former Trump campaign members and state lawmakers, as it further expands its review into efforts to falsely declare Donald Trump the winner of the 2020 election in several swing states.

The panel is seeking testimony and records from individuals who it says had knowledge of or participated in efforts to send false "alternate electors" from seven of the states President Joe Biden rightfully won.

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"The Select Committee is seeking information about efforts to send false slates of electors to Washington and change the outcome of the 2020 election," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee's Democratic chairman, said in a statement. "We're seeking records and testimony from former campaign officials and other individuals in various states who we believe have relevant information about the planning and implementation of those plans."

The individuals subpoenaed include Michael Roman and Gary Michael Brown, who served as directors for Trump's 2020 reelection campaign. The committee believes the two men reportedly promoted allegations of election fraud as well as encouraged state legislators to appoint false slates of electors.

The other four individuals are Pennsylvania State Sen. Douglas Mastriano, Laura Cox, the former chair of the Michigan Republican Party, Arizona State Rep. Mark Finchem and Arizona Republican Party chair Kelli Ward.

Messages requesting comment from Ward, Mastriano, Roman and Finchem were not immediately returned.

Two weeks ago, Ward and her husband filed a lawsuit against the House committee seeking to block a subpoena of their phone records. They were presidential electors who would have voted for Trump in the Electoral College had he won Arizona. Both signed a document falsely claiming they were Arizona's true electors, despite Democrat Biden's victory in the state. No decisions have been issued in the case.

Mastriano, a former Army officer currently seeking Pennsylvania's Republican gubernatorial nomination, was among Trump's most dedicated supporters during the 2020 campaign, helping organize and host a four-hour hearing post-election that was attended by Rudy Giuliani and that Trump addressed remotely.

Finchem was on Capitol grounds on Jan. 6, although he did not enter the building. He has been a vocal critic of the election results in Arizona, contending despite evidence to the contrary that Trump won in Arizona.

He is currently pushing a resolution in the state Legislature that seeks to overturn the state's certification of the 2020 presidential election, listing a slew of debunked election fraud conspiracy theories. He is also seeking the Republican nomination to run for secretary of state, Arizona's chief election officer.

The latest subpoenas come more than a month after the committee issued subpoenas to 14 people over the submission of false Electoral College certificates declaring Trump the winner of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Honduras ex-President Hernández arrested at US request

By MARLON GONZÁLEZ and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Police arrested former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández at his home on Tuesday, following a request by the United States government for his extradition on drug trafficking and weapons charges.

The arrest came less than three weeks after Hernández left office and followed years of allegations by U.S. prosecutors of his alleged links to drug traffickers.

Hernández exited his home flanked by police, shackled at the wrists and ankles, and wearing a bulletproof jacket. He got into a police vehicle and was driven away. A police helicopter waiting nearby took flight and appeared to be escorting the caravan.

The Supreme Court of Justice had designated a judge Tuesday morning to handle the case and hours later the judge signed an order for Hernández's arrest, said court spokesman Melvin Duarte. The security ministry, which had Hernández's home surrounded since Monday evening, moved quickly to take him into custody.

Honduran Security Minister Ramón Sabillón, who was fired by Hernández as head of the National Police in 2014, said that Hernández had conspired "with cartels to traffic (drugs) and corrupt many public institutions, which led to social deterioration and undermined the application of justice in Honduras."

He said the main charges Hernández faces in the U.S. are drug trafficking, using weapons for drug trafficking and conspiracy to use weapons in drug trafficking.

U.S. prosecutors in New York had repeatedly implicated Hernández as a co-conspirator during his brother's

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2019 drug trafficking trial, alleging that his political rise was fueled by drug profits.

His brother, Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández was sentenced to life in prison on drug and weapons charges in March 2021. At his sentencing Assistant U.S. Attorney Matthew Laroche characterized the crimes as "state-sponsored drug trafficking."

Nicole Navas, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Justice, declined comment about the U.S. extradition request.

Hernández released an audio recording via Twitter early Tuesday saying he was "ready and prepared to cooperate and go voluntarily ... to face this situation and defend myself" if an arrest order was issued.

The identity of the judge chosen to handle the case was not immediately released. However, the court's president, Rolando Argueta, is known to be close to Hernández, and all 15 Supreme Court justices were selected by Congress in 2016 during Hernández's first presidential term. They serve seven-year terms, and most come from his National Party.

The U.S. moves were a long-awaited fall for a leader reviled in his home country who enjoyed support from the Trump administration but had been kept at arm's length by the Biden White House, which has targeted Central America's endemic corruption as a root cause of migration.

Last year, U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy was one of a dozen senators who supported a bill that sought to isolate Hernández by imposing sanctions on him and prohibiting the export of tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets that Honduran security forces deployed in recent years against protesters.

"Throughout the past eight years of decay, depravity, and impunity, successive U.S. administrations sullied our reputation by treating Hernandez as a friend and partner," Leahy said in a statement Tuesday.

"By making excuse after excuse for a government that had no legitimacy and that functioned as a criminal enterprise, U.S. officials lost sight of what we stand for and that our real partners are the Honduran people."

Dana Frank, a Honduras expert and professor of history emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said the U.S. wants to look heroic for finally trying to bring Hernández to justice, but that successive administrations going back to President Barack Obama enabled Hernández.

"Hernández was able to wreak havoc with Honduras, with devastating costs, in large part because the U.S. supported him up to the last minute," Frank said.

Honduran criminal lawyer Marlon Duarte said that the extradition process against Hernández would not last more than three months.

He said that at an initial hearing, Hernández would be informed of the charges and would be held on a military base. Within two months, another hearing would be held in which the U.S. evidence would be presented and the judge would make a decision on whether he should be extradited.

If the judge rules for extradition, Hernández would have three days to appeal. Then the appellate court — also named by the Supreme Court — would decide within five days whether to confirm the extradition or overturn the judge's decision. If the judge denies extradition, the U.S. government would have an opportunity to appeal.

Hernández left office Jan. 27 with the swearing in of President Xiomara Castro. The same day, he was sworn in as Honduras' representative to the Central American Parliament.

One of his lawyers, Hermes Ramírez, told local media his client had immunity as a member of the regional parliament and said government forces were not following proper procedures.

Various contingents of the National Police, including special forces as well as military police, were present around Hernández's neighborhood Monday night. Barriers at all of the entrances kept out media and residents.

Members of the security forces entered the area with weapons, wearing balaclavas and with handcuffs dangling from their ballistic vests.

As part of his defense, Hernández often pointed to the fact that Honduras began allowing the extradition of its citizens on drug trafficking charges while he was president of the Congress.

But U.S. prosecutors have alleged that he was taking bribes from drug traffickers on the promise of protecting them once he was president.

Hernández took office on Jan. 27, 2014. He used a friendly Supreme Court to overcome Honduras' constitutional ban on reelection and won a second term in 2017 in elections marred by irregularities.

Prince Andrew to settle sex abuse case, donate to charity

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Britain's Prince Andrew, accused in a lawsuit of sexually abusing a 17-year-old girl supplied to him by financier Jeffrey Epstein, has agreed to settle by making a substantial donation to his accuser's charity and declaring he never meant to malign her character, a court filing revealed Tuesday.

The deal avoids a trial that would have brought further embarrassment to the monarchy. Besides the undisclosed donation to Virginia Giuffre's charity, it says Andrew acknowledges she has suffered as an abuse victim. It did not specify whether Giuffre would personally receive money as part of the settlement.

Attorney David Boies, representing Giuffre, told the New York federal judge overseeing the case in a letter that a settlement in principle had been reached and lawyers on both sides would request a dismissal of the lawsuit within a month.

Andrew's lawyer did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Judge Lewis A. Kaplan said he would suspend the case until March 17, when he might set a trial date if the lawyers don't ask for a dismissal by then.

Giuffre, 38, sued Andrew in August. The American accused the British royal of sexually abusing her while she traveled with Epstein.

Andrew strenuously denied Giuffre's allegations and attempted to get the lawsuit tossed earlier this year.

Attached to the letter from Boies was a statement that read: "Virginia Giuffre and Prince Andrew have reached an out of court settlement. The parties will file a stipulated dismissal upon Ms. Giuffre's receipt of the settlement (the sum of which is not being disclosed)."

"Prince Andrew intends to make a substantial donation to Ms. Giuffre's charity in support of victims' rights. Prince Andrew has never intended to malign Ms. Giuffre's character, and he accepts that she has suffered both as an established victim of abuse and as a result of unfair public attacks."

According to the statement, Prince Andrew acknowledged that Epstein trafficked "countless young girls" over many years and said the prince "regrets his association with Epstein, and commends the bravery of Ms. Giuffre and other survivors in standing up for themselves and others."

He also pledged to support the victims of sex trafficking as part of demonstrating his regret.

The tentative settlement comes weeks after Kaplan last month rejected the prince's attempt to win an early dismissal of the lawsuit, meaning depositions and other evidence gathering could commence.

After Kaplan ruled, Andrew — who had already stepped back from royal duties — was stripped of his honorary military titles and roles and leadership of various charities, known as royal patronages. He also can no longer use the title "his royal highness" in official settings.

The decision was an effort to insulate the House of Windsor from the fallout from potentially years of sordid headlines if the lawsuit moved forward.

It came after more than 150 veterans and serving members of the armed forces asked the queen to strip her second son of his military titles, saying he had failed to live up to the "very highest standards of probity, honesty and honorable conduct" that are expected of British officers.

Mark Stephens, an international lawyer, said pressure from the royal family would have pushed Andrew to settle, particularly as Queen Elizabeth II celebrates her Platinum Jubilee — or 70 years on the throne. The carefully worded settlement — in which Andrew admits only an unfortunate association with Epstein — allows him to save face, Stephens said.

"Essentially, what he's done is throw himself on this judicial grenade to prevent wider damage to the royal family," Stephens told The Associated Press. "And I think he had no alternative but to settle because otherwise this case would have really overshadowed the Queen's Jubilee, and we would have been hearing details of what he was alleged to have done with Virginia Giuffre. And all of that would have really caused problems for the royal family more broadly."

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Stephens estimated that Andrew paid around \$10 million to settle, having gotten the cash after selling a ski chalet at a "fire sale" price. He speculated that the cash would be split into three unequal portions — with Giuffre, her lawyers and charities taking a piece.

Besides the settlement, Giuffre gets to champion her support of abuse victims, and avoid having to relive "this whole experience in the public circus of a courtroom," he said.

"She's been vindicated in the sense that Prince Andrew acknowledges that she's a victim of sexual abuse," Stephens said.

Giuffre asserted that she met Andrew while she traveled frequently with Epstein between 2000 and 2002, when her lawyers maintain she was "on call for Epstein for sexual purposes" and was "lent out to other powerful men," including Andrew.

Her lawsuit said she still suffers significant emotional and psychological distress and harm. She has alleged she had sex with Andrew three times: in London during a 2001 trip, at Epstein's New York mansion when she was 17 and in the Virgin Islands when she was 18.

Andrew repeatedly denied Giuffre's allegations and has said he can't recall ever meeting her, although a photograph of Giuffre and Andrew together in a London townhouse, his arm around her bare midriff, was included in Giuffre's lawsuit against him.

Inconsistencies in her statements over the years that would have been highlighted by Andrew's attorneys at trial may have motivated her, in part, to settle, though she has explained them as innocent mistakes that occur when recalling traumatic events years later.

The settlement may be a relief to others beyond the prince and Giuffre because of the names that might have arisen at trial.

Besides Andrew, Giuffre has said she was sexually trafficked to former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, high-profile lawyer Alan Dershowitz, French modeling scout Jean Luc Brunel and billionaire Glenn Dubin, among others. All have said her accounts are fabricated.

Andrew served in the Royal Navy for two decades, including as a helicopter pilot during the 1982 Falklands War. The honorary military roles he lost included several overseas ones, such as his title as colonel-in-chief of the Royal New Zealand Army Logistic Regiment.

He has spent years combatting concerns about his links with Epstein, the U.S. financier who took his life at age 66 in 2019 in a Manhattan federal lockup while awaiting trial on child sex trafficking charges. Epstein's longtime companion Ghislaine Maxwell was convicted of related charges last month.

A settlement of the Andrew lawsuit would follow deals reached by Giuffre years ago to resolve separate lawsuits against Maxwell and Epstein. It was recently revealed that Epstein settled for \$500,000.

The Associated Press does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they choose to come forward publicly, as Giuffre has.

As Canada protests persist, so do challenges for Trudeau

By ROB GILLIES and DAVID CRARY Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canada has endured bitter divisions in the past, but the current wave of disruptive protests over COVID-19 restrictions is unprecedented in the extent it has undermined public trust in government leadership, starting at the top with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

On Monday, as criticism of his hands-off approach mounted, Trudeau finally took forceful action against the truckers and other protesters who have laid siege to parts of Ottawa, the capital, for more than two weeks. The prime minister invoked emergency powers that could freeze protesters' bank accounts, target crowdfunding sites used to support them and ban blockades at border crossings, airports and in Ottawa.

Unsurprisingly, the pronouncement further angered the protesters and many of their conservative backers; a wave of social media posts denounced Trudeau as a tyrant. But there was also little enthusiasm for the move anywhere else on Canada's political spectrum.

While the pronouncement may halt a sharp recent drop in Trudeau's approval ratings, he may not recover his former popularity, said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

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"Trudeau has become a more polarizing leader than he once was," Wiseman said. "The chance of him contesting the next election, whenever it comes, has been lessened."

The Toronto Star, normally supportive of Trudeau, said in an editorial that emergency powers wouldn't have been needed if political and police leaders had responded effectively early on.

"Many will cheer the Trudeau government's decision to invoke the Emergencies Act," the Star said. "But we will not join the cheering. Federal emergency powers may now be necessary as a last resort, but going that route is a shocking admission of failure by governments at all levels."

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association also was critical, saying the protests did not meet the threshold for invoking emergency powers.

"Governments regularly deal with difficult situations, and do so using powers granted to them by democratically elected representatives," the association said. "Emergency legislation should not be normalized. It threatens our democracy and our civil liberties."

The protests have been depicted in some international news coverage as a dramatic rupture of norms in a country viewed as peaceable and polite. But that stereotype has never been fully accurate — as evidenced by recent mass murders, a gunman's deadly attack on Parliament Hill in 2014 and a series of blockades pitting indigenous protesters against police.

From 1963 through 1970, separatist militants in Quebec carried out scores of robberies and bombings in a campaign culminating with the kidnapping and murder of a provincial minister in October 1970. The prime minister at the time was Justin Trudeau's father, Pierre Trudeau, who invoked the War Measures Act so that armed soldiers could deploy in Quebec streets and police could make arrests without charge.

The younger Trudeau, even while invoking emergency powers, said he has no plans to deploy the military to disperse the protests — in effect, drawing a contrast with his father's choice.

"I think Justin is worried about being seen reproducing his dad's response," said York University political science professor Dennis Pilon, depicting the prime minister as facing a "can't win" situation.

"He thought it was a show of strength to ignore the protesters, but that didn't go down well with some of his supporters," Pilon said. "They felt he should have at least talked to them."

"His father knew what to do to, and Justin doesn't," said Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto. "I look at Justin and I do very much wish we had a more obviously strong person at the helm. I think a lot of Canadians feel like that."

Often branded a "liberal elitist" by his critics, Trudeau refused to meet with the protesters, some of whom called for his government to be overthrown. He depicted protesters as an anti-vaccine "fringe" fueled by disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Trudeau is still remembered for evoking the prospect of "sunny ways" when he took office in 2015 at age 43, the second-youngest Canadian prime minister ever. There have been numerous setbacks since then, but he has been re-elected twice, most recently in September.

In theory, Trudeau could run again when the next election is held within the next few years. But there are widespread doubts that he will do so, given the drop in his popularity and the animosity toward him in much of western Canada.

"If he runs, the election will be more about him than any particular issue," said the University of Toronto's Wiseman. "He will be perceived as having overstayed his welcome."

The truckers' protest began in Alberta, a long-time bastion for Canadian conservatives and one of four provinces, along with Manitoba, Quebec and Saskatchewan, whose premiers have opposed the prime minister's invocation of emergency powers this week.

The demonstrators in Ottawa — and at protests and blockades elsewhere in Canada — have decried vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 precautions, and also denounced the overall performance of Trudeau's Liberal Party government.

Even as Trudeau's approval ratings dipped, however, polls show that most Canadians have supported the pandemic restrictions. The vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated, and the COVID-19 death rate is one-third that of the United States.

For Trudeau, the protest campaign has had international overtones. The truckers' so-called Freedom

Convoy has been cheered on by right-wing figures in the United States, including Fox News personalities, former President Donald Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. A big chunk of the money donated to support the protests also has come from the U.S.

Grace Skogstad, a University of Toronto political science professor, said the fallout from Trudeau's emergency order will depend on whether it succeeds in ending the upheaval.

"If the protesters can be cleared out without anyone getting injured and soon (by the weekend), it will be hard for critics to oppose his actions," Skogstad said via email. "But let's face it, the conservative right will always be critical of Trudeau."

Nik Nanos, a pollster whose Ottawa office affords him a close-up view, doubts that the protesters — including many families with young children — will disperse any time soon.

"In my view, this is the equivalent of an Occupy Wall Street movement that will be at the front door of the House of Commons for a long time," he said. "These truckers want to be in the face of politicians every day until these restrictions are lifted."

"What's clear is that everyone is frustrated with the government — the truckers, the people who oppose the truckers, the people concerned about using the emergency act," Nanos added. "It will be interesting to see what happens if the government plays this card and nothing happens."

Kremlin critic Navalny faces new trial, this time in prison

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A new trial against Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny opened Tuesday at the penal colony where he faces another lengthy prison term, a further step in a yearlong, multi-pronged crackdown on Russia's most ardent Kremlin critic, his allies and other dissenting voices.

Navalny, President Vladimir Putin's longtime foe, is charged with fraud and contempt of court. His allies denounced the case as an effort by the Kremlin to keep the anti-corruption crusader in prison for as long as possible.

Authorities moved the trial to the prison colony hours away from Moscow, where Navalny is serving a sentence for parole violations. The move received criticism for effectively limiting access to the proceedings for the media and supporters.

Navalny, 45, appeared in the makeshift courtroom on Tuesday wearing a prison uniform.

"It is just that these people, who ordered this trial, are really scared," he said during the hearing. "(Scared) of what I say during this trial, of people seeing that the case is obviously fabricated."

Navalny can receive up to 15 years in prison, if convicted, his allies have said, on top of the time he was ordered to serve last year.

The unusual trial got underway as world leaders are preoccupied with another round of tensions between Russia and the West fueled by fears that Russia plans to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor.

Asked about Navalny at a news conference Tuesday after a round of talks with Putin in the Kremlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reaffirmed that "his conviction is incompatible with the principles of the rule of law."

Scholz was vice chancellor in 2020 when Navalny was brought to Germany for treatment for a nerve agent poisoning that the dissident blamed on the Kremlin, accusations that Russian officials have denied.

Navalny was arrested in January 2021 immediately upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months convalescing. Shortly after the arrest, a court sentenced him to 2 1/2 years in prison over the parole violations stemming from a 2014 suspended sentence in a fraud case that Navalny insists was politically motivated.

Following Navalny's imprisonment, authorities unleashed a sweeping crackdown on his associates and supporters. His closest allies have left Russia after facing multiple criminal charges, and his Foundation for Fighting Corruption and a network of nearly 40 regional offices were outlawed as extremist — a designation that exposes people involved to prosecution.

Earlier this month, Russian officials added Navalny and a number of his associates to a state registry of

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extremists and terrorists.

Several criminal cases have been launched against Navalny individually, leading his associates to suggest the Kremlin intends to keep him behind bars for as long as possible.

"Navalny is in prison as a politician. He spoke the truth, ran for president, and for that Putin tried to kill him and then sent him to prison," a close Navalny ally, Ivan Zhdanov, wrote on Facebook this month. "And there are no doubts that Putin will come up with more and more political cases."

The prosecution in the current trial accuses Navalny of embezzling money that he and his foundation raised over the years and of insulting a judge during his trial last year for allegedly slandering a World War II veteran. Navalny has rejected the allegations as bogus.

"I understand that this is attempt to intimidate: 'If you say something, if you don't just keep quiet, don't nod obediently, aren't afraid of us, judges and prosecutors ... then we will rubber-stamp one criminal case after another,'" Navalny said in an address to the court. "Well, go ahead. By all means, rubber-stamp. I won't keep silent anyway."

Members of Navalny's defense team complained they were not allowed to bring cellphones or laptops containing case files into the makeshift courtroom at the IK-2 penal colony. The prison is located in the Vladimir region, 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of Moscow.

Media access to the hearing, which was formally declared open, was also severely restricted Tuesday.

Navalny's wife, Yulia, was allowed to attend the trial on Tuesday. Photos published by Russia's independent news site Mediazona showed the couple hugging and laughing during a hearing recess.

In an emotional Instagram post on Monday, Yulia Navalnaya said she had a long family visit scheduled for Wednesday — one of the four that Navalny is allowed annually. She said she fears her husband's trial would interfere with the visit.

"They did it on purpose. You wanted a visit from your family? You're better off facing a farcical court right in prison," Navalnaya wrote.

The court, however, adjourned on Tuesday evening until Feb. 21.

US could see a century's worth of sea rise in just 30 years

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

America's coastline will see sea levels rise in the next 30 years by as much as they did in the entire 20th century, with major Eastern cities hit regularly with costly floods even on sunny days, a government report warns.

By 2050, seas lapping against the U.S. shore will be 10 to 12 inches (0.25 to 0.3 meters) higher, with parts of Louisiana and Texas projected to see waters a foot and a half (0.45 meters) higher, according to a 111-page report issued Tuesday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and six other federal agencies.

"Make no mistake: Sea level rise is upon us," said Nicole LeBoeuf, director of NOAA's National Ocean Service.

The projected increase is especially alarming given that in the 20th century, seas along the Atlantic coast rose at the fastest clip in 2,000 years.

LeBoeuf warned that the cost will be high, pointing out that much of the American economy and 40% of the population are along the coast.

However, the worst of the long-term sea level rise from the melting of ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland probably won't kick in until after 2100, said ocean service oceanographer William Sweet, the report's lead author.

Warmer water expands, and the melting ice sheets and glaciers adds more water to the world's oceans.

The report "is the equivalent of NOAA sending a red flag up" about accelerating the rise in sea levels, said University of Wisconsin-Madison geoscientist Andrea Dutton, a specialist in sea level rise who wasn't part of the federal report. The coastal flooding the U.S. is seeing now "will get taken to a whole new level in just a couple of decades."

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"We can see this freight train coming from more than a mile away," Dutton said in an email. "The question is whether we continue to let houses slide into the ocean."

Sea level rises more in some places than others because of sinking land, currents and water from ice melt. The U.S. will get slightly more sea level rise than the global average. And the greatest rise in the U.S. will be on the Gulf and East Coasts, while the West Coast and Hawaii will be hit less than average, Sweet said.

For example, between now and 2060, expect almost 25 inches (0.63 meters) of sea level rise in Galveston, Texas, and just under 2 feet (0.6 meters) in St. Petersburg, Florida, while only 9 inches (0.23 meters) in Seattle and 14 inches (0.36 meters) in Los Angeles, the report said.

While higher seas cause much more damage when storms such as hurricanes hit the coast, they are becoming a problem even on sunny days.

Cities such as Miami Beach, Florida; Annapolis, Maryland; and Norfolk, Virginia, already get a few minor "nuisance" floods a year during high tides, but those will be replaced by several "moderate" floods a year by mid-century, ones that cause property damage, the researchers said.

"It's going to be areas that haven't been flooding that are starting to flood," Sweet said in an interview. "Many of our major metropolitan areas on the East Coast are going to be increasingly at risk."

The western Gulf of Mexico coast, should get hit the most with the highest sea level rise — 16 to 18 inches (0.4 to 0.45 meters) — by 2050, the report said. And that means more than 10 moderate property-damaging sunny-day floods and one "major" high tide flood event a year.

The eastern Gulf of Mexico should expect 14 to 16 inches (0.35 to 0.4 meters) of sea level rise by 2050 and three moderate sunny-day floods a year. By mid-century, the Southeast coast should get a foot to 14 inches (0.3 to 0.35 meters) of sea level rise and four sunny-day moderate floods a year, while the Northeast coast should get 10 inches to a foot (0.25 to 0.3 meters) of sea level rise and six moderate sunny-day floods a year.

Both the Hawaiian Islands and Southwestern coast should expect 6 to 8 inches (0.15 to 0.2 meters) of sea level rise by mid-century, with the Northwest coast seeing only 4 to 6 inches (0.1 to 0.15 meters). The Pacific coastline will get more than 10 minor nuisance sunny-day floods a year but only about one moderate one a year, with Hawaii getting even less than that.

And that's just until 2050. The report is projecting an average of about 2 feet of sea level rise in the United States — more in the East, less in the West — by the end of the century.

US accuses financial website of spreading Russian propaganda

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence officials on Tuesday accused a conservative financial news website with a significant American readership of amplifying Kremlin propaganda and alleged five media outlets targeting Ukrainians have taken direction from Russian spies.

The officials said Zero Hedge, which has 1.2 million Twitter followers, published articles created by Moscow-controlled media that were then shared by outlets and people unaware of their nexus to Russian intelligence. The officials did not say whether they thought Zero Hedge knew of any links to spy agencies and did not allege direct links between the website and Russia.

Zero Hedge denied the claims and said it tries to "publish a wide spectrum of views that cover both sides of a given story." In a response posted online Tuesday morning, the website said it "has never worked, collaborated or cooperated with Russia, nor are there any links to spy agencies."

The officials briefed The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence sources. It was the latest effort by President Joe Biden's administration to release U.S. intelligence findings about Russian activity involving Ukraine as part of a concerted push to expose and influence the moves of Russian President Vladimir Putin. U.S. officials previously accused Putin of planning a "false-flag" operation to create a pretext for a new invasion of Ukraine and detailed what they believe are final-stage Russian preparations for an assault.

It's unclear whether U.S. efforts are changing Putin's behavior. And without releasing more proof of its

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findings, Washington has been criticized and reminded of past intelligence failures such as the debunked allegations that pre-war Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Zero Hedge has been sharply critical of Biden and posted stories about allegations of wrongdoing by his son Hunter. While perhaps best known for its coverage of markets and finance, the website also covers politics with a conservative bent.

In its response online, the website accused the AP of publishing a "bizarre hit piece" and said government officials were trying to distract from "our views of the current dismal US economic situation."

"The bottom line is that such hit piece accusations that we somehow work with or for the Kremlin are nothing new: we have repeatedly faced similar allegations over the years, and we can absolutely confirm that all of them are 'errors,'" the website said.

In recent months, Zero Hedge has published numerous articles that accused the U.S. of fomenting panic about Ukraine, which now faces the possibility of an invasion by more than 130,000 Russian troops massed on several sides of the country. Some of those articles are listed as being written by people affiliated with the Strategic Culture Foundation.

The Biden administration sanctioned the foundation last year for allegedly taking part in Russia's interference in the 2020 U.S. election. U.S. intelligence officials allege the foundation's leaders ultimately take direction from the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence service.

Recent articles listed as authored by the foundation and published by Zero Hedge include those with the headlines: "NATO Sliding Towards War Against Russia In Ukraine," "Americans Need A Conspiracy Theory They Can All Agree On" and "Theater Of Absurd... Pentagon Demands Russia Explain Troops On Russian Soil."

In an email sent prior to its online response, the website said there "is no relationship between Strategic Cultural Foundation (or the SVR) and Zero Hedge, and furthermore this is the first time we hear someone allege that the Foundation is linked to Russian propaganda."

"They are one of our hundreds of contributors — unlike Mainstream Media, we try to publish a wide spectrum of views that cover both sides of a given story," the website said.

Disinformation has long been used by Putin against adversaries, including the United States, and as one tool in regional conflicts to accompany cyberattacks and the movement of military forces. Washington and Kyiv have for months highlighted the issue of Russian influence in Ukrainian media.

Intelligence officials on Monday named two websites they said were directed by the Strategic Culture Foundation. Three other websites are alleged to have ties to the FSB, Russia's federal security service.

"These sites enable the Russian government to secure support among the Russian and Ukrainian populations," one official said. "This is the primary vector for how the Russian government will bolster support domestically for an invasion into Ukraine."

Officials described for the first time what they say are direct communications between Russian spies and the editors or directors of the media outlets. They did not release records of the communications.

FSB officers had directed Konstantin Knyrik, the head of NewsFront, to write stories specifically damaging to Ukraine's image, U.S. officials alleged. They said Knyrik has been praised by senior FSB officers for his work and requested derogatory information that he could use against the Caucasian Knot, a website that covers news in the mostly Muslim republics of southern Russia and neighboring countries such as Georgia.

The editor of PolitNavigator sent reports of published articles to the FSB, an official said. And the managing editor of Antifashist allegedly was directed at least once by the FSB to delete material from the site.

PolitNavigator's editor, Sergey Stepanov, said Washington turns a blind eye to what he says are Ukraine's anti-democratic actions and instead labels those who point them out "anti-Ukrainian propagandists" and "agents of the FSB."

"I would like to believe that American journalism will rise above the hysteria provoked by officials," he added.

The Strategic Culture Foundation is accused of controlling the websites Odná Rodyna and Fondsk. The foundation's director, Vladimir Maximenko, has met with SVR handlers multiple times since 2014, officials alleged.

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Several of the sites have small social media followings and may not appear influential at first glance, noted Bret Schafer, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy. But falsehoods or propaganda narratives often start small before they're amplified by larger actors, he said.

"You see the narrative enter the information space, and it's very hard to see where it goes from there," he said.

A manifesto published on Zero Hedge's site defends its use of anonymous authors and proclaims its goal is "to liberate oppressed knowledge." Many articles are published under the name Tyler Durden, also a character in the movie "Fight Club."

The website was an early amplifier of conspiracy theories and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. An Associated Press investigation determined the site played a pivotal role in advancing the unproven theory that China engineered the virus as a bioweapon. It's also posted articles touting natural immunity to COVID-19 and unproven treatments.

Zero Hedge was also cited in a recent report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue that examined how far-right extremists are harnessing COVID-19 misinformation to expand their reach. Twitter briefly suspended Zero Hedge's account in 2020 but reinstated it a few months later, saying it "made an error in our enforcement action in this case."

The U.S. moving to name the website could inform some people who come across its content online, Schafer said.

"My guess is that most of the people who are loyal Zero Hedge followers naturally are inclined to mistrust the U.S. government anyway," he said, "and so this announcement is probably not going to undermine most of Zero Hedge's core support."

Trump's stash of documents shows 'fragile' historical record

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As president, Donald Trump never liked to leave a paper trail. He avoided email, admonished aides to stop taking notes during meetings and ripped up documents when he was finished with them.

But Trump was unwilling to part with some of his administration's records when he left the White House last year, whisking them away to his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. Although more than a dozen boxes have since been returned to the government, the discovery alarmed archivists and historians who were already skeptical of Trump's commitment to transparency.

For them, the episode is not just a story about a presidential packrat or a sloppy filing system, but an example of how fragments of American history are at risk of being lost. Destroying or concealing documents, they said, could prevent future generations from understanding how important decisions were made.

"My first reaction was words you're probably not allowed to print," said Lindsay Chervinsky, a presidential historian. Academics rely on official records to paint a complete picture of every administration, and she said revelations about the documents at Mar-a-Lago were a reminder of "how fragile that process can be if people do not follow the rules."

The Presidential Records Act, which requires the preservation of White House documents, was passed in 1978 after the Watergate scandal, when a collection of secret tapes played a defining role. Although President Richard Nixon had considered destroying them, the tapes were ultimately discovered by investigators, revealing that Nixon tried to cover up the bungled burglary of Democratic National Committee headquarters. He chose to resign rather than face impeachment and removal from office.

It can be hard to believe that there's anything left to learn about Trump's presidency, which has already been the subject of around-the-clock media coverage and a small library's worth of books. But official records can still prove insightful once they become public after being processed by the National Archives, which can take years.

"History books are actually where the real accountability lies," Chervinsky said. "If we don't have that full story, it's not an accountability system. And the very heart of a democracy is that leaders are accountable to the people."

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Trump's erratic handling of documents could have more immediate effects than the eventual judgment of historians. The congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol in 2021 is examining the former president's actions that day, but finding gaps in official records such as call logs.

There's also the potential for legal trouble if Trump or his associates are determined to have mishandled any documents, especially if they're classified. Presidents have the power to declassify any information they choose, but that expires after they leave office.

Concealing or destroying records is a crime with a potential prison term of three years; storing classified information in an unauthorized location can carry a sentence of up to five years.

Sandy Berger, President Bill Clinton's former national security adviser, removed classified documents from the National Archives in 2003. He claimed he took the files to help prepare testimony to the 9/11 Commission, which was probing intelligence failures in the years leading up to the terrorist attacks in 2001. Berger pleaded guilty and, instead of serving time behind bars, he paid a \$50,000 fine.

The House Oversight Committee has asked the National Archives to detail the records it recovered from Mar-a-Lago by Friday.

Trump suggested in a statement that there was nothing nefarious about the boxes that were stored at his Florida resort. He said it's been "a great honor" to work with the National Archives "to help formally preserve the Trump Legacy."

There's never been a case where a former commander in chief has been punished for violating the Presidential Records Act. Lee White, director of the National Coalition for History, said Congress failed to improve enforcement when it updated the law in 2014.

"The law basically relies on the current president to follow the rules of the road," he said.

The White House produces geysers of records, including emails, calendars and transcripts. President Barack Obama's administration left behind an estimated 300 million emails — more than 1 billion pages if printed out — and another 30 million pages of paper documents.

All of these are funneled into the National Archives through painstaking work that is intended to prevent anything from falling through the cracks. For example, a digital copy of a memo isn't sufficient if someone printed it out and took notes in the margins during a meeting.

White said archivists explain all of this to staff members when a new administration takes over.

"You don't just get hired at the White House and they stick you at your desk. They walk you through all these rules," he said. "Nobody can claim ignorance."

Journalists, historians and members of the public can begin seeking documents with Freedom of Information Act requests five years after a president leaves office.

However, a former president can extend the secrecy for an extra seven years under some circumstances, such as when the records involve confidential communications from advisers.

President Bill Clinton chose to do that with some documents that involve his administration's failed push for health care legislation. One memo that eventually came out was from Ira Magaziner, a key aide, to Hillary Clinton, and it detailed efforts to reshape public perception of the debacle.

"I am continuing to meet with different Washington 'insiders' to try to amend their perceptions of what occurred," Magaziner wrote. "It is a grind, but I believe that it may be doing some good with some of them."

Sometimes it can take even longer for records to emerge. For example, President Lyndon Johnson taped many of his private conversations, but they didn't become available until decades after his death.

When Michael Beschloss, another presidential historian, listened to them, he discovered a commander in chief unsure about the Vietnam War — "I don't see any way of winning," Johnson told Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in 1965 — even as he was ordering an escalation of American military operations.

"We wouldn't have known that without those tapes," Beschloss said.

He said preserving government records "gets to the heart of democracy as much as anything."

If presidents can hide or destroy whatever archival documents they want — creating their own version of history — "that's totalitarianism," he said.

Stonehenge through the ages: Exhibit brings builders to life

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For a monument that has been drawing crowds for thousands of years, Stonehenge still holds many secrets.

The stone circle, whose giant pillars each took 1,000 people to move, was erected between 5,000 and 3,500 years ago on a windswept plain in southwest England. Its purpose is still debated: Was it a solar calculator, a cemetery, a shrine?

A new exhibition at the British Museum in London unravels some of the mystery — Stonehenge was, at times, all those things. But the exhibition's bigger goal is bringing to life the sun-worshipping and surprisingly sophisticated people who built it.

"We all feel we know Stonehenge," lead curator Neil Wilkin said Tuesday. "We drive past it on A303 (the highway), and we visit as schoolchildren or bring our kids to see it. But often we don't know much, or feel like we don't know much, about the world, the people who built the monument and who came to worship at the monument."

"The World of Stonehenge" exhibition assembles more than 430 objects from across Europe to explore the monument's creators and their world. It was a time of radical change that saw technological advances, large-scale migration and social transformation.

The objects explore successive groups of people who lived in the area, 80 miles (130 kilometers) southwest of modern-day London. The semi-nomadic Neolithic farmers who built the first phase of Stonehenge — with stones hauled 150 miles (250 kilometers) from Wales — were followed by Bronze Age farmers, traders and warriors who were deeply intertwined with continental Europe.

The evolving uses of Stonehenge reflect that changing society.

At first it was a cemetery, where the cremated remains of 150 to 200 men, women and children, a seeming cross-section of society, were interred.

"People often ask, is it like the Pyramids? But there's no pharaoh in the middle of this monument," said Wilkin. "It's more of a communal enterprise."

Later, the original bluestones were encircled in a ring of 13-foot (4-meter) standing stones capped with lintels, much of which still stands. Wilkin said the monument became a site for "ancestral veneration and for ceremonies" that drew visitors from far afield.

Its fame is reflected playfully in the very first object displayed in the show, an ancient cup whose shape mimics that of Stonehenge.

"It's almost like a prehistoric souvenir," said project curator Jennifer Wexler.

There are many other arresting images in the exhibition, from a wall covered in scores of Neolithic stone axes to finely wrought gold hats and jewelry that look medieval but are many centuries older.

Stonehenge was not the only circular "henge" monument built in ancient Britain. The exhibition includes Seahenge, a circle of oak posts made 4,000 years ago and near-miraculously uncovered by the waves on an English beach in 1998.

Like Stonehenge, it's believed to have been aligned with the sun, which was central to the lives and beliefs of these ancient societies. Stonehenge is aligned with sunrise and sunset, respectively, at the summer and winter solstices, the key dates in the calendar for ancient farmers.

The exhibition's star item is the 3,600-year-old Nebra Sky Disc, a bronze disc inlaid with gold symbols representing the sun, moon and stars, believed to be the oldest surviving map of the cosmos. The disc was found in 1999 in eastern Germany, but the gold comes from Cornwall in southwest England — evidence that ancient Britons were more connected than we might think.

"People were inquisitive and adventurous, despite having relatively short lives compared to us," Wilkin said. "There is a really large amount of mobility and migration at this time."

That mobility eventually swept away the Stone Age culture that built Stonehenge, as metalworking immigrants from Europe brought social, technological and demographic transformation.

Wexler said metal brought a more unequal society "because people are getting access to these blingy materials and making these beautiful objects."

As a visitor walks through the exhibition, Neolithic stone carvings give way to elaborately wrought gold objects.

Metal meant people could carry important symbols with them, perhaps lessening the need for stone monuments like Stonehenge. In its final phase of use, Stonehenge became something of a status symbol, surrounded by burial mounds as society's elite sought a prime resting place.

Wilkin said the exhibition aims to underline the human side of the shift from Neolithic era to Bronze Age. "We've known about that as a technological change," he said. "But what we've been able to do in the show, I think, is to show that it had a big impact on people's beliefs, and how they saw their identities."

Pressure mounts on Congress to curb lawmaker stock trading

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Amid a steady drip of damaging headlines, pressure is building for Congress to pass legislation that would curtail lawmakers' ability to speculate on the stock market.

Trading in Congress has long been criticized by government watchdogs, who say the access to nonpublic information creates a temptation for lawmakers to prioritize their own finances over the public good.

But public anger has mounted since the first tremors of the pandemic, when some lawmakers were caught buying and selling millions of dollars worth of stock after being warned about the coming disruption from the virus. The pandemic's arrival tanked markets and caught many Americans by surprise.

Now, with November elections fast approaching and members of both parties embracing reform, congressional leaders are getting on the bandwagon, expressing their willingness to toughen the rules. After a spate of controversies over suspiciously timed trades and undisclosed transactions, few lawmakers are defending the status quo, raising hopes that a significant ethics package is within reach.

"This isn't going to solve all of America's problems. But it's a substantive reform that three-fourths of the country supports," said Sen. Jon Ossoff, who is sponsoring a bill that would require lawmakers and their spouses to sell off stocks or place such assets in a blind trust. The Georgia Democrat beat Republican Sen. David Perdue last year in a race that turned largely on Perdue's pandemic-era stock trading.

There's reason for skepticism. Past efforts to tighten ethics rules have fallen short of lawmakers' lofty declarations. And in the end, the task of writing ethics rules governing Congress is left to the lawmakers themselves, creating a conflict that often results in easily evaded restrictions.

But progress is apparent. A raft of bills have been introduced, some by lawmakers at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Senators are working on a compromise. And House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, whose husband is a prolific trader, is on board with the legislative push, though she has advocated a more targeted approach.

Pelosi supports strengthening an existing law, the Stock Act, which requires lawmakers to disclose their stock sales and purchases. She has also called for extending stock trading disclosure requirements to members of the judiciary, while stiffening penalties for members of Congress who flout the rules.

"It's complicated," Pelosi said last week. "What we're trying to build is consensus."

Her stance has evolved since December, when Pelosi reacted to a question about lawmaker trades by saying there is a "free market" that members of Congress "should be able to participate in."

Past ethics reforms demonstrate the challenge ahead.

The Stock Act was signed into law in 2012. At the time, lawmakers and government watchdogs predicted that public disclosure would shame lawmakers out of actively buying and selling stock. That hasn't happened. A decade later, trading continues apace and no one has been prosecuted under the law.

The same could be said for reforms enacted in the wake of the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal. A 2007 law that was intended to force more disclosure of lobbying activity instead created a new class of "shadow lobbyists" who work to influence public policy but don't have to register as a lobbyist or disclose their activities.

"Both those bills certainly did not solve the actual problems themselves," said Craig Holman, a registered lobbyist for the good government group Public Citizen. He said the earlier laws were important, but added

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that "there is room for improvement."

Several lawmakers have come under fire for their stock portfolios.

Last year, The Associated Press reported that Democratic Rep. Tom Malinowski of New Jersey repeatedly failed to disclose trades worth as much as \$1 million in medical and tech companies that had a stake in the virus response. He now supports efforts to curtail lawmakers' trading.

Former Sens. Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, both Georgia Republicans, lost their runoff bids for the Senate last year after their own stock trades became a campaign issue. Both were investigated by the Justice Department and ultimately cleared.

Perdue had dumped between \$1 million and \$5 million worth of stock in a company where he was formerly a board member. After markets crashed, he bought it back and earned a windfall after its price skyrocketed.

Loeffler and her husband, the CEO and chairman of the parent company of the New York Stock Exchange, bought and sold millions of dollars in stock following a briefing on the virus.

Republican Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina drew perhaps the most scrutiny for his trades. He stepped aside as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee after the FBI obtained a search warrant to seize a cellphone.

Burr and his wife sold \$1.6 million in early 2020 just before the market began to dive, according to court records. The Justice Department investigated Burr's actions, but did not file charges and closed the case. The Securities and Exchange Commission continues to probe the matter.

Drafting the legislation presents a challenge. Difficult questions remain, such as whether lawmakers who sell their assets would be required to pay capital gains tax, whether the proposed ban would apply to spouses and children and whether stocks purchased before serving in Congress would be exempt. But supporters of the effort say the rules need to be as tight as possible.

"I think that the worst possible thing that Democratic leadership could do would be to put forth a bit of a hand-wave effort," said Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-Va. "That would be so outrageously insulting to the American people."

Spanberger is sponsoring a bill with Texas Republican Chip Roy that would require lawmakers to place assets like stock in a blind trust.

The issue has broad support from the public. Republicans and Democrats alike point to recent polling, which they say indicates as much as three-quarters of the electorate supports action.

"Too many Americans have lost faith in Congress as an institution," said Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., who is sponsoring a bill with Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., to ban lawmakers from owning stock. "Sen. Warren and I disagree on many important issues, but we agree and have found common ground that we have to restore faith in Congress."

Holman, the good government lobbyist, said it's time for Congress to go further than the Stock Act.

"It really did reduce stock trading activity by members of Congress by two-thirds," Holman said. "The problem is there's still one-third of members of Congress who are still out there trading stocks."

US to face Slovakia in Olympic men's hockey quarterfinals

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Miroslav and Michaela Knies will have big smiles on their faces when their son Matt plays for the United States against Slovakia at the Olympics.

The quarterfinal matchup Wednesday is also special for Matt Knies, a University of Minnesota forward who has strong ties to his parents' birth country, including playing for Slovakia in a youth tournament.

"It'll be a moment I won't forget for a long time," said Knies, who also played for the U.S. against Slovakia in the world junior championship in December. "I love my roots. Obviously both my parents were both there and same with my older brother. All my relatives live there and I always go back when I can in the summer. I love Slovakia. Whenever I get to go visit there, it's definitely a great time. But I'm born in the U.S., so I love representing my country. It's going to be an exciting game."

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Slovakia earned a spot in the quarterfinals by beating Germany 4-0, knocking the reigning silver medalists out of the men's hockey tournament in the qualification round. Denmark moved on to face the third-seeded Russians by coming back to beat Latvia 3-2.

Second-seeded Finland faces 10th-seeded Switzerland, which upset the seventh-seeded Czech Republic 4-1. Fourth-seeded Sweden will face Canada, which beat China 7-2.

"They have their way to play, like Canada always plays on the small rinks," said Sweden forward Linus Johansson, who played for Canada assistant Jeremy Colliton in a lower-level Swedish league. "They're going to go hard and they're going to forecheck and they're going to hit, so we've got to do the same."

The U.S. practiced while Slovakia was playing Germany, and that's just as well because coach David Quinn would rather his players worry about themselves than their opponent.

"It's way more about us, our team and our progress and continuing to get better," Quinn said. "We certainly (have been) taking a look at what Slovakia does and if there's anything we haven't seen before, certainly we'll talk about it, make the adjustments, but at the end of the day, we want to keep rolling through and improving and tightening up the areas we need to tighten up on and keep doing the things we're doing well more consistently."

U.S. forward Brendan Brisson said he and his teammates haven't felt better since getting to Beijing, thanks to a day off Monday and the confidence that's going strong for the youngest team in the tournament. The U.S. goes into the knockout round as the only team to win all of its group games in regulation.

Slovakia has won two in a row and is starting to find its game just in time for the difficulty level to get ratcheted up.

"We build with every game," former NHL forward Marko Dano said. "(We are) just believing in ourselves and sticking up for each other and being there for each other. That worked. I feel like with every game we play better, and hopefully (against the U.S.) we can play as a team again."

Slovakia coach Craig Ramsay, who played 14 NHL seasons and spent more than two decades in the league as an assistant, does not want his team to get into a track meet up and down the ice against the young Americans.

"It's going to be important for us to have good sticks, stick on puck, win the battles when we have to," Ramsay said. "If we can continue to play with that kind of speed and aggressiveness, then teams have to chase us. You certainly don't want to get in a battle with that U.S. team where you're chasing them around the ice because they're just too quick."

Young Slovakia players Juraj Slafkovsky and Simon Nemec were also part of the world juniors game against the Americans before that tournament was abruptly canceled out of COVID-19 fears. Knies, fellow skaters Matty Beniers, Jake Sanderson and Brock Faber and goaltender Drew Commesso all played in that game.

"It's good to face them again," Slafkovsky said. "I just want to win."

Sanderson is questionable with an undisclosed injury. He practiced Tuesday after missing the final U.S. preliminary round game Sunday against Germany. Even though Sanderson did not take part in team drills, Quinn said it was an encouraging sign that the University of North Dakota defenseman was on the ice.

"He really is day to day," Quinn said.

Slovakia goes in as the underdog, but it's still in the tournament thanks in large part to defenseman Mislav Rosandic, who was one of the best players on the ice against Germany. It's a major accomplishment for him to be at the Olympics after being born in Zagreb in 1995 and growing up in postwar Croatia before emigrating to Slovakia.

"It means a lot to me," Rosandic said. "My journey is not usually one for some young boy from a hockey country because in my country there is not much hockey. Maybe I will write a book about it after my career."

With COVID rules eased, Barcelona embraces festival's return

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — Crowds gathered in Barcelona's historic downtown to watch in awe and snap cellphone photos as teams of people in colorful garb formed human towers rising into the air like the spires

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on the nearby medieval cathedral.

A giant figure in bright blue dress and a floral crown paraded through the streets in representation of St. Eulàlia, the city's patron, a 13-year-old girl who was crucified by Romans in the early fourth century for refusing to renounce Christianity.

After two years of canceled or muted celebrations due to the pandemic, this Mediterranean city went all-out this past weekend to mark the Feb. 12 feast, or "festa" in the Catalan language, of its longest-celebrated patron.

With the most recent nationwide outdoor mask mandate lifted by the government just days earlier, Barcelonans were especially eager to revel in the three-day "festes de Santa Eulàlia," with celebrations that make social distancing impossible and require painstaking choreography and training.

Celebrated with a specific protocol since the 1600s, the festival has been gaining renewed popularity since the early 1980s. It includes solemn Masses, intricate dances and parades of "gegants," larger-than-life historical and fantasy figures usually made of papier maché and borne by revelers.

While rooted in Catholic liturgy, today the festival is primarily a secular expression of pride and shared cultural identity in the Catalonia region in northeastern Spain, passionately celebrated even if most who take part don't identify as believers.

"The resurgence started with ordinary people who wanted to do something that would be their own, belonging to Barcelona," said Nil Rider, a historian who helped organize an exhibit about St. Eulàlia at the cathedral's Diocesan Museum. "This is living heritage that gives people an identity."

Foremost among the festival's traditions are the "castells," or "castles," as the human towers are called, which have been performed for two centuries by neighborhood groups not only in Barcelona but in local festivals across Catalonia.

Dozens of "castellers," or group members, stand packed tightly together, compressing every inch of their bodies into each other to form a base. Progressively lighter-weight members then climb up to establish six or more human tiers until they form a support for the top performer, a young child wearing a mandatory helmet — and, this year, a KN95 face mask.

"What we like is to achieve a challenge that we only are able to do together. It's very identity-forming," said Dan Esteban, a casteller and former head of the group representing the neighborhood of Poble Sec, just outside the medieval core.

Two years of pandemic restrictions and lockdowns in hard-hit Spain have left people out of practice, and Esteban said the group wasn't able to train at all until September. Even now fewer people than usual show up for twice-weekly sessions, which are crucial for getting everyone to work in concert since budging just an inch can bring the entire structure crashing down.

Cristina Velasco also worried about recovering lost ground as she planned for this year's "correfoc," another traditional element of the festival in which adults and children parade in horned devil costumes alongside spinning fireworks displays. Sunday night's would be the first full parade since the pandemic, with fewer kids taking part as some turned to other activities and haven't returned.

"We have the feeling we have to do it because otherwise we will lose it," said Velasco, who has been dressing up as a devil for 30 years and is president of the city's federation of three-dozen neighborhood correfoc groups.

Teaching youngsters the allegorical and historic origins of the correfoc tradition is vital, she said, even if "99% of people don't even know where the devil came from."

Clutching a statuette of St. Eulàlia, 10-year-old Laia Castro, 10, waited patiently in line under a chilly drizzle to enter the majestic Gothic cathedral on Saturday, the day commemorating the saint's martyrdom. Descending into the crypt where the saint's remains have been venerated since the 1330s, she signed a registry kept in the sacristy for girls named with the common diminutive for Eulàlia.

"Really we're not religious, but we like this celebration," her father, Albert Castro, said.

He hopes for Laia to know the saint's history and then make her own decision about faith: "And if she believes, she will know she did something extra today."

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The Rev. Robert Baró Cabrera, director of the Cathedral's cultural heritage patrimony, said the festival's spotlight on identity and devotion to the saint offers "a powerful environment for evangelization" even as secularism continues to grow.

"Our churches are both cultural and identity references," he said. "If people want to find the roots of their identity, they can't help but go into the church."

In one of the festival's most evocative celebrations, a performer bearing a giant eagle figure with flowering branches in its beak paraded Friday night from city hall through the old quarter, accompanied by drums, bagpipes and flutes.

Arriving at the soaring Gothic basilica of Santa Maria del Mar, built where St. Eulàlia was first buried after her martyrdom, the eagle entered the packed but hushed sanctuary and proceeded to pirouette in front of the altar in a six-century-old ritual.

On hand were Loli García and her 4-year-old granddaughter, Ona, whom she brought to teach her about their roots and culture.

"It's one thing not to be religious, but they have to know the history," García said as Ona stood on a pew and watched, spellbound. "I take her to all traditional Catalan celebrations, as I used to do with my daughter."

US figure skaters struggle at women's Olympic short program

By SALLY HO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Three U.S. women advanced to the free skate but struggled to break into medal contention in an event that has been overshadowed by the latest Russian doping scandal.

The dominant Russians had three of the top four spots, and Alysa Liu was the only American breaking into the top 10, in eighth.

"I don't know how anybody else skated. I only know how I skated. Again, it's disappointing. I hope that they skated well. And if not, then I guess we're in the same boat," said Karen Chen, who came in 13th. "We've just got a focus on delivering a more solid long program."

Liu skated a more conservative program, downgrading her planned triple axel into a double in order to land a cleanly.

Though Liu was all smiles during the program, she said it was a struggle to switch to a new coach late in the season. She shouted out her former coach for helping her with her choreography.

"The change was really recent so it was a hard change, of course, for me," Liu said. "I'm just really glad I get to show his choreography. Hopefully I did it justice."

Fellow American Mariah Bell, in 11th, also had a shaky performance. Both she and Chen fell. All three U.S. skaters now advance to the free skate on Thursday, when the medals will be decided.

"I have very mixed emotions about it. I'm bummed with the mistake on that element," Bell said. "I think it cost me quite a bit of points, but I'm happy with how I came back with everything else. And ultimately, I just really enjoyed skating on Olympic ice."

Chen's tumble left her sobbing after she exited the rink, an upsetting turn after an uneven team event showing and a disappointing appearance at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Games.

"I'm super disappointed about my skate. I know I'm capable of much better than that. And to not deliver that is, again, just like very disappointing," Chen said. "I can't find a better word to describe how I'm feeling right now. I definitely just have to put that behind me and focus on the long program."

On this night, all eyes were on Russian Kamila Valieva, who walked away with the top performance at Capital Indoor Stadium. Russian teammates Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova came in second and fourth, respectively. Japan's Kaori Sakamoto was in third.

The 15-year-old Valieva returned to the Olympic stage a day after she was cleared to compete in the individual event. The controversial ruling was made Monday by a Court of Arbitration for Sport panel at the Olympics. Valieva already earned a gold medal when the Russians won the team event last week.

The medals won't be presented in Beijing, however, because the International Olympic Committee is

waiting for the longer-term investigation of Valieva's doping case to play out.

For Chen, that means leaving Beijing without her silver medal from the team competition. Though that hardware could get upgraded to gold if Valieva is ultimately disqualified, it still means no Olympic celebration here in Beijing.

"I really was looking forward to be on the podium with my teammates and just sharing that moment, and I'm sure I'm not the only one that felt that way," Chen said. "But what can we do? It's out of our control and, whatever it is, we just got to go with it and go with the flow. ... I think once that everything is over, we'll definitely try to find a way to celebrate."

Valieva skates into first place after Olympic short program

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Kamila Valieva skated off the Olympic ice with the lead in the women's short program and tears in her eyes.

They were not tears of joy.

The enormous pressure and scrutiny on the 15-year-old Russian dynamo, who is at the center of the latest Olympic doping scandal, appeared to finally get to her Tuesday night. Despite an incredible performance by the standards of just about anyone else, Valieva could hardly hold it together while she awaited her scores.

She wound up earning 82.16 points, more than eight off her own world record, but more than enough to top teammates Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova as they go for a Russian sweep of the podium.

Valieva did not speak afterward, walking through the mix zone of reporters in stoic silence. The Russian Olympic Committee also declined to bring her to the news conference, which is required only for medal rounds, and when asked about the scandal, Scherbakova said: "I will not say anything about this situation."

"Whether it is fair, I am not quite sure," said Japan's Kaori Sakamoto, who sits in third place. "I would like to refrain from answering that question. Right now I would just like to focus on my own performance."

Shcherbakova, the reigning world champion, was second with 80.60 points after a clean program. Sakamoto's score of 79.89 points broke up the "Quad Squad" with Trusova, who fell on her opening triple axel, in fourth with 74.60.

"I think that everything was like always, like every competition," Shcherbakova said. "I didn't feel anything different from other competitions, and it was really controlled (and) focused."

The trio of Russian women, all coached by the embattled Eteri Tutberidze, are trying to deliver the second podium sweep in Olympic figure skating and the first in the women's competition. The free skate is Thursday night.

For the last week, Valieva's positive drug test from an event in December has shrouded the competition in controversy.

The test was flagged by a laboratory in Sweden for a banned heart medication but only emerged last week, after her two brilliant performances in the team competition helped win gold for the Russia Olympic Committee.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled that Valieva should be allowed to compete while anti-doping officials conduct a full investigation — in part because she is a minor and is subject to different rules from an adult athlete.

Lawyers for Valieva also "brought some doubts about her guilt," veteran IOC member Denis Oswald said Tuesday. Russian lawyers speculated that the sample may have been contaminated by medicine her grandfather was taking.

In her only comments since the drug test surfaced, Valieva told Russian state broadcaster Channel One on Monday night that "these days have been very difficult for me. I'm happy but I'm tired emotionally."

Valieva said the entire process had taught her that adult life "can be unfair to some extent."

Others pointed out that the real unfairness came in Valieva performing despite a positive test for a banned substance.

"I can only speak for myself and that I advocate for clean sporting," said Mariah Bell, who along with U.S.

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teammates Alysia Liu and Karen Chen advanced to the free skate. "That's the whole idea of the Olympics and our careers, in general."

Valieva and her teammates had plenty of support from the carefully curated crowd inside Capital Indoor Stadium. There were even several fans waving Russian flags, which the team can't use at Olympics as punishment from the country's state-sponsored doping scheme at the 2014 Sochi Games.

There also were plenty of fans that sat stoically in the stands when Valieva's name was announced.

Her biggest mistake came on her first element, the difficult triple axel, when Valieva barely held onto the jump through the opening chords of Kirill Richter's "In Memoriam." She had no such problems with her triple flip and her triple lutz-triple toe loop, and she received Level 4 marks on the rest of her program to climb into first place.

"The (Russian) girls are such that nothing would have helped them if they didn't have that kind of talent," said Anastasiia Shabotova, who was born in Moscow but competes for Ukraine. "It's just funny to even think about it. They're just talented and do a lot of work."

Valieva had looked calm and confident during her warm-up session hours before her short program, though she did fall twice on the triple axel. Each time, the shy, reserved Russian quickly got up and kept pressing forward.

Just as she's done all week, even amid the tension engulfing her team.

Regardless of what happens Thursday night, there won't be a podium presentation or medal ceremony if Valieva finishes in the top three. The International Olympic Committee, concerned that she could still be banned after a full investigation, said it would instead "organize dignified medal ceremonies" in the future.

Valieva and her teammates are trying to extend an era of Russian dominance in women's figure skating at the Olympics. It began at the 2014 Sochi Games, when the country's state-sponsored doping scheme first came to light, and Adelina Sotnikova won the gold medal for the host nation. Alina Zagitova and Evgenia Medvedeva followed with a one-two finish for what was known as the Olympic Athletes from Russia at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

Zagitova and Medvedeva also were coached by Tutberidze, the former ice dancer-turned-kingmaker who has been criticized for pushing young skaters to extreme limits in her brazen pursuit of Olympic medals.

The World Anti-Doping Agency announced this week it will investigate Tutberidze along with the rest of the entourage surrounding Valieva in the lead-up to the Olympics.

"She's pretty much a product of the adults around her," Switzerland's Alexia Paganini said, "so I have a lot of empathy for her because she, regardless of everything, did have to get on the ice and work hard, no matter what happened around her. She did endure a lot. So I feel sorry for her, but rules are rules and they should be followed."

EXPLAINER: Will burglar alarms still work after 3G shutdown?

By TALI ARBEL AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As telecom companies rev up the newest generation of mobile service, called 5G, they're shutting down old networks — a costly, years-in-the-works process that's now prompting calls for a delay because many products out there still rely on the old standard, 3G.

AT&T is scheduled to be the first carrier to shut down its 3G network on Feb. 22. T-Mobile will shut down its 3G network by summer and Verizon in December.

The home-alarm industry has asked the Federal Communications Commission, the U.S. regulator, to delay AT&T's network sunset until December. The FCC is monitoring the 3G phase-out and working to "implement safeguards" for older phones and other devices, spokesperson Paloma Perez said late Monday.

Verizon has already pushed back its shutdown — twice — from an original target date in 2019, saying customers needed more time to update their devices. T-Mobile has also delayed the shutdown of the Sprint 3G network it acquired in 2020, to the end of March; it'll shut down the T-Mobile 3G network by July 1.

WHY IS 3G SHUTTING DOWN?

First, some history. AT&T's 3G network launched in the U.S. in 2004; later that decade it was the exclu-

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sive carrier for early iPhones, helping usher in the first phase of the smartphone era. The networks we currently rely on for video streaming, social apps, Uber and other must-haves of the modern era mostly use the subsequent 4G standard.

For the carriers, shutting down 3G is an efficiency move. As they upgrade to the latest technology, they shut off outdated networks and use the freed-up bandwidth for newer — and what they hope will be more profitable — services.

WHAT IF I HAVE AN OLDER PHONE?

People with older phones that aren't compatible with 4G will have to upgrade; once 3G shuts down, those phones won't work for calls or texting. AT&T says it has reached out to offer its customers free replacements via letters, emails and texts. Spokesperson Jim Greer said fewer than 1% of AT&T's consumer devices, including phones, tablets and watches, will lose cellular service, but declined to say how many devices that is. The company reported about 196 million phones and connected devices using its network in the most recent quarter.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER DEVICES?

Industry groups have also raised concerns about other products that will need to be replaced or updated — everything from home fire alarms to ankle bracelets used by law enforcement. It's not certain how many outdated products are out there, or how big a deal it would be if updates take place after Feb. 22.

The alarm industry and other companies say they have had issues replacing devices even though they've known about the coming shutdown for years. Recent setbacks include both pandemic-triggered supply-chain issues and customers hesitant to let technicians into their homes during the pandemic.

HOW MANY OUTDATED PRODUCTS ARE OUT THERE?

It's not really clear. An alarm-industry lobbying group estimates that 1.5 million customers still need to upgrade their fire or burglar alarms, while about half a million have medical alert devices that run on 3G; it said most rely on AT&T service. While an unnetworked fire alarm will still sound an alarm if there's smoke, it won't be able to contact the fire department. Likewise, burglar alarms won't route to emergency responders if triggered. Not all providers say there's an issue. ADT said in November that it was on track to update its AT&T customers by February; a spokesperson declined to offer an update on Sunday.

AARP, the advocacy group for adults over 50, is also concerned that users of medical alert systems — those necklaces and bracelets, like Life Alert — that connect users to emergency call centers won't know their gadgets don't work anymore or won't be able to replace them in time.

HOW SHOULD I PREPARE?

Check your phone to make sure it will still work. Here's an AT&T list of devices that the carrier says will work normally after Feb. 22. Call the companies that make or service your burglar and fire alarms and personal medical alert systems to see if any need an update. If so, schedule a service visit immediately or get a new device shipped.

OK, DONE. ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD WORRY ABOUT?

A few. One manufacturer of ankle bracelets for people on probation, parole or pre-trial release said it hasn't been able to update many 3G-reliant devices. A premature shutdown could potentially allow tens of thousands of offenders like child abusers, sex offenders and drunk drivers to go unmonitored while out of prison, Alcohol Monitoring Systems wrote in an August FCC filing. The company did not respond to questions.

Zonar, which provides GPS and other services for buses and trucks, says tens of thousands of vehicles will be affected. Trucks that aren't upgraded may have to be idled if drivers can't electronically log their hours as federal rules require. Zonar has a workaround for the trucking industry, but not all customers have placed orders for it, said Susan Corscadden, a company marketing executive.

Affected school districts could also lose their ability to track the location of school buses, while their drivers may not be able to use GPS systems for directions. The National Association for Pupil Transportation seconded these concerns in a September filing, although Noelle Ellerson Ng, the group's legislative liaison, said in an interview that she hasn't heard school superintendents raise the issue.

SO DOES THE SHUTDOWN POSE A SERIOUS PUBLIC-SAFETY THREAT?

It's unclear. "There's a lot of uncertainty about the impact and about how many people are affected," said Tom Kamber, the executive director of Older Adults Technology Services, a nonprofit affiliated with AARP. The AARP has asked the FCC to delay the AT&T shutdown until December.

Public Knowledge, a public-interest group, also urged the FCC to block the February shutdown unless AT&T can show that it has made sure that essential services won't be disrupted or that it can restore service immediately if problems arise.

SO WHY NOT DELAY?

AT&T says that delaying the shutdown would hurt its 5G rollout, degrading its customers' ability to use their service and causing more dropped calls. The company argues that the alarm companies have had years to upgrade their customers' devices. The company also says the FCC doesn't have the authority to stop its shutdown.

Report: Conspiracy theorists fuel bump in extremist killings

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

Newer strains of far-right movements fueled by conspiracy theories, misogyny and anti-vaccine proponents contributed to a modest rise in killings by domestic extremists in the United States last year, according to a report released Tuesday by a Jewish civil rights group.

Killings by domestic extremists increased from 23 in 2020 to at least 29 last year, with right-wing extremists killing 26 of those people in 2021, the Anti-Defamation League said in a report first provided to The Associated Press.

The ADL's report says white supremacists, antigovernment sovereign citizens and other adherents of long-standing movements were responsible for most of the 19 deadly attacks it counted in 2021. The New York City-based organization's list also included killings linked to newer right-wing movements that spread online during the coronavirus pandemic and former President Donald Trump's presidency.

The ADL concluded that roughly half of the 2021 killings didn't have a clear ideological motive, fitting a pattern that stretches back at least a decade.

The group's tally included a shooting rampage in Denver by Lyndon James McLeod, who killed five people in December before a police officer fatally shot him. McLeod was involved in the "manosphere," a toxic masculinity subculture, and harbored revenge fantasies against most of his victims, the ADL report notes.

Right-wing conspiracy theorists killed five people last year in two incidents, both involving "troubled perpetrators," the ADL report says.

In August, California surfing school owner Matthew Taylor Coleman was charged with killing his two young children with a spear gun in Mexico. Coleman told an FBI agent that he was "enlightened" by conspiracy theories, including QAnon, and believed his wife had passed "serpent DNA" on to his children, according to a court affidavit.

A Maryland man, Jeffrey Allen Burnham, was charged with killing his brother, his sister-in-law and a family friend in September. Charging documents said Burnham confronted his brother, a pharmacist, because he believed he was poisoning people with COVID-19 vaccines.

"Prior to the coronavirus, the anti-vaccine movement in the United States did not have a particular ideological leaning and contained both left-leaning and right-leaning activists," the ADL report says. "However, the politicization of the coronavirus and other factors have created many new anti-vaccine conspiracy adherents and given the anti-vaccine movement a distinctly right-wing tone it did not previously have."

The QAnon conspiracy theory has been linked to other acts of real-world violence, including last year's riot at the U.S. Capitol. In June, a federal intelligence report warned that QAnon adherents could target Democrats and other political opponents for more violence.

A core idea QAnon promotes is that Trump was secretly fighting a Satan-worshipping, child sex trafficking cabal of "deep state" enemies, prominent Democrats and Hollywood elites. QAnon hasn't faded away with Trump leaving office.

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Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the ADL's Center on Extremism and author of Tuesday's report, said the QAnon movement is still evolving and increasingly overlapping with other extremist movements, including vaccine opponents.

"Could it sort of dissipate into those or could it find some sort of new focus or new life? Or could it just hang around if Donald Trump is elected again in 2024 and take a new form then?" Pitcavage said during an interview. "It's difficult to predict the future of those movements, so it's difficult to predict whether they will continue to have this sort of similar effect on people."

A dearth of mass killings in 2021 meant that last year's tally was far lower than the totals in any year between 2015 and 2019, when killings by domestic extremists ranged from 45 to 78.

In other respects, the ADL data for 2021 mirrors long-term trends.

Right-wing extremists have killed at least 333 people in the U.S. over the past decade, accounting for three-quarters of all extremist-related killings, the report says.

The ADL distinguishes between killings that it considers to be driven by ideology and those that it found to be non-ideological or lacking a clear motive. Its report says the numbers for each category have been close to even over the past 10 years. The ADL concluded that 14 of the 29 extremist killings in 2021 were apparently motivated at least in part by ideology.

The ADL attributed 13 killings last year to white supremacists, three to anti-government extremists, two to Black nationalists and one to an Islamist extremist.

The group didn't count the death of Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick during the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021, as an extremist killing. Sicknick collapsed and died hours after he was attacked by rioters who stormed the Capitol and interfered with Congress' certification of President Joe Biden's electoral victory. In April, the Washington, D.C., medical examiner's office ruled that Sicknick suffered a stroke and died from natural causes.

"Although it is clear that the Capitol attack could have contributed to, or even precipitated, the strokes that felled Sicknick, it cannot be definitely proven that he was murdered by a Capitol stormer," the ADL report says.

Russia's Olympic doping case helps China skirt dicey topics

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Little more than a week ago, the questions from non-Chinese reporters at daily Olympics briefings were about sensitive things involving China — tennis player Peng Shuai, the government's treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the northwest, the efficiency of the anti-COVID "closed-loop system."

These days, they're all about a drug scandal — the one with Russia at the center — and not much else.

The doping saga unfolding around Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva has been a Games-changer at the Beijing Olympics, pushing aside dicey topics that Chinese officials like to avoid answering.

"The big winner in the Valieva scandal is the Chinese government," Olympic historian David Wallechinsky said in an email. He has been a consistent critic of China's government and stayed away from these Games, his first Olympic absence since 1988.

"What a relief for them to not have to fend off comments about human rights," Wallechinsky quipped.

The focus is now on 15-year-old Valieva, which will continue through her long program on Thursday when she is expected to win gold — her second of the Games — but be banned from any medal ceremony after failing a pre-Games doping test.

The IOC has said it "would not be appropriate to hold the medal ceremony" with her case sure to wind up again in the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which ruled on Monday that she could compete. She seems sure to dominate the briefings until the Games end on Sunday, leaving room for little else.

Peng, once the world's No. 1-ranked tennis doubles player, made sexual assault allegations against a former high-ranking member of China's ruling Communist Party. The charges three months ago were scrubbed immediately from China's censored internet, placing the subject out of bounds for Chinese reporters.

Yang Shu'an, the high-profile organizing committee vice president, nearly stumbled in a briefing when —

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speaking in English — he was asked about Peng and almost mentioned her by name. Of course, saying it would acknowledge that Chinese officials are aware of her case.

China's internment of at least 1 million Uyghurs has been termed genocide by the United States and others, which China calls the "lie of the century." This topic is also off limits for Chinese reporters and, by its own choice, the International Olympic Committee.

"The position of the IOC must be, given the political neutrality, that we are not commenting on political issues," IOC President Thomas Bach said at the briefing Feb. 3, the day before the Games opened. Bach also seldom mentions the Uyghurs by name.

Still, uncomfortable queries about Peng and the Uyghurs kept coming as the Games opened. COVID-19 questions were popular, too, as was criticism about China's "case-hardened" bubble that separates reporters and athletes from 20 million Beijing residents.

There was a question about Jack Ma, China's e-commerce billionaire who has largely disappeared from public view. Ma is the founder of the Alibaba Group, which is a major IOC sponsor.

There were persistent questions about athletes' safety if their comments upset officials of China's authoritarian government. But those began to fade as few spoke up.

Then came Feb. 9: Day 5 of the Olympics.

"A situation arose today at short notice which requires legal consultation," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said. "You'll appreciate because there are legal implications involved that I can't talk very much about it at this stage."

Non-Chinese reporters quizzed Adams about the details for days. Questions from Chinese state-controlled media continued to center on soliciting laudatory comments about the venues, offering praise of the efficient organization — and laments about the scarce supply of Bing Dwen Dwen panda mascots.

Much news is local, so Chinese reporters are not alone in this. But not one offered a question about Valieva as non-Chinese continued to press Adams about the unfolding mystery.

"I can't give you any more details," Adams said. He repeated this for several days in varied forms. "I'm afraid, as you know, legal issues can sometimes drag on."

After days of dominating the briefings, news came Monday that Valieva had been cleared to compete despite failing a pre-Games drug test. She skates this week and is the favorite to win the gold on Thursday, where she may lead a 1-2-3 sweep by Russian women.

And everybody's watching. They'll be doing so not just for her skating prowess, but for the next chapter in the saga of a girl buffeted by powerful forces and a nation known for doing what it takes to get the outcome it wants.

A nation that, for the moment, isn't China.

"This is likely a welcome distraction from other potential subversions or critiques of the Games and of China at large," Maria Repnikova, a China expert at Georgia State University, said in a email to Associated Press.

"Since the Olympics tend to present apt opportunities for the international community to investigate and widely report on the host country, having a scandal that takes the attention away from China in this case plays in favor of Chinese authorities."

Russians scoff at Western fears of Ukraine invasion

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — While the U.S. warns that Russia could invade Ukraine any day, the drumbeat of war is all but unheard in Moscow, where pundits and ordinary people alike don't expect President Vladimir Putin to launch an attack on its ex-Soviet neighbor.

The Kremlin has cast the U.S. warnings of an imminent attack as "hysteria" and "madness," and many Russians believe that Washington is deliberately stoking panic and fomenting tensions to trigger a conflict for domestic reasons.

Putin's angry rhetoric about NATO's plans to expand to Russia's "doorstep" and its refusal to hear Mos-

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cow's concerns has struck a chord with the public, tapping into a sense of betrayal by the West after the end of the Cold War and widespread suspicion about Western designs.

Speaking to reporters after President Joe Biden's call with Putin on Saturday, Kremlin foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov bemoaned what he described as U.S. "hysteria" about an allegedly imminent invasion, saying that the situation has "reached the point of absurdity."

The U.S. says that Russia has concentrated over 130,000 troops east, north and south of Ukraine and has the necessary firepower to launch an attack at any moment.

Russian officials have angrily denied any plans to attack Ukraine and dismissed Western concerns about the buildup near the country, arguing that Moscow is free to deploy its troops and conduct drills wherever it likes on its territory.

On Tuesday, the Russian Defense Ministry announced a partial withdrawal of troops involved in war games in an apparent move to ease tensions, but didn't mention any details of their numbers and location. The pullback came a day after Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov advised Putin to have more talks with the West — a signal of the Kremlin's intention to pursue the diplomatic path.

Lavrov mocked what he described as "paranoid" Western concerns about a possible Russian invasion and gave a sardonic forecast that the West will trumpet the troop pullback as its victory.

"The West will say: 'We pressured them, Biden gave a shout and they immediately got scared and fulfilled our demands!'" he said. "It's selling hot air, and our partners really excel in that. We are yet to learn the tricks they play."

In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula following the ouster of the country's Moscow-friendly president and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, Donbas, where more than 14,000 people have been killed in fighting.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the invasion warnings as "madness" and taunted the move by the U.S. and some of its allies to withdraw most of their diplomatic staff from Ukraine as "demonstrative hysteria."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has taken a more combative tone, denouncing Washington's warnings of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine as "war propaganda" by the U.S. and some of its allies.

Zakharova alleged that the U.S. "needs a war at any price," charging that "provocations, disinformation and threats represent its favorite methods of solving its own problems."

She denounced U.S. intelligence claims about an alleged "false flag" operation mounted by Russia to create a pretext for invading Ukraine, comparing them to then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's 2003 speech before the U.N. Security Council, in which he made the case for war against Iraq, citing faulty intelligence information claiming Saddam Hussein had secretly stashed weapons of mass destruction.

"The U.S. politicians lied, are lying and will keep lying," Zakharova said.

Such rhetoric has been amplified by state television, where hosts have alleged nefarious U.S. designs, accusing Washington and its allies of planning phony operations of their own to encourage hawkish forces in Ukraine to launch an offensive to reclaim areas controlled by Russia-backed separatists in the country's east.

Opinion surveys indicate that the majority of Russians share such views.

More than half of respondents in recent polls conducted by the Levada Center, the top independent opinion firm, consider the U.S. responsible for the current standoff over Ukraine, about 15% blame it on Ukraine and only 3%-4% believe it's Russia's fault, while others were undecided, its director Denis Volkov said in comments broadcast earlier this month. Levada's nationwide polls of about 1,600 people have a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percentage points.

"Most people see the conflict as a Russia-U.S. conflict," Volkov said, adding that respondents in focus group interviews said that the U.S. could push Ukraine into attacking the rebels in the east to draw Russia into the fighting.

Asked if she fears a war, Moscow resident Anaida Gevorgyan dismissed it as Western "propaganda."

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"Russia will never do it," she said. "We are brotherly people, and we have lived together for so many years."

Russian political analysts are broadly dismissive of U.S. war warnings, pointing out that Russia's invasion of Ukraine would carry a massive price without offering Putin any clear wins.

"For Moscow, risks of an invasion of Ukraine outweigh any possible gains," Moscow-based security analyst Sergei Poletayev said in a commentary.

Unlike Crimea, which Russia seized from Ukraine in 2014 without firing a shot, and the conflict in Donbas, where Moscow has denied playing a military role despite Ukrainian and Western claims to the contrary, a full-fledged invasion is certain to become a political and economic disaster for Russia.

While the Kremlin appears bent on pulling Ukraine back into Moscow's orbit, a massive offensive will inevitably involve huge casualties, undermining Russia's global standing, leading to its international isolation and shattering Putin's posture as a leader who cares about ordinary Ukrainians and sees the two people as one.

"It's impossible to imagine a war with Ukraine," Moscow resident Vitaly Ladygin said. "We all have relatives there, we have always lived together. I love Ukraine and dream about going there once it all ends."

An attack on Ukraine would be certain to trigger draconian Western sanctions that would further cripple Russia's stagnant economy, dent people's incomes and erode Putin's support. And while the Russian military could be expected to rout the much weaker Ukrainian army, it will inevitably face massive resistance later, resulting in a protracted conflict that would drain Moscow's scarce resources.

Sergei Karaganov, a Russian foreign policy analyst with close ties to Kremlin thinking, said in recently published comments that while "it's necessary to stop NATO's further expansion and militarization of Ukraine ... we definitely don't have plans to conquer Ukraine."

Many Russian observers predict that instead of launching an invasion, Putin could try to keep pressure on the West with more troop deployments and drills to keep Ukraine out of NATO.

"Having failed to score a full diplomatic result or dare to use force, Russia could turn its army presence near Ukraine into a constant or regularly renewed source of threat that will incur a damage to Ukraine that Western assistance wouldn't be able to compensate," Alexander Baunov of the Carnegie Moscow Center said in an analysis. "It will also keep the West under strain, and in the end Ukraine and the West could show a greater flexibility."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 16, the 47th day of 2022. There are 318 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 16, 1959, Fidel Castro became premier of Cuba a month and a-half after the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista.

On this date:

In 1862, the Civil War Battle of Fort Donelson in Tennessee ended as some 12,000 Confederate soldiers surrendered; Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's victory earned him the moniker "Unconditional Surrender Grant."

In 1918, Lithuania proclaimed its independence from the Russian Empire. (Lithuania, which was occupied by the Soviet Union, then Nazi Germany, then the Soviet Union again during World War II, renewed its independence in 1990).

In 1923, the burial chamber of King Tutankhamen's recently unearthed tomb was unsealed in Egypt by English archaeologist Howard Carter.

In 1945, American troops landed on the island of Corregidor in the Philippines during World War II.

In 1960, the nuclear-powered radar picket submarine USS Triton departed New London, Connecticut, on the first submerged circumnavigation by a vessel.

In 1961, the United States launched the Explorer 9 satellite.

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In 1996, eleven people were killed in a fiery collision between an Amtrak passenger train and a Maryland commuter train in Silver Spring, Maryland.

In 1998, a China Airlines Airbus A300 trying to land in fog near Taipei, Taiwan, crashed, killing all 196 people on board, plus seven on the ground.

In 2001, the United States and Britain staged air strikes against radar stations and air defense command centers in Iraq.

In 2009, in Stamford, Connecticut, a 200-pound chimpanzee named Travis went berserk, severely mauling its owner's friend, Charla Nash; Travis was shot dead by police.

In 2011, bookstore chain Borders filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and said it would close nearly a third of its stores. (Borders closed all of its remaining stores in September 2011.)

In 2019, the Vatican announced that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who served as archbishop of Washington, D.C., had been found guilty by the Vatican of sex abuse and had been defrocked; McCarrick was the highest-ranking churchman and the first cardinal to face that punishment as the church dealt with clerical sex abuse.

Ten years ago: A federal judge in Detroit ordered life in prison for "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (OO'-mahr fah-ROOK' ahb-DOOL'-moo-TAH'-lahb), a Nigerian who had tried to blow up a packed Northwest jetliner. New York Times correspondent Anthony Shadid, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, died of an apparent asthma attack in Syria while reporting on the uprising against its president; he was 43. Hall of Fame catcher Gary Carter died in West Palm Beach, Florida, at age 57.

Five years ago: In the first full-length news conference of his presidency, Donald Trump denounced what he called the "criminal" leaks that took down his top national security adviser, Michael Flynn. Trump named Alexander Acosta as his new choice for labor secretary, a day after Andrew Puzder abruptly withdrew. Immigrants around the U.S. stayed home from work and school to demonstrate how important they were to America's economy, and many businesses closed in solidarity.

One year ago: A winter storm that left millions without power in record-breaking cold weather claimed more lives, including four family members who perished in a Houston-area house fire while using a fireplace to stay warm. FEMA opened its first COVID-19 mass vaccination sites, setting up in Los Angeles and Oakland as part of a stepped-up effort by the Biden administration to reach minority communities. Amy Cooper, the white woman who was arrested for calling 911 on a Black birdwatcher in New York's Central Park, had her criminal case thrown out after completing a diversionary counseling program.

Today's Birthdays: Jazz/pop singer-actor Peggy King is 92. Actor William Katt is 71. Actor LeVar Burton is 65. Actor-rapper Ice-T is 64. Actor Lisa Loring is 64. International Tennis Hall of Famer John McEnroe is 63. Rock musician Andy Taylor is 61. Rock musician Dave Lombardo (Slayer) is 57. Actor Sarah Clarke is 51. Olympic gold medal runner Cathy Freeman is 49. Actor Mahershala Ali is 48. Electronic dance music artist Bassnectar is 44. Rapper Lupe Fiasco is 40. Actor Chloe Wepper is 36. Pop-rock singer Ryan Follese (FAHL'-eh-say) (Hot Chelle (SHEL) Rae) is 35. Sen. John Ossoff, D-Ga., is 35. Rock musician Danielle Haim (HYM) is 33. Actor Elizabeth Olsen is 33.