

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### 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).  
Boys C Game at 4 p.m. in the Cardinal Gym. Girls JV game starts at 4 p.m. in the main gym followed by Boys JV game, girls varsity game and then boys varsity game.

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, Feb. 24

Girls Basketball regions

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

**OPEN:** **Recycling Trailer in Groton**  
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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## Groton Prairie Mixed

**Feb. 9 Team Standings:** Foxes 4, Shih Tzus 2, Chipmunks 2, Jackelopes 2, Coyotes 2, Cheetahs 0

**Men's High Games:** Lance Frohling 217, Roger Spanier 215, Brad Waage 212

**Women's High Games:** Brenda Waage 185, 178, Darci Spanier 171, Sue Stanley 165

**Men's High Series:** Brad Waage 583, Mike Siegler 577, Roger Spanier 573

**Women's High Series:** Brenda Waage 494, Darci Spanier 461, Sue Stanley 444.

**Feb. 2 Team Standings:** Cheetahs 22 ½, Chipmunks 22, Jackelopes 12, Foxes 12, Shih Tzus 8 ½, Coyotes 7

**Men's High Games:** Randy Stanley 218, 214, Brad Waage 208, Lance Frohling 203

**Women's High Games:** Darci Spanier 197, 180, 158, Nicole Kassube 181, Alexa Schuring 153

**Men's High Series:** Randy Stanley 590, Brad Waage 555, Larry Frohling 526

**Women's High Series:** Darci Spanier 535, Nicole Kassube 472, Dar Larson 429

## DON'T QUIT! Fitness Campaign Launches, Offering Three SD Schools a Chance to Win \$100K in Fitness Equipment

Pierre, SD – Today, Governor Kristi Noem joined fitness icon Jake “Body by Jake” Steinfeld, Chairman of the National Foundation for Governors’ Fitness Councils (NFGFC), in launching the 2022 DON'T QUIT! campaign for South Dakota schools. The NFGFC will deliver a state-of-the-art DON'T QUIT! Fitness Center to three elementary or middle schools selected from nominations. School nominations will be accepted starting today and the deadline to submit nominations is Wednesday, March 16, 2022.

“Healthy families make strong families and strong families build healthy communities. Thank you to Jake and his foundation for bringing the DON'T QUIT! campaign to South Dakota,” said Governor Noem. “Programs like DON'T QUIT! help children to make better choices that will strengthen their bodies and their minds. I encourage every elementary and middle school in our great state to nominate their school today for this incredible opportunity.”

Nominations may be made [here](#); click on your state seal or use this link to [download](#) the short application.

“Childhood obesity is a serious problem that can follow a child into adulthood. It’s inspiring to see elected leaders like Governor Kristi Noem champion my vision by jumping on board and welcoming us into the great state of South Dakota,” said Jake Steinfeld. “Every governor we’ve partnered with recognizes that childhood obesity is neither a Democratic nor Republican issue, it’s a kids’ issue. Our kids are our most precious resource and by providing them with a strong foundation in health and fitness, we can feel confident that they’ll excel beyond their wildest dreams.”

DON'T QUIT! Fitness Centers have been delivered to 38 states plus Washington, DC. In 2022, the council is adding four more states to its DON'T QUIT! family, including South Dakota. Steinfeld witnessed firsthand the positive impact these fitness centers have on students and communities. By providing schools with the tools and inspiration, the communities will be amazed at the changes that take place. According to the council, not only are schools seeing increased academic scores but they are also seeing self-esteem skyrocket.

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Each fitness center is financed through public/private partnerships with companies like The Coca-Cola Company, Anthem Foundation, Wheels Up and Nike, and does not rely on taxpayer dollars or state funding. [MyFitnessStore.com](http://MyFitnessStore.com) provides the fitness equipment. The foundation's goal is to build a nation of the fittest, healthiest kids in the world.

"I have witnessed firsthand the positive impact these fitness centers have on students and their communities. When you provide schools with the tools and inspiration, you'll be amazed by the changes that take place," continued Steinfeld. "Children are our most precious resource and by providing them with a strong foundation in health and fitness, we can feel confident that they'll excel beyond their wildest dreams."

Physical activity and exercise are shown to help prevent and treat more than 40 chronic diseases, enhance individual health and quality of life, and reduce health care costs. In schools, studies show that physical activity improves academic achievement, increases confidence and self-esteem, reduces discipline problems, cuts absenteeism, and fosters better interpersonal relationships.

For information about the NFGFC or to download a nomination form, visit [www.natgovfit.org](http://www.natgovfit.org).

###

About The National Foundation for Governors' Fitness Councils

The National Foundation for Governors' Fitness Councils (NFGFC) seeks to encourage and reward innovation in the field of youth fitness by awarding fitness centers to schools that use new and unique methods to promote student physical activity and wellness. The NFGFC envisions a fitness center in every school in the U.S., helping to build a nation that—through innovation and a "DON'T QUIT!" attitude—boasts the fittest kids in the world. Since 2012, the NFGFC has delivered fitness centers in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Washington D.C., Georgia, New Jersey, Delaware, West Virginia, California, New Mexico, Connecticut, Virginia, Illinois, Arkansas, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Washington, Wisconsin, Arizona, Maryland, Louisiana, Oregon, Colorado, Kansas, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Rhode Island, Missouri, Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Alabama, Kentucky, Indiana, Maine, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and North Carolina. In 2022, we will gift fitness centers to South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska & Idaho.

## 2022 Spring Flood Outlook Issued

This spring flood outlook for the rivers and streams in northeast South Dakota, portions of central South Dakota, and portions of west central Minnesota has been issued.

Due to the very dry conditions across the area this winter and the lack of any significant snow cover across most of the region, the chances for minor, moderate or major flooding are below normal.

The exception is across the James River basin in Brown and Spink counties, where the chances are above normal for moderate to major flooding due to the more extensive and wet snowpack in the upper portions of the basin in North Dakota.

The flood threat through this spring, both in location and severity, will largely be determined by future rain or snowfall. The next flood outlook will be issued on February 24.

## Thune Introduces Resolution to Unmask America's Children

"A toddler mask mandate highlights everything that's wrong with Washington, which is why I introduced this common-sense resolution that would prohibit the Biden administration from enforcing or implementing this intrusive, one-size-fits-all Washington rule on America's children."

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) today led several of his Senate Republican colleagues in introducing a resolution that, if enacted, would allow Congress to nullify a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) interim final rule (IFR) that requires all staff and volunteers in Head Start educational facilities around the country to be fully vaccinated and wear a mask. Most notably, this resolution would nullify the IFR's mandate for all children two years of age and older to wear a mask, including when they are playing outside. Congress can consider this resolution using expedited procedures under the Congressional Review Act and can pass it by a simple majority vote.

"Not only is this decision to police schoolyard activities yet another affront to parents' rights by the Biden administration, even worse is nothing about this nationwide policy is based on science or common sense," said Thune. "A toddler mask mandate highlights everything that's wrong with Washington, which is why I introduced this common-sense resolution that would prohibit the Biden administration from enforcing or implementing this intrusive, one-size-fits-all Washington rule on America's children."

"South Dakota Head Start programs have successfully implemented appropriate COVID-19 mitigation strategies, and the majority have been open and safely functioning since June 2020," said Katie Sieverding, executive director of South Dakota Head Start Association. "We thank Senator Thune for his work to protect our children and families from blanket masking mandates and keep these important decisions at the local level where they are best made."

This resolution is co-sponsored by U.S. Sens. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), John Boozman (R-Ark.), Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Steve Daines (R-Mont.), John Hoeven (R-N.D.), Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.), Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), Mike Lee (R-Utah), Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.) Jerry Moran (R-Kan.), Jim Risch (R-Idaho), Mike Rounds (R-S.D.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), and Rick Scott (R-Fla.).

In December, Thune introduced separate legislation to nullify this IFR, and in January, he led his colleagues in sending a letter to HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra requesting that the administration rescind the IFR. The Head Start program is a federal government program that provides qualifying, low-income children with early education services. Program facilities are located throughout the nation and, up until the issuance of this IFR, individual locations had been able to set and enforce their own COVID-19 protocols.



## Gray Wolf Returns to Federal Endangered Species List

PIERRE, S.D. – On February 10, 2022, a District Court decision ruled that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) must re-instate wolves under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections, with the exception of wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Therefore, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) no longer has management authority over gray wolves, and they can no longer be hunted or trapped in South Dakota.

On January 4, 2021, the gray wolf was delisted as a federally protected species following 45 years of protection under the Endangered Species Act. This action allowed GFP to manage wolves as a predator as defined in state law.

Under GFP's management authority, trappers, sportsmen and women, landowners and livestock producers had the ability to harvest gray wolves across the state. Now, because wolves are no longer under GFP management, individuals may only harvest a gray wolf if it is posing a danger to human life.

"Over the past few years, South Dakota has had a handful of gray wolves killed on both sides of the Missouri River; however, South Dakota does not have a resident gray wolf population," said GFP Wildlife Director, Tom Kirschenmann. "The gray wolves that have been present in South Dakota are transient animals that have dispersed from populations east and west of the state."

For more information, please visit [gfp.sd.gov/wolf](https://gfp.sd.gov/wolf).

## Virtual EMS Training Available Through NESD AHEC

(South Dakota) — What started as a way to educate Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers about the Covid-19 pandemic, has become so much more. When the pandemic began in March 2020, the Northeast South Dakota Area Health Education Center (NESD AHEC) created free online training webinars EMS providers could join to learn about Covid.

“We started the webinars during Covid having weekly calls,” explained Mikayla Titus, NESD AHEC Director of Community Programs and Operations. “Some of the EMS providers didn’t have access to education on how they should be responding to Covid, or how they should be protecting themselves.”

The weekly webinars helped fill this gap and provide timely knowledge and updates as the pandemic progressed. As time went on, the webinars changed to once a month and the topics broadened.

“Many EMS providers appreciate the fact that the topics chosen are relevant to South Dakota’s needs,” relayed Titus. “For our November webinar, we focused on hunting accidents, which tend to be common for the state’s EMS providers.”

### Webinars Count As Training Hours

The webinars also help fill continuing education hours EMS providers need for recertification every two years. While South Dakota holds yearly events where EMS providers can complete their training in a weekend, this can often be a challenge for small towns who have less than a handful of providers.

“If you go to a training, then that means there’s no one there to run the ambulance,” explained Jackie Rau, a volunteer EMT in Leola, South Dakota.

Connie Templeton, an EMS provider in Miller, South Dakota, said in-person meetings were canceled when the pandemic began.

“So these webinars came to the rescue in providing the education hours we needed,” said Templeton. “We got back into holding our monthly in-service meetings later on, but now, even as the webinars have continued on, it’s a good supplement to our monthly meetings because the speakers they’re able to get, we wouldn’t often be able to.”

While the speakers that are lined up are highly qualified and sometimes nationally recognized, there’s an even more important aspect that providers find valuable.

“It isn’t the fact that they’re a great qualified trainer, or a trainer that has been trained really well. It’s the fact that they’ve had real world experience,” shared Patti Woods, an EMS provider in Groton, South Dakota. “We’re listening to other EMTs and people that are more on our level, which helps to make the training more personal.”

“Our goal for the webinars is to utilize speakers from around the state,” added Titus. “We have been fortunate to have physicians volunteer their time to speak, whether it be through responding to a call for volunteers from the South Dakota State Medical Association or reaching out to us directly.”

### Webinars Help Connect EMS Providers

The webinars have also provided an unexpected benefit, more than just first-hand knowledge.

“Besides the training, you also get to meet a lot of people from the whole state, and even outside the

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state," said Rau. "You get to meet new people you wouldn't necessarily get to meet."

"The positive thing is when you're out here in the middle-of-nowhere, you feel like no one's around," added David Bucholz, an EMS provider living in Doland, South Dakota. "But when you go through the webinars, there's people from all over the state in some areas that are almost more remote than we are. Every area has similar challenges."

"I was able to get training without having to travel," said Bucholz. "I have a full-time job so it's really hard to get away for a whole day of training. I can do it with the webinar and it's really convenient."

"We've had a lot of EMTs tell us they've really appreciated it being accessible and being able to jump on whether they're watching it while they're eating dinner or on a break at work," Mikayla added.

"I'm very appreciative of the webinars. There is such a wide variety of topics that we can learn from right at home," concluded Rau. "Everyone can get the knowledge they need, and we can still respond to a call if we need to."

## **Why Volunteer As An EMS Provider?**

A majority of EMS providers in South Dakota are volunteers, who do so because they see a need in their communities.

"We live in a small town of about 200 people and we are about 20 miles from the nearest ambulance," said Bucholz. "We had no trained first responders/EMTs in town, which is why I chose to volunteer."

To become an EMS provider, one way to start is to reach out to your local rescue and response service to begin a conversation. For more information on becoming an EMS provider, please call NESD AHEC at 605-715-5152.

## **How To Participate**

The monthly webinars are free to attend. A list of this year's webinars and webinar registration can be found on NESD AHEC's website at <https://nesdahec.org/ems/>.

Not able to join the live webinars? Check out our past webinars and resources on the NESD AHEC website, [www.nesdahec.org/ems](http://www.nesdahec.org/ems).

## **About NESD AHEC**

Through community-based initiatives, NESD AHEC works to promote rural health educational opportunities and address health workforce challenges including the underserved population, and those unique to South Dakota and the region including the following South Dakota counties: Corson, Ziebach, Dewey, Campbell, Walworth, Potter, Sully, Hughes, Hyde, Faulk, Edmunds, McPherson, Hand, Brown, Beadle, Spink, Marshall, Day, Clark, Kingsbury, Roberts, Grant, Codington, Hamlin, Brookings, and Deuel.

## Rose Hill Church RE:SET Women's Conference

The first-ever RE:SET Women's Conference will be held on Saturday, March 5, 2022, from 10 am to 3 pm at the Rose Hill Evangelical Free Church, rural Langford. The event is free and women of all ages are welcome. The guest speaker for our event is Nicole J. Phillips of the Kindness Podcast. Here's a little bit about Nicole:

Nicole is a big fan of FUN! She won a car on The Price is Right and found a new home on HGTV's House Hunters. But her biggest joy comes from teaching people how to use kindness to overcome all of life's difficulties. A breast cancer survivor, Nicole spreads the message of the healing power of kindness as host of "The Kindness Podcast", and through her weekly column, "Kindness is Contagious" which runs in newspa-

pers in North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota. Nicole is a regular guest on Hallmark Channel's Home & Family Show. She is also the author of three books, Kindness is Contagious: 100 Stories to Remind You God is Good and So are Most People, Kindness is Courageous: 100 Stories to Remind You People Are Brave + Kind and her authentic and entertaining "how-to" guide, The Negativity Remedy.

Nicole has her Broadcast Journalism degree from the University of Wisconsin and has worked as a television anchor and reporter in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin and Fargo, North Dakota. As Miss Wisconsin 1997, she spent the year touring the state talking to kids and adults about overcoming crisis.

Nicole lives in Aberdeen, South Dakota, has three children and is married to her childhood crush, Saul Phillips.

Register online by March 1st using the online registration form, which can be accessed at <http://www.rosehillefc.com/events/reset-womens-conference>.

Guest Speaker  
Nicole J Phillips  
The Kindness Podcast

You're  
Invited!

**RE:SET**  
womens conference

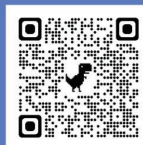
SATURDAY, MARCH 5  
AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

IT'S TIME TO RESET AND ENJOY A DAY OF  
FELLOWSHIP, WORSHIP, LUNCH, AND MORE!

Rose Hill Evangelical Free Church  
12099 Rose Hill Rd, Langford SD  
Saturday, March 5, 2022  
10 am to 3 pm

Women and girls of all generations are welcome.  
Childcare will be available.

REGISTER FOR THIS FREE EVENT  
ONLINE AT [ROSEHILLEFC.COM](http://ROSEHILLEFC.COM)

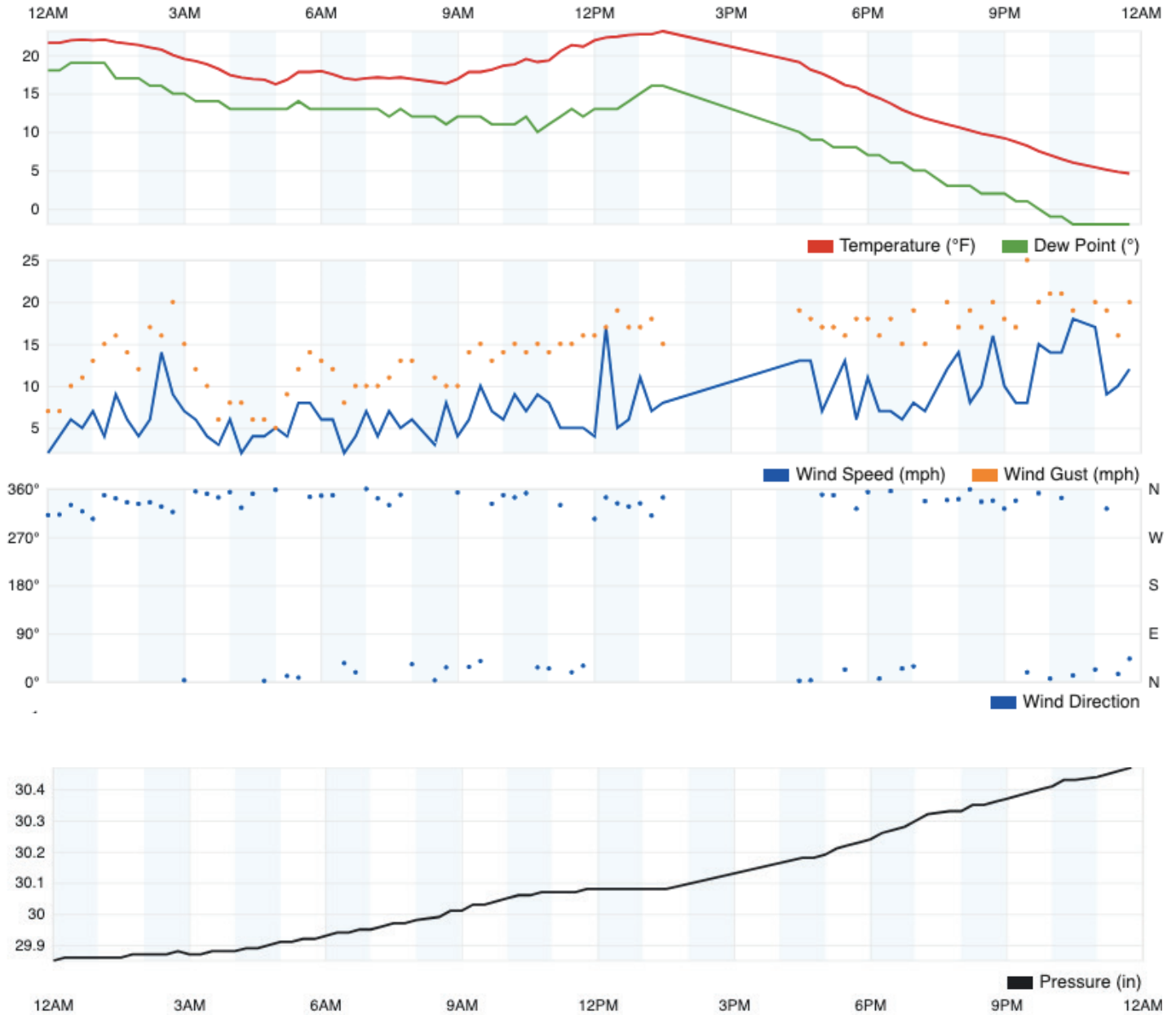




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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Increasing Clouds	Mostly Cloudy then Mostly Cloudy and Breezy	Breezy. Slight Chance Rain/Snow then Chance Flurries	Mostly Clear and Blustery then Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny and Breezy
High: 19 °F	Low: 14 °F↑	High: 40 °F	Low: 2 °F	High: 41 °F

**TODAY** cold. Highs 5 to 35°

Over central SD: Light winds increasing out of the south in the afternoon.



**FRIDAY** very warm & windy with gusts 40 to 50 mph.

Highs 30 to 51°. Light snow possible over far ne SD & w MN in the afternoon.

*Increased **Fire Weather Concerns** with strong winds out of the northwest!*

Dry vegetation combined with warm, windy, and dry weather can quickly create dangerous fire conditions.

Properly discard cigarettes.  
Keep vehicles off of dry grass.  
Avoid activities with open flames or sparks.  
Avoid power equipment that creates sparks.  
Obey burn bans.  
Evacuate if fire/smoke is heading your way.  
Evacuate if ordered to do so by local officials.



Check out your latest  
South Dakota Grassland Fire Danger Map  
at  
[weather.gov/unr/rfd](http://weather.gov/unr/rfd)



Cold today. A change is coming Friday, when very warm and windy conditions return. Gusts of 40 to 50 mph are expected, increasing fire weather concerns over much of central South Dakota where dry conditions remain. As has been the case so many times over the winter, remain extra cautious Friday with anything that could create a fire.

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## Today in Weather History

February 17th, 1962: Very heavy snow of 20 to 30 inches fell across the southeastern half of South Dakota. One location had 44 inches of snowfall from the storm. Everything was shut down due to the storm, including roads, schools, and businesses. Some snowfall amounts included 10 inches at Bryant, 11 inches at Miller, 20 inches at Mitchell, 21 inches at Redfield, 23 inches at Huron, and 32 inches at Sioux Falls.

February 17th, 1972: In Minnesota, high winds of 30 to 50 mph across southern and central Minnesota reduced visibilities to zero at times from blowing snow. Wind gusts of 90 mph were reported at Worthington and Fairmont. Snow of 2 to 6 inches fell across the state. The blizzard stopped almost all traffic from west-central through the south-central part of the state. Most schools in the area were closed. Dozens to hundreds of people were stranded in nearly every town. Many communities stopped all traffic from leaving town. The snow derailed a train at Butterfield. In South Dakota, freezing rain followed by snow accompanied by winds of over 60 mph produced hazardous driving conditions in the area. Traffic was brought to a standstill in many areas resulting in cancellations of school and other activities. Some accidents occurred due to the icy roads. Although the snowfall was light, strong winds caused drifting with visibilities to near zero at times.

February 17th, 1991: On February 17th, a significant snowstorm dumped massive amounts of snow on most of the state from the Black Hills, southwest, central, east-central, and the northeast. At the storm's end, parts of the black hills received up to 2 feet of snow while the rest of the affected area had between 8 and 15 inches. The heavy snow caused most of Interstate 90 west of the Missouri River to close and many other highways in the central part of the state. In addition, many cars and trucks skidded off the roads, causing many minor injuries. The only serious injury was a man rolled his vehicle over after losing control near Belvidere.

1894: According to Grazulis, an estimated F2 tornado hits 5 miles south of Warren, Arkansas. An older woman was killed in one of the small homes that were destroyed. In addition, fruit trees were ripped out and carried a half-mile. Another tornado, estimated F3, killed two people in Claiborne County, Louisiana.

1926: A deadly avalanche, Utah's worst, demolishes 14 miner's cottages and a three-story boarding house in Bingham Canyon. Thirty-six were killed and 13 injured.

1930 - Eureka, CA, reported an all-time record high of 85 degrees, a record which lasted until September of 1983. (The Weather Channel)

1958: From the 14th through the 17th, one of the most significant snowstorms of the mid 20th century struck the northeastern U.S. The storm produced 30 inches of snow in the interior of New England, including more than 19 inches in 24 hours at the Boston Airport. The same storm produced up to three feet of snow in the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, with 14 inches in Washington D.C. and 15.5 inches in Baltimore, Maryland. The storm resulted in 43 deaths and 500 million dollars damage over the Middle Atlantic Coast States.

1936 - The temperature at McIntosh SD plunged to 58 degrees below zero to establish a state record. (David Ludlum)

1973: Snow showers moved across southeast Texas, with most locations only reporting snow flurries. However, the Houston Intercontinental Airport measured 1.4 inches of snow.

1987 - A couple of winter storms, one off the Atlantic coast and another over the south central U.S., produced snow and ice from the Mississippi Valley to the Mid Atlantic Coast Region. Freezing rain produced a coat of ice three inches thick in northern South Carolina, and 30,000 homes around Pee Dee were left without electricity. Parts of south central Kentucky were without electricity for three days following the storm, which was their worst in 35 years. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Santa Ana winds in southern California gusted to 63 mph at Ontario. Heavy snow blanketed parts of Colorado, with 11 inches reported at Strontia. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Low pressure off the Washington coast produced more than a foot of snow in the Cascade Mountains, and more than three inches of rain along the Northern Pacific Coast. Spokane WA was blanketed with 13 inches of snow. Cold arctic air in the Upper Midwest produced all-time record high barometric pressure readings of 31.10 inches at Duluth MN, 31.09 inches at Minneapolis MN, and 31.21 inches at Bismarck ND. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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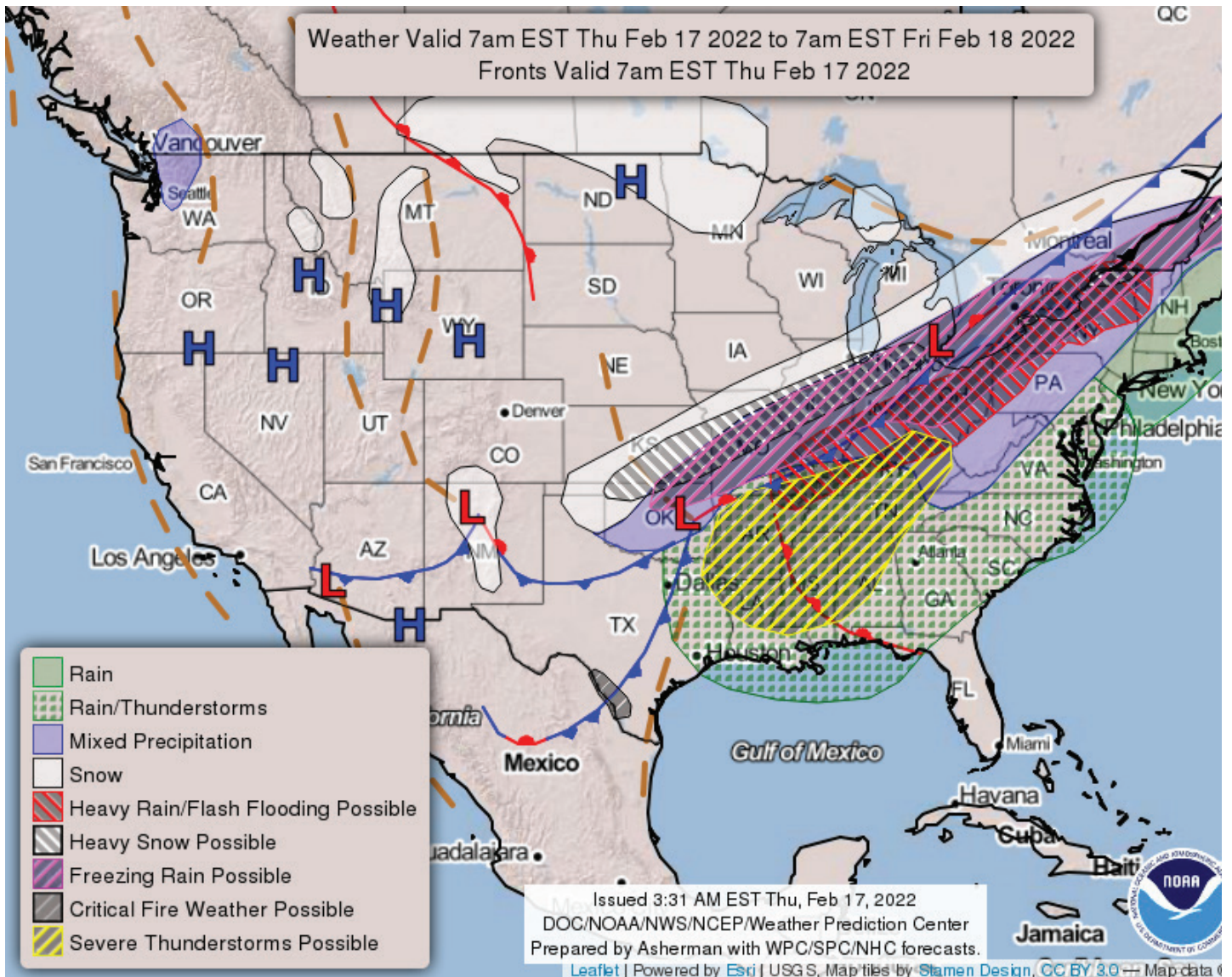
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 24 °F at 2:14 PM**  
**Low Temp: 4 °F at 11:56 PM**  
**Wind: 25 mph at 9:25 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1930  
Record Low: -39 in 1903  
Average High: 29°F  
Average Low: 7°F  
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.35  
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 0.90  
Precip Year to Date: 0.59  
Sunset Tonight: 6:03:55 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:27:10 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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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

04-05-19-25-32

(four, five, nineteen, twenty-five, thirty-two)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

14-15-17-21-25, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 4

(fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, twenty-one, twenty-five; Star Ball: nine; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$7.79 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$64 million

Powerball

22-30-40-42-48, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 2

(twenty-two, thirty, forty, forty-two, forty-eight; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

### Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. February 13, 2022.

Editorial: Moving Election Dates Could Cause Problems

A well-meaning but problematic bill has made considerable progress in the South Dakota Legislature, but the matter needs to be examined more closely.

House Bill 1300 would require all municipal and school board elections to be held either on the day of the South Dakota primary (the first Tuesday after the first Monday in June) or on the day of the general election in November. Last week, HB 1300 was approved by the House 47-19 and is headed to the Senate.

Right now, city and school elections are generally held at various times, depending on the locale, but many of them are scheduled in the spring. Like numerous other communities, Yankton holds these elections on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in April.

As was noted in Saturday's District 18 cracker barrel, one purpose of this measure is to increase participation in city and school elections, which have a habit of seeing scant participation. By merging them with other election dates, they could in theory get more people participating (arguably, by accident). Also, there would likely be a modest cost savings by consolidating these elections onto one ballot.

However, this may be a hindrance to execute — unless one huge change is made.

A big reason why many city and school elections are held in the spring is because it better fits their respective budgeting work and scheduling.

As Rep. Ryan Cwach noted Saturday, many city governments begin doing their budget work in the summer months, which would give very little time for a new city commissioner/councilor elected in June to get up to speed on the issue. (New officials elected in November would have to operate an entire year with a budget into which they had no input or background.) Cwach also mentioned that working on budget details may be the most important thing local elected officials do in performing their jobs.

Meanwhile, many school districts generally start their new budget years on July 1, due to how the school year is configured. Budgetary work cranks up in the spring especially after school officials know how much funding they are getting from the Legislature. Inserting new school board members into the middle or very end of the process (and without the valuable time for the orientation needed to get up to



speed) would seem impractical.

As far as getting more voters participating in these elections, Rep. Mike Stevens of Yankton pointed out that this is a choice that voters themselves are making. It costs them nothing to participate in this democratic right. Contorting the budgeting process to lure more people to participate would seem impractical.

Stevens also noted Saturday that those who drafted the bill have said it wouldn't go into effect for a few years until other details are hammered out, which suggests the proposal isn't ready, or even completely thought through, for implementation.

However, there is that one way mentioned above that could make all this work. If South Dakota wants to align the elections to get more people participating, move the state's primary date from June to April or early May. It might (arguably) be easier to reconfigure that process than it would be for cities and school districts to accommodate the cumbersome June or November dates.

However, since that primary switch will probably never happen, it's hoped that the Senate instead considers the drawbacks carefully and rejects this idea, which would probably create more problems than it solves.  
END

## Senate rejects appraiser changes that came from Noem probe

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Wednesday rejected a bill to enshrine into law an advisory council for the state's real estate appraiser certification program, repudiating a proposal that emerged from lawmakers' inquiry into how Gov. Kristi Noem took a hands-on role in the agency as it was evaluating her daughter's application for an appraiser license.

The bill had already passed the House and a narrowly-divided Senate committee, but was rejected by 22 Republicans in the 35-member Senate.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers who had conducted the inquiry into the Appraiser Certification Program last year argued that codifying an advisory council, made of certified appraisers and people from other parts of the real estate industry, would prevent the discord that had grown between the Professional Appraisers Association of South Dakota and the state agency that regulates them.

The organization had become critical of changes at the agency after its longtime director, Sherry Bren, abruptly departed in March last year.

Lawmakers began looking into the agency following a report from The Associated Press that Bren had been pressured to retire by Noem's cabinet secretary. Months earlier, Noem had also held a meeting with her daughter, Bren and other key decision-makers in the agency, just days after the Appraiser Certification Program moved to deny her daughter's application. Noem's daughter, Cassidy Peters, received an extra opportunity to show her appraiser work could meet federal requirements.

Noem has repeatedly denied wrongdoing and implied that Bren was standing in the way of efforts to make it easier for potential appraisers to get licenses.

"More government, more reports," Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck said as he argued against the bill, adding, "We shouldn't just react because there was volatility for a time last year."

Democratic Rep. Linda Duba, who brought the bill, said she was disappointed for the appraisers who had pushed the proposal.

"They tried in good faith to continue their advisory relationship with (the Department of Labor) for nearly a year and were given the silent treatment," she said, adding that she would trust a pledge from Noem's Secretary of Labor to restore the relationship with the informal advisory council.

A Senate committee is also considering a bill to give lawmakers more power to look into settlement agreements that emerged from the Legislature's inquiry into the agency. It has already passed the House.

## Private grant funds SD AG's missing Indigenous coordinator

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — An office in the South Dakota attorney general's office to coordinate investigations into the disappearance and murder of Indigenous people will be started through a private donation from

an organization connected to St. Joseph's Indian School.

Native American lawmakers who have been pushing for the funding in the state budget said Wednesday they hoped the three-year grant of \$85,000 a year from Native Hope will lead to Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg hiring someone soon. The office, which is designed to coordinate law enforcement investigations across tribal, state and federal agencies, was created last year, but without funding to hire anyone.

"We want to impact this critical issue in our state," said Jennifer Long, the director of Native Hope. "No more missing sisters; no more missing Indigenous people."

The announcement comes after two women were found dead on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation last week.

"In Pine Ridge, the Oglala Sioux Tribe public safety is underfunded," said Democratic Rep. Peri Pourier. "This is an outstanding opportunity to bridge those gaps of all people coming together and saying what can we do?"

Gov. Kristi Noem is also pushing for ongoing funds for the position.

## Noem names Wasko to lead South Dakota corrections system

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The individual who will lead South Dakota's correctional system comes from Colorado where she was president of a company that administers health care service to state and local corrections partners.

Gov. Kristi Noem Wednesday announced the appointment of Kellie Wasko as the new Secretary of Corrections, effective March 7.

"Her experience in corrections reform and her career-long work on correctional healthcare make it clear that she will prioritize the health and safety of both our corrections officers and the men and women confined at our facilities," Noem said in a statement.

Wasko currently serves as the CEO of Correctional Health Partners in Denver, Colorado. Prior to 2019, Wasko served as the Deputy Executive Director for the Colorado Department of Corrections where she was responsible for the daily operations of 23 prisons.

"I am grateful for this opportunity to work on reforms with a team that values correctional professionals and public safety," Wasko said.

Doug Clark, who is serving as Interim Secretary of Corrections, will return to his prior role as Deputy Secretary of Corrections.

Adult institutions in South Dakota include the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, Mike Duffee State Prison in Springfield and the South Dakota Women's Prison in Pierre.

## Zimbabwe grapples with substance abuse problems in pandemic

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — Tucked in a corner of a dimly-lit hallway of a rundown block of flats in Zimbabwe's Mbare township, a few drug users desperate for recovery prayed and encouraged each other to reduce their habits. They passed around a plate of cookies.

Among those in the support group was Adrias Chidemba, 28, who used to sell fruits and vegetables on Harare's streets and was saving to set up a small kiosk.

But then COVID-19 hit and the months-long lockdown shattered his dreams.

"I took to drugs and alcohol to numb the stress," he said, adding that his parents "took me as a madman and kicked me out of the house."

The pandemic has exacerbated a mental health crisis in Zimbabwe driven by substance abuse, say health professionals. Authorities and campaigners attribute it to loss of employment, prolonged school closures and anxiety resulting from COVID-19. Lack of support systems such as affordable rehabilitation centers makes recovery difficult for many abusers.

"It's catastrophic," said Dr. Johannes Marisa, president of the Medical and Dental Practitioners Council of Zimbabwe, who said substance abuse-related mental health cases are "skyrocketing."

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At Sally Mugabe Hospital, one of the country's biggest, the majority of people passing through the psychiatric unit are substance users, said Nelson Makore, the unit's senior nursing officer.

"We have cases of schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorders ... but drug use at the moment is topping the list. It is straining our members of staff, as a hospital we are not a rehabilitation center," he said. In 2019, the hospital attended to 150 substance abuse cases. That number spiked to 850 in 2020 and continued to rise in 2021.

Zimbabwe's crisis appears to be part of a global problem.

"Early research studies conducted in different regions of the world appear to point to relatively high rates of symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and non-specific psychological distress during the pandemic," said Dr. Mark van Ommeren, the unit head of WHO's Department of Mental Health and Substance Use.

Reports suggest increases in alcohol-related deaths during the pandemic and studies in a few countries indicate "an increase in the use of cannabis and psychoactive substances with sedative effects."

Zimbabwean health professionals are familiar with problems from marijuana use but now see more people turning to harder drugs such as heroin, cocaine and crystal methamphetamine to forget pandemic pressures, said Makore.

With few government rehabilitation centers, many substance abusers rely on support groups that meet in dingy places where drug dens often flourish nearby.

"This support group is their only hope. The lack of rehabilitation centers for the poor is killing us," said Kudakwashe Madzima, leader of the Mbare township chapter of the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network. Even as the support group's meeting was underway in Mbare, some other youths puffed marijuana nearby.

Before the pandemic, Madzima said he received an average of two distress calls a week, now he can get up to five a day. Syringes and bottles of cough medicine litter the township, a sign of widespread abuse, said Madzima, a former addict who had to travel to South Africa for treatment at a rehabilitation center.

At Tirivanhu Therapeutic Center, a mental health rehabilitation center about 25 kilometers (15 miles) southeast of the capital, Harare, people fortunate enough to find a place there work in the garden, a tree nursery and with livestock before engaging in counseling and sporting sessions in the afternoon.

Offices have been converted into an accommodation wing due to increasing demand, said Timothy Sithole, a programs officer with the Zimbabwe National Association for Mental Health, which runs the home.

"It's really sad," he said. "We only have a capacity of 17 people at a time. So there is a backlog, a long list of people willing to have their relatives admitted here especially after the pandemic because we have a rise in substance abuse," said Sithole.

The center charges \$30 a month but also takes in some "really desperate cases" for free and receives some government support. Some private centers can charge between 10 to 20 times more, making them unaffordable to many, said Sithole. Some who fail to get support "become wasted lives" and end up roaming the streets, he said.

As Zimbabwe searches for answers, some are already too hooked to consider quitting.

"This keeps me sane," said 21-year-old Rutendo Dzapasi, sipping a cough syrup containing codeine.

Next to her in a dark room in Mbare township, a man delicately put a crystal methamphetamine fragment into a piece of a curved fluorescent tube. After frantically searching the room to find a cigarette lighter he heated the tube to decrystallize the meth and then inhaled the vapor.

"Problem solved," he sighed.

## **NATO: Russia misleads world on troop movements near Ukraine**

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU and LORNE COOK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — NATO allies accused Russia of misleading the world and disseminating "disinformation" by saying it was returning some troops to bases, charging that Moscow has instead added as many as 7,000 more troops near its tense border with Ukraine.

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With Western fears high that Russia is planning to invade, tensions also spiked Thursday along the line that separates Ukrainian forces from Russia-backed separatists in the country's east, with the parties accusing each other of intensive shelling.

After a handful of positive signals from Russia that lowered the temperature in the crisis earlier in the week, the pendulum appeared to be swinging in the opposite direction again. With an estimated 150,000-plus troops massed near Ukraine, the Kremlin offered to keep pursuing diplomatic solutions — an overture the NATO chief welcomed, even as he and others warned that the U.S.-led alliance has still seen no sign of the military withdrawal that Moscow announced.

"We have seen the opposite of some of the statements. We have seen an increase of troops over the last 48 hours, up to 7,000," said British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace ahead of a meeting Thursday of the western alliance in Brussels.

That squared with what a U.S. administration official said a day earlier.

British Armed Forces Minister James Heappey even called Russia's claim to be withdrawing troops "disinformation."

While the West warned the threat of invasion remains high, no attack materialized Wednesday, as some had feared.

Moscow said several times this week that some forces are pulling back to their bases, but it gave virtually no details that would allow for an independent assessment of the scope and direction of the troop movement, and Western leaders quickly cast doubt on those statements. On Thursday, NATO allies knocked down the Russian assertions again — and warned that they are ready to counter any aggression.

"The consequences of this mass buildup — nearly 60% of Russia's land combat forces on the border of a sovereign nation — will get you the opposite effect," Wallace said.

"We are deadly serious," he added, "and we're going to face the threat that is currently being posed."

Already the alliance has moved troops and military equipment into Eastern Europe — in a display of resolve of meant to deter any Russian aggression and underline its intent to defend NATO's eastern members, in the unlikely event that they too become a target.

The U.S. has started to deploy 5,000 troops to Poland and Romania. A further 8,500 more are on standby. Britain is sending hundreds of soldiers to Poland, offering more warships and planes, and doubling the number of personnel in Estonia. Germany, the Netherlands and Norway are sending additional troops to Lithuania. Denmark and Spain are providing jets for air policing in the Baltic Sea region.

While Ukraine braces for a potential invasion, tensions soared in the conflict in the country's east where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian troops since 2014.

Separatist authorities in the Luhansk region reported an increase in Ukrainian shelling along the tense line of contact, describing it as a "large-scale provocation." Separatist official Rodion Miroshnik said that rebel forces returned fire.

Ukraine disputed the claim, saying that separatists had shelled its forces, but they didn't fire back. The Ukrainian military command charged that shells hit a kindergarten building in Stanytsia Luhanska, wounding two civilians, and cut power supply to half of the town.

An observer mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is expected to offer its assessment of the situation later Thursday.

Many in the West are concerned that a flare-up in the east could be used by Russia as a pretext for rolling across the border — though there was no sign yet that the latest fighting was larger than what typically happens. Russia, in turn, aired worries that hawkish forces in Ukraine, encouraged by the West, could launch an attack to reclaim control of the rebel areas — plans Ukrainian authorities deny.

A 2015 deal brokered by France and Germany helped end the worst of the fighting in eastern Ukraine, but regular skirmishes have continued and a political settlement has stalled.

The U.N. Security Council is scheduled to hold its annual meeting on the agreement on Thursday.

Russia denies it is plotting an invasion but says it's free to deploy troops wherever it deems necessary to counter threats from NATO. It wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet nations out

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of NATO, halt weapons deployments near Russian borders and roll back forces from Eastern Europe, the demands the allies have flatly rejected.

There have been some suggestions Ukraine could decide to abandon its hope of joining NATO — something written into its constitution — as a way out of the crisis. It's not clear how or if it would do that.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy noted Thursday that some NATO members don't want the country to join.

"Not all members of the alliance want Ukraine in NATO," he said without naming specific countries. "It's not the Ukrainian people's choice when we will be there, because it doesn't only depend on us — 30 countries must reach consensus on that decision."

While the U.S. and its allies have roundly rejected Moscow's demands to bar membership to Ukraine, they offered to engage in talks with Russia on limits on missile deployments in Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures.

Russian President Vladimir Putin charged that Moscow had offered to discuss those issues years ago, but the West only agreed to talk about them now. He said that Russia was ready to talk about them now, but only in conjunction with its main security demands.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Moscow was sending its formal reply on those issues to the U.S. and NATO later Thursday and will make it public.

Even as Russia seemed to try to ease tensions this week, the Western allies maintained that the threat of an attack remained high.

Maxar Technologies, a commercial satellite imagery company that has been monitoring the Russian buildup, reported continued heightened military activity near Ukraine, including a new pontoon bridge and a new field hospital in Belarus. It also said that some forces had left an airfield in the country, a Russian ally, but it was unclear where they went.

A senior U.S. administration official said some forces arrived only recently and that there had been a marked increase in false claims by Russians that the Kremlin might use as pretext for an invasion. The official said those claims included reports of unmarked graves of civilians allegedly killed by Ukrainian forces, assertions that the U.S. and Ukraine are developing biological or chemical weapons, and claims that the West is funneling in guerrillas to kill Ukrainians.

The official was not authorized to speak publicly about sensitive operations and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. The official did not provide underlying evidence for the assertions.

The rebels in eastern Ukraine have made such claims for weeks, and they were featured in some Russian media reports.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told ABC News that Russian President Vladimir Putin "can pull the trigger. He can pull it today. He can pull it tomorrow. He can pull it next week. The forces are there if he wants to renew aggression against Ukraine."

## Rapid COVID-19 home tests surge in India, experts flag risks

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and SHONAL GANGULY Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — On New Year's Eve, the Indian government wrote to states encouraging them to promote the use of COVID-19 home tests, especially for people who are experiencing symptoms, in a bid to avoid straining local health systems.

During last year's delta-driven surge, an explosion in cases overwhelmed hospitals and testing labs. But last month, as new infections fueled by the omicron variant skyrocketed, so did the number of people testing themselves at home across India.

In the first 20 days of January, around 200,000 people shared their test results with India's health agency — a 66-fold increase compared to all of 2021. The strategy apparently worked. Those testing positive with speedy, though less accurate tests were told to self-isolate at home, allowing hospital beds to remain available for the most vulnerable.

But experts say this figure is likely only a fraction of the actual number of tests used. Despite rules

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requiring people to share their results with authorities, many aren't doing so. This means the country's already patchy testing data is even less accurate and that future clusters may go undetected.

It's a problem some states in India are already flagging. In Maharashtra, state health official Dr. Pradeep Vyas recently appealed to all users to report their results. And since tests don't differentiate between omicron and the deadlier delta variant, which also continues to spread in India, he warned there are still vulnerable people who need hospital care.

"Suddenly there may be stress on our health infrastructure," he wrote in a letter to authorities last month.

Since January, pharmacists in the state have begun keeping records of those buying home tests. But this isn't the case in most Indian cities.

"If I had to guess, maybe only 20% of people using home tests are reporting it," said K Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, adding that every test result ideally should be reported so authorities can track the virus.

"If you're not reporting it then your sample can't be sent for genomic analysis, and then you may miss tracking clusters and variants," he said.

In interviews with The Associated Press, several people in the capital New Delhi admitted they tested positive using home tests but didn't share their results with authorities.

With the highly contagious omicron variant still spreading throughout Asia, more countries are making a difficult tradeoff between accuracy and speed, deploying the nimble home tests to make sure patients don't flood hospitals.

In South Korea, officials said Wednesday that free coronavirus rapid test kits would be available at kindergartens, elementary schools and senior welfare centers starting next week after an unprecedented wave of omicron infections. Authorities recently began moving away from a predominantly PCR testing strategy to rapid tests, even as some experts warned the latter do not reliably detect early omicron infections. People can buy at-home tests from pharmacies and convenience stores or take the tests for free at public health offices and testing stations, where anyone with a positive result is then given a PCR test.

Indian officials are relying on a centralized database where people upload their test results using a mobile app. MyLab, the first company approved for its COVID-19 home test, is producing 500,000 tests per day. Sales have jumped tenfold compared to last quarter, said Saurabh Gupta, head of strategy at MyLab. India has approved eight home tests so far, priced between \$2 and \$33.

Despite the increased use of home tests, experts say they are not as accurate as lab-run PCR tests and have a higher chance of reporting false negatives.

Parul Saxena, a housewife in New Delhi, took a home test last month that turned out negative. But when she continued to have a body ache and fever, she went in for a PCR test, which confirmed what she felt all along — that she was positive for COVID-19.

India's health ministry did not respond to questions sent via email.

Another concern is that home tests are inherently more difficult to adjust — which needs to be done as the virus evolves. While the accuracy of both home and lab tests are affected when a virus evolves, rapid tests may not be able to detect a new variant, said Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research.

After last year's catastrophic delta surge and a sharp rise in omicron infections to start 2022, cases in India have now stabilized with many cities reopening restaurants, schools and workplaces. On Thursday, India recorded 30,757 new cases and 541 deaths — down from a high of over 300,000 cases last month. Experts have warned that India, like elsewhere, was likely missing cases even before the emergence of home testing.

But some say it is not necessary for all positive cases to be reported to authorities. Officials can continue to study the virus's spread through robust random sampling, said Dr. Jacob John, who studies viruses at the Christian Medical College in Vellore, a city in southern India.

Reddy, the public health expert, questioned the importance of case counts at this stage of the pandemic in India.

"Right now, this is not going to be the biggest priority — the important thing is to make sure that if people are getting very sick, there are enough healthcare facilities," he said.

Ashley St. John, an associate professor at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, agreed that other factors are more relevant.

"I think our concern with having very accurate data on positive case numbers has lessened as vaccination rates have increased," she said. "We know that many vaccinated individuals can test positive even without developing symptoms or severe disease. Also, we have transitioned to accepting that the virus is endemic and cannot feasibly be tracked in every person."

## **Poulin leads Canada women to Olympic gold in 3-2 win over US**

By JOHN WAWROW AP Hockey Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Marie-Philip Poulin reminded everyone of her Captain Clutch reputation. And Canada regained its place atop the women's hockey world.

It was only fitting that Poulin delivered at a time her team needed it most by scoring twice, including her third Olympic gold-medal clinching goal, in Canada's 3-2 win over the defending champion United States at the Beijing Games on Thursday.

After winning gold in her first two Olympics, Poulin learned to appreciate how significant capturing her third was, coming four years after losing it to the Americans at the Pyeongchang Games.

"I just got shivers," she said.

"That 2018 was very hard, very, very hard. And I think when you take some time to reflect on what you need to do better as a team and personally," Poulin added. "We did that and I'm very happy that we're resilient and we're able to put that back in the past and win that gold today."

Ann-Renee Desbiens stopped 38 shots and Sarah Nurse had a goal and assist in a game where the Canadians built a 3-0 lead and hung on for the win. Nurse set the single Olympic tournament record with 18 points.

The Canadians finished 7-0 by showcasing a dynamic, deep and relentless offensive attack to capture their fifth Olympic title in seven tournaments, with four coming against the Americans in what has been one of sports' fiercest and longest-running rivalries.

Canada can now boast holding both the Olympic and world championship titles at the same time, and for the first time since 2012. The win at Beijing comes nearly six months after Poulin's overtime goal sealed Canada's 3-2 victory over the U.S. at worlds, which ended the Americans' run of winning five consecutive tournament titles.

"It was a long haul of silvers and a lot of soul-searching in the program," said Brienne Jenner, named the tournament MVP for tying a single Olympic record with nine goals. "I think this group didn't really shy away from it. We were like, 'Let's be bold, let's be brave, let's go out and see what we can do.'"

Hilary Knight, the Americans' only consistent threat in the tournament, scored her team-leading sixth goal on a shorthanded rush to cut the deficit to 3-1. Amanda Kessel scored with 13 seconds remaining during a mad scramble in front for a power-play goal and with the U.S. net empty for an extra attacker.

"We can't get down that many goals. It's really tough to bounce back," Knight said. "It's devastating. It's heartbreaking. ... It feels like we let our country down."

Alex Cavallini stopped 18 shots in her fourth tournament start.

The Americans, who have two Olympic golds, settled for their fourth silver medal, with all losses coming against Canada.

Poulin gained her nickname by scoring decisive goals in big games and especially against the Americans. She scored both goals in Canada's 2-0 gold-medal win over the U.S. at the 2010 Vancouver Games. Four years later at Sochi, Poulin scored in overtime to seal the gold versus the Americans again.

On Thursday, Poulin staked the Canadians to a 2-0 lead with 4:34 left in the first period, and then made it 3-0 off an odd-man rush 9:08 into the second period. Nurse drove up the right wing and fed Jenner, whose slapper was stopped by Cavallini. The rebound caromed to Poulin, who immediately fired a shot

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from the left of the net and banked it in off Cavallini's skate.

"Woo, I don't know. I don't know what's happening," Poulin said of her knack for clutch goals. "There's some angel there or something."

And yet, Poulin had her anxious moments before she could celebrate. She was in the penalty box for tripping when Kessel scored in the closing seconds — but only after Desbiens stopped the first five shots she faced during the power play.

Fitting for Poulin was standing next to Desbiens in the medal line and having the honor of draping the gold around the goalie's neck.

"She showed up in those big moments," Poulin said of Desbiens, who quit hockey after 2018 before being coaxed into rejoining the team. "She kept us in the game and to be honest, being able to give (the medal) to her, it was very special."

No problem, Desbiens said, noting she had an inkling the game was over while glancing at the clock and seeing only 13 seconds left after Kessel scored.

"I said, 'Oh, we got this,'" Desbiens said.

Though Knight's goal provided the Americans life, they were unable to cash in on their chances in the third period. Alex Carpenter had two chances five minutes in, only to have her one-timer from the left circle hit the crossbar, and then getting stopped by Desbiens on a partial breakaway.

Kessel lamented how her goal came far too late.

"We hold ourselves to a high standard, and personally myself, I think my line we wanted to score more goals," she said. "We knew that we were counted on to probably score earlier and get one or two for our team."

The U.S. didn't have enough defense to contain the Canadians' aggressive forechecking attack, nor the offense to match them, especially without top center Brianna Decker, who broke her left leg in the tournament opener.

The Americans finished seventh out of 10 teams in scoring efficiency with just 30 goals on a tournament-leading 374 shots.

It's been a long and bumpy road back for the Canadians, who were forced to reinvent themselves in three years under coach Troy Ryan. The low point followed Canada settling for bronze at the 2019 world championships, which marked the first time in tournament history the country failed to reach the title game.

At Beijing, the Canadians out-classed the field by outscoring opponents by a combined margin of 57-10, including a 4-2 win over the U.S. in group play last week.

"Just being able to prove ourselves again and being able to fight adversity and come back on top," Rebecca Johnston said. "It's great to know that this team has gone through a lot and we're able to pull out a win."

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## Olympics Live: Japan's Takagi wins 1000m speedskating gold

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

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Miho Takagi of Japan has won her fourth speedskating medal of the Beijing Games and the first individual gold of her career with an Olympic-record victory in the women's 1,000 meters.

The silver went to Jutta Leerdam of the Netherlands, while Brittany Bowe of the United States claimed the first individual medal of her career with a bronze.

Takagi added to silver medals in the 500 meters, 1,500 meters and team pursuit at the Beijing Games. She won three medals in Pyeongchang four years ago, taking gold in the team pursuit, silver in the 1,500 and bronze in the 1,000.

Takagi won with a time of 1 minute, 13.19 seconds, easily breaking the previous Olympic record of 1:13.56 set in 2018 by Jorien ter Mors. Ter Mors did not get a chance to defend her title after failing to make the powerful Dutch team.



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Leerdam posted a time of 1:13.83 despite dragging her left hand on the ice to stay upright in a turn. Bowe grabbed the bronze in 1:14.61, just 0.1 seconds ahead of Russian skater Angelina Golikova.

Austria's ski jumpers combined for 475.4 points in the Nordic combined team event Thursday. That gives them an eight-second lead in a cross-country ski race later in the day as competition in the sport wraps up at the Beijing Games.

Norway's four-man team will start second, followed closely by Germany and Japan.

Ten countries will each have four skiers racing 5K on a cross-country course. The one that finishes first wins gold.

The bottom six teams have a very slim chance to catch up to the contenders, especially China's young team. The Chinese skiers will have to wait 6 minutes and 28 seconds at the start line after the Austrians start a race that will take them about 50 minutes to finish.

Nordic combined star Jarl Magnus Riiber of Norway, who was hit hard by COVID-19, isn't part of Norway's team. He traveled home on Thursday after competing in one event. The three-time champion took the wrong turn early in a 10K cross-country race and lost a large lead he earned in ski jumping on Tuesday night, a day after getting out of COVID isolation.

Beijing Olympics organizers have reported their first day of no new COVID-19 cases.

There were no new positive COVID tests among 5,239 athletes and team officials and 63,731 workers inside the Beijing Olympic bubble in the 24-hour period through Wednesday, according to figures published Thursday.

Everyone inside the bubble must undergo daily tests.

Just seven people arrived at the Beijing airport Wednesday for the Olympics and none has returned a positive test.

A total of 435 confirmed positive tests have been detected since Jan. 23 from more than 1.6 million tests. Of those, 264 were athletes and officials and 171 were Games workers.

Russian world pairs champions Anastasia Mishina and Aleksandr Galliamov drew the most favorable position, first in the final group, for the short program to start their event Friday night at Capital Indoor Stadium.

The pairs competition, which concludes with Saturday night's free skate, is the final discipline at the Beijing Games.

Mishina and Galliamov were drawn into the final group with their teammates, Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov and world bronze medalists Aleksandra Boikova and Dmitrii Kozlovskii. The reigning Olympic silver medalists, Sui Wenjing and Han Cong of China, also are in the final group.

Alexa Knierim and Brandon Frazier, who helped the U.S. win team silver, will perform second among the 19 pairs. Their teammates, Ashley Cain-Gribble and Timothy LeDuc, will perform in the penultimate group.

World champion Sandra Naeslund of Sweden won the women's Olympic skicross competition in a race where the third-place finisher was disqualified.

Naeslund opened up a lead and held off Canada's Marielle Thompson on a snowy day along the winding course filled with bumps and jumps. The third-place finisher was Fanny Smith of Switzerland, but after a delay the bronze was awarded to Daniela Maier of Germany. Smith moved her left ski directly into the line of Maier and Maier briefly lost her balance. Maier fell two body lengths behind and couldn't catch up. Following the review, Smith's place was listed as "RAL" -- ranked as last.

Naeslund's win ends the reign of Canada, which had won every Olympic gold in the women's version of the race since its debut at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

Nordic combined star Jarl Magnus Riiber of Norway was one and done at the Beijing Games.

Riiber traveled home on Thursday, two days after he took the wrong turn early in a 10K cross-country race and lost a large lead he earned in ski jumping.

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He's not skiing in Thursday's team competition.

The three-time world champion was in isolation for more than 10 days after testing positive for COVID-19 upon arrival in Beijing. A little more than 24 hours after being cleared for competition, Riiber led the field in ski jumping before getting disoriented on the cross-country course and struggling to ski because he did not feel physically fit.

Norway has a four-man team entered in the team competition, the final Nordic combined event of the 2022 Olympics. The teams will have four jumpers and each of them will ski in a 5K cross-country race later in the day.

Defending champion Michelle Gisin of Switzerland clinched a second straight Olympic gold medal in the Alpine combined race after Mikaela Shiffrin again skied out in the slalom run.

Gisin beat teammate Wendy Holdener by more than a second in the two-run race to help Switzerland make it a record five gold medals in Alpine skiing at a single Olympics.

Shiffrin was fifth-fastest in the downhill portion of the two-run combined on Thursday morning but went out without making it to the bottom in the slalom leg in the afternoon. She took home silver in the combined four years ago.

Federica Brignone of Italy was third, 1.85 seconds behind Gisin, to claim a second medal in Beijing. She also took silver in the giant slalom — another race Shiffrin failed to finish.

The 28-year-old Gisin, who edged Holdener by 1.05 seconds on Thursday, also won a bronze in last week's super-G.

Gus Kenworthy has squeaked into the Olympic ski halfpipe final, finishing a solid run then waiting almost an hour to find out if he would earn one of the 12 spots in the gold-medal round. He finished 12th.

Kenworthy, the 2014 silver medalist who adopted stray dogs at the Sochi Games, is competing for his mother's home country, Britain, in what he says will be his last Olympics. He has struggled this season and is not considered a medal favorite.

Aaron Blunck of the United States finished first in qualifying, followed by Nico Porteous of New Zealand and Birk Irving of the U.S. Two-time defending champion David Wise qualified in fourth.

For two weeks and more, China's stance on questions about its politics and policies has been straightforward: It's the Olympics, and we're not talking about these things.

That changed Thursday at the Beijing organizing committee's daily news conference, three days before the end of the Games. The persistent and polite refusal to answer questions gave way to the usual state of affairs at news conferences with Chinese officials — emphatic answers about the country's most sensitive situations.

Taiwan? An indivisible part of China. The Uyghur population of the Xinjiang region? Not being pushed into forced labor. China's sovereignty? Completely unassailable under international norms.

"What I want to say is that there is only one China in the world," organizing committee spokeswoman Yan Jiarong said, calling it "a solemn position" for China.

Canada has defeated the United States 3-2 in the fierce rivals' latest showdown to win the gold medal in women's hockey.

Marie-Philip Poulin scored twice and assisted on Sarah Nurse's goal to add another chapter to her legacy as "Captain Clutch" for Canada. Goalie Ann-Renee Desbiens made 38 saves and was at her best when under siege.

Canada won Olympic gold for the fifth time in seven chances since women's hockey was introduced at the 1998 Nagano Games. The defending champion U.S. settled for silver for a fourth time.

The Americans got a goal from star winger Hilary Knight and another with 13.5 seconds left from Amanda Kessel. But they could not get past Desbiens again to force overtime.

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It was Canada's fourth gold medal of the Beijing Games.

Mikaela Shiffrin has skied out in the Alpine combined and once again was unable to finish a race at the Beijing Olympics.

She will leave the 2022 Games without an individual medal after participating in all five women's events.

Not only did she go 0 for 5, but the 26-year-old American did not even manage to complete three of those races.

Shiffrin was fifth-fastest in the downhill portion of the two-run combined on Thursday morning but went out without making it to the bottom in the slalom leg in the afternoon.

She took home a silver in the combined four years ago.

She came to China as one of the biggest stars in winter sports and already the owner of two Olympic gold medals — from the slalom in 2014 and the giant slalom in 2018.

Olympic champions Martin Fourcade and Frida Hansdotter have been elected by athletes at the Beijing Games to represent them as members of the International Olympic Committee.

Fourcade, a biathlete from France, and Hansdotter, an Alpine skier from Sweden, got the most votes cast by 2,307 athletes in a 16-candidate election.

Both retired from competition since winning Olympic titles at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games and will now serve eight-year terms at the IOC.

The International Olympic Committee has about 100 members who meet annually. Members mostly rubber-stamp proposals from the executive board, such as the new policy of confirming a pre-selected candidate that will host a future Olympics.

Fourcade and Hansdotter replace Canadian hockey player Hayley Wickenheiser, whose eight years ends Sunday at the closing ceremony, and Norwegian biathlon great Ole Einar Bjørndalen, who resigned from the IOC in 2016.

The U.S. and Canada are facing off for women's hockey gold at the Beijing Olympics.

One of international sports' fiercest and longest-running grudge matches is playing out for the second time.

The U.S. is the defending Olympic champion after rallying to beat Canada 3-2 in a shootout at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

The Canadians are considered the favorites this time after steamrolling to a 6-0 record and outscoring opponents 54-8, including a 4-2 win over the U.S. in group play.

Canada also had the edge over its cross-border rivals since captain Marie-Philip Poulin scored the gold-medal-winning goal in a 3-2 overtime win over the U.S. at the world championships in August to end the Americans' streak of five tournament titles.

Overall at the Olympics, which added women's hockey in 1998, Canada is 6-3 against the U.S., with four gold medals to the Americans' two.

American John Shuster and the defending Olympic curling champions won a last-chance match to qualify for the playoffs at the Beijing Olympics. They beat Denmark 7-5 to keep their hopes of a repeat gold medal alive.

The Americans will play Britain in the semifinals later Thursday night. Reigning silver medalist Sweden will meet Canada, which finished fourth a year ago.

Four years after winning five straight elimination games to take gold -- just the second Olympic curling medal in U.S. history -- Shuster's foursome was again in a desperate position.

This time there was a twist, though: Even with a loss, they could have made the playoffs if Italy beat Norway. (The Americans beat Norway 7-6 in the round-robin to claim the tiebreaker.)

In the end, Italy lost. The Americans needed to win, and they did.

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Christine Scheyer of Austria is in the lead after the downhill run of the Alpine combined race at the Beijing Olympics. Two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin of the United States is in fifth place.

Shiffrin is 0.56 seconds behind Scheyer, who has never won a medal at a major championship.

They'll compete in the second part of the event, the slalom, Thursday afternoon Beijing time.

Scheyer is 0.01 ahead of Czech skier 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.

Ramona Siebenhofer of Austria is 0.14 behind in third.

The combined adds the times from one downhill run and one slalom run.

Shiffrin's best event for years has been the slalom. She won a gold medal in that discipline at age 18 at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. But she also only made it through five gates in the slalom last week before skiing out. She also did not finish the giant slalom.

The women's biathlon mass start race at the Beijing Olympics will be held a day ahead of schedule because strong winds and especially cold temperatures are forecast for Saturday at the Zhangjiakou National Biathlon Center.

The women's 12.5-kilometer (7.76-mile) mass start has been moved to 3 p.m. Friday instead of 5 p.m. Saturday. The men's mass start is still set for 5 p.m. Friday.

The forecast predicts Saturday's temperatures to hover around the minus 8 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 22 Celsius) range, while on Friday there could be some snow and temperatures around 7 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 14 Celsius), which is still frigid, but within the allowable competition range, which cuts off racing at minus 20 degrees Celsius.

The change means that biathlon at the 2022 Olympics will end Friday.

Eileen Gu recorded the top score not once but twice in a competitive ski halfpipe qualifier as she chases her third medal at the Beijing Games.

The standout American-born freestyle skier who represents China already has a gold from big air and a silver from slopestyle. She's bidding to become the first action-sports athlete to capture three medals at the same Winter Games.

Gu played it safe in the first of her two runs and still scored a 93.75. Hardly content, she went even bigger on her final run and scored a 95.50 on what was a crisp morning at the Genting Snow Park. Rachael Karker of Canada was in second position and Estonia's Kelly Sildaru in third. Brita Sigourney was in eighth position, one of three Americans to make the top 12 for Friday's final.

Two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin made it through the downhill leg of the Alpine combined and will get a chance to go for a medal in the slalom run.

Shiffrin went ninth out of 26 skiers on the downhill portion of the two-run event Thursday.

The American's time of 1 minute, 32.98 seconds has her in fifth place of 12 skiers.

Shiffrin is 0.56 seconds behind current leader Christine Scheyer of Austria.

The slalom leg is scheduled to begin in about 3 1/2 hours on a different slope at the National Alpine Skiing Center.

Shiffrin's best event for years has been the slalom. She won a gold medal in that discipline at age 18 at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. But she also only made it through five gates in the slalom in Beijing last week.

Shiffrin also did not finish the giant slalom. She was ninth in the super-G and 18th in the downhill. The combined is her fifth individual event of the 2022 Winter Games. She has said she also plans to enter the team event on Saturday.

## Beijing Olympics get political with Taiwan, Uyghur questions

By STEPHEN WADE and GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writers

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BEIJING (AP) — For two weeks and more, China's stance on questions about its politics and policies has been straightforward: It's the Olympics, and we're not talking about these things.

That changed Thursday at the Beijing organizing committee's last regularly scheduled daily news conference, three days before the end of the Games. The persistent and polite refusal to answer such questions gave way to the usual state of affairs at news conferences with Chinese officials — emphatic, calibrated answers about the country's most sensitive situations.

Taiwan? An indivisible part of China. The Uyghur population of the Xinjiang region? Not being pushed into forced labor. China's sovereignty? Completely unassailable under international norms.

"What I want to say is that there is only one China in the world," organizing committee spokeswoman Yan Jiarong said, calling it "a solemn position" for China. She referred to other assertions about China's treatment of Uyghurs and living conditions in the northwestern region of Xinjiang as "based on lies."

It was only a matter of time before these topics burst at the seams. The run-up to the Games was overshadowed by a diplomatic boycott led by the United States, which centered on China's human rights record; China was determined to keep the focus only on sports but is also very committed to vigorously defending its stances publicly.

In the final regularly scheduled briefing before the Games close on Sunday, Yan and IOC spokesman Mark Adams were peppered with questions about Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the safety of Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai.

Following up on a question about Taiwan's reported attempt to skip the opening ceremony, Yan asked for extra time to address the status of the self-governing island, which China views as its sovereign territory.

She often opened in English but switched to Chinese to make key points, rendered in English by an interpreter.

"Mark, could I just make some supplementary remarks?" Yan said in English. Then, shifting to Chinese: "Taiwan is an indivisible part of China and this is a well recognized international principle and well recognized in the international community. We are always against the idea of politicizing the Olympic Games."

Adams was immediately questioned by a non-Chinese reporter who suggested that Yan, herself, had "politicized" the Games by raising China's stance on Taiwan. Adams dodged the question.

"There are views on all sorts of things around the world, but our job is to make sure that the Games take place," Adams said.

A Games volunteer, a young Chinese graduate student, got a question she did not expect when a reporter asked if she knew who Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai was and, further, did she believe Peng was safe.

Peng, once the world's top-ranked doubles player, three months ago accused a former high-ranking politician of sexual assault. Peng's comments were immediately scrubbed from China's censored internet.

"Well, I am sorry," the young woman replied. "I don't really know that."

One reporter asked Adams directly about the IOC's position on the reported existence of "concentration camps" in Xinjiang, and whether China was using forced labor there. Adams suggested the question was not "particularly relevant" to the briefing, and then went on to praise the power of the Olympics to unite people.

Yan again made sure China's view was heard.

"I think these questions are very much based on lies," she said. "Some authorities have already disputed this false information. There is a lot of solid evidence. You are very welcome to refer to all that evidence and the facts."

Yan had a similar response when a reporter asked Adams if IOC uniforms and other IOC garments were produced by Uyghur labor — or from Xinjiang cotton.

"None of the production took place in Xinjiang, nor any of the input of raw materials comes from that region," Adams said.

Yan added: "I think the so-called forced labor in Xinjiang are lies made up by deliberate groups. And the relevant organizations have provided a large amount of facts to dispute that. And we are against the politicization of sports."

For the second straight day, details were also sought and not given about a Japanese reporter's asser-

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tion that she was prevented by an organizing committee staffer from asking questions to an Alpine skier from Hong Kong.

China is actively suppressing pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong.

The Olympic Charter ensures athletes' right to express opinions in venue interview areas. Yan maintained that Beijing organizers would "protect the freedom of speech of all participants."

## US funds for Canada protests may sway American politics too

By RICHARD LARDNER, MICHELLE R. SMITH and ALI SWENSON The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Canadians who have disrupted travel and trade with the U.S. and occupied downtown Ottawa for nearly three weeks have been cheered and funded by American right-wing activists and conservative politicians who also oppose vaccine mandates and the country's liberal leader.

Yet whatever impact the protests have on Canadian society, and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, experts say the outside support is really aimed at energizing conservative politics in the U.S. Midterm elections are looming, and some Republicans think standing with the protesters up north will galvanize fund-raising and voter turnout at home, these experts say.

"The kind of narratives that the truckers and the trucker convoy are focusing on are going to be really important issues for the (U.S.) elections coming ahead," said Samantha Bradshaw, a postdoctoral fellow at the Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford University. "And so using this protest as an opportunity to galvanize their own supporters and other groups, I think it's very much an opportunity for them."

By Wednesday afternoon, all previously blocked border crossings had been re-opened, and police began focusing on pressuring the truckers and other protesters in Ottawa to clear out of the capital city or face arrest, fines and confiscation of their vehicles.

About 44 percent of the nearly \$10 million in contributions to support the protesters originated from U.S. donors, according to an Associated Press analysis of leaked donor files. U.S. Republican elected officials, including Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, have praised the protesters calling them "heroes" and "patriots."

"What this country is facing is a largely foreign-funded, targeted and coordinated attack on critical infrastructure and our democratic institutions," Bill Blair, Canada's minister of public safety and emergency preparedness, said earlier this week.

Demonstrators in Ottawa have had been regularly supplied with fuel and food, and the area around Parliament Hill has at times resembled a spectacular carnival with bouncy castles, gyms, a playground and a concert stage with DJs.

GiveSendGo, a website used to collect donations for the Canadian protests, has collected at least \$9.58 million dollars, including \$4.2 million, or 44%, that originated in the United States, according to a database of donor information posted online by DDoSecrets, a non-profit group.

The Canadian government has been working to block protesters' access to these funds, however, and it is not clear how much of the money has ultimately gotten through.

Millions of dollars raised through another crowdfunding site, GoFundMe, were blocked after Canadian officials raised objections with the company, which determined that the effort violated its terms of service around unlawful activity.

The GiveSendGo database analyzed by AP showed a tally of more than 109,000 donations through Friday night to campaigns in support of the protests, with a little under 62,000 coming from the U.S.

The GiveSendGo data listed several Americans as giving thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to the protest, with the largest single donation of \$90,000 coming from a person who identified himself as Thomas M. Siebel.

Siebel, the billionaire founder of software company Siebel Systems, did not respond to messages sent to an email associated with a foundation he runs and to his LinkedIn account.

A representative from the Siebel Scholars Foundation, who signed her name only as Jennifer, did not respond to questions about whether he had donated the money. But she said Siebel has a record of sup-

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porting several causes, including efforts to “protect individual liberty.”

“These are personal initiatives and have nothing to do with the companies with which he is associated,” she wrote.

Siebel has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican candidates and organizations over the last 20 years, according to Federal Election Commission records, including a \$400,000 contribution in 2019 to a GOP fundraising committee called “Take Back the House 2020.”

The GiveSendGo Freedom Convoy campaign was created on Jan. 27 by Tamara Lich. She previously belonged to the far-right Maverick Party, which calls for western Canada to become independent.

The Canadian government moved earlier this week to cut off funding for the protesters by broadening the scope of the country’s anti-money laundering and terrorist financing rules to cover crowdfunding platforms like GiveSendGo.

“We are making these changes because we know that these platforms are being used to support illegal blockades and illegal activity, which is damaging the Canadian economy,” said Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland.

Perhaps more important than the financial support is the cheerleading the Canadian protesters have received from prominent American conservative politicians and pundits, who see kindred spirits in their northern neighbors opposing vaccine mandates.

On the same day Lich created the GiveSendGo campaign, retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn shared a video of the convoy in a post on the messaging app Telegram.

“These truckers are fighting back against the nonsense and tyranny, especially coming from the Canadian government,” wrote Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency who served briefly as former President Donald Trump’s national security adviser.

A few days later, Flynn urged people to donate to the Canadian protesters. Earlier this week, he twice posted the message “#TrudeauTheCoward” on Telegram, referring to the prime minister who leads Canada’s Liberal Party.

Fox News hosts regularly laud the protests, and Trump weighed in with a broadside at Trudeau, calling him a “far left lunatic” who has “destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates.” Cruz called the truckers “heroes” and “patriots,” and Greene said she cannot wait to see a convoy protest in Washington.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., said he hopes truckers come to America and “clog up cities” in an interview last week with the Daily Signal, a news website of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Far-right and anti-vaccine activists, inspired by the Canadian actions, are now planning American versions of the protests against COVID-19 mandates and restrictions modeled on the Canadian demonstrations.

## Far-right French candidate makes taboo term his mantra

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Two words, taboo for many in France because they evoke a conspiracy theory embraced by white supremacists, have been haunting the French presidential campaign.

“Great replacement” rolls off the tongue of presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, an outsider with views to the right of the far-right who has made the term the underpinning of his campaign. But when mainstream conservative presidential candidate Valerie Pécresse pronounced them at her first major rally last weekend, politicians and pundits screamed foul, saying she had crossed a red line.

The “great replacement” is the false claim that the native populations of France and other Western countries are being overrun by non-white immigrants — notably Muslims — who are allegedly supplanting, and one day will erase, Christian civilization and its values. The claim, popularized by a French author, has inspired deadly attacks in recent years from New Zealand to El Paso, Texas.

Critics said Pécresse was normalizing a dangerous falsehood that immigration figures in France do not corroborate.

Pécresse later denied she was venturing into Zemmour’s far-right territory, contending that her brief remark was misconstrued. Still, the flap focused attention on Zemmour’s campaign mantra and underscored

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the threat he represents to mainstream conservatives.

"If I'm a candidate in the presidential election, it is firstly and above all to stop the 'great replacement' and to fight immigration," Zemmour — whose upstart party is named Reconquest — told France 2 TV.

Numerous polls place Zemmour fourth among a bevy of candidates for France's April 10 presidential vote behind poll leader President Emmanuel Macron — who has yet to formally declare his candidacy — and slightly behind far-right candidate Marine Le Pen and Pecesse. A presidential runoff will be held among the top two candidates on April 24 if no one wins outright.

Zemmour, 63, controversial talk show pundit before entering the presidential race, has been convicted multiple times of inciting racist or religious hatred.

He has, for instance, drawn ire for falsely stating that Marshall Philippe Petain, who headed France's collaborationist World War II Vichy government, saved Jews from deportation to Nazi death camps. Under Petain's regime, some 76,000 French Jews were sent to camps; very few survived.

The "great replacement" theory was formulated in 2011 by Renaud Camus, a writer and social media fan. But the notion dates back to writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, according to Jean-Yves Camus, a French expert on the far right who is not related to Renaud.

Both Renaud Camus and Zemmour base their unfounded claims that Muslims are already supplanting native French on visual indicators like Islamic headscarves. Yet less than 10% of France's population is Muslim.

"Every day when I go to work, I say, 'Hey, this is France,' said Jean-Yves Camus, the far-right expert. "When Zemmour goes out from his flat ... he says, 'Wow, this is not France anymore.'"

Polls suggest that between Le Pen and Zemmour, the far-right has gained traction in France since the 2017 presidential race, when the centrist Macron beat Le Pen in a landslide in the presidential runoff. Together, the two far-right candidates represent 30% of potential French voters, the polls show, compared to up to 25% for Macron.

One reason for the ground gained by far-right ideology is France's "difficulty adjusting to a multicultural society," Jean-Yves Camus said.

In France, where the melting pot is based on assimilation and officials are banned from counting people by origin, "we are supposed to be equal but only if we are identical," he said.

"There is certainly some kind of mainstreaming of many issues that were only fringe topics, let's say 10 or 15 years ago," Jean-Yves Camus said. "It's not only about the great replacement ... (it's) anything that has to do with immigration, and French identity, and the roots of the French nation."

He also cites an amorphous fear of Muslims, viewed by some as "the enemy from within," due to several terrorist attacks carried out by French Muslim citizens. That is devastating for the nation's Muslim population, estimated at 5 million, which is overwhelmingly peaceful but often unfairly stigmatized.

The rector of the Paris mosque urged Muslim citizens to vote, asking them to "sanction the apostles of racism and those who look down on French of the Muslim faith."

Without naming names, rector Chems-Eddine Hafiz denounced the far-right in a commentary in the Le Monde newspaper, saying their "extremist speech" must be disavowed just like Islamist extremists.

Le Pen, once best known for her anti-immigration portrayals of a France with minarets dotting the countryside where church steeples once stood, has softened her image to broaden her voter base. She has not pronounced the taboo words that are Zemmour's mantra. Several figures in her far-right National Rally party have complained, saying that Le Pen has gone off message, and have defected to Zemmour's camp.

Zemmour's latest far-right achievement was a phone conversation Monday evening with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Zemmour, who reportedly requested the chat, told reporters the two discussed the "destiny and perspectives" of the United States and France, which he claimed are both "in the torment of a war of civilizations."

Le Pen was philosophical. She had hoped, but failed, to meet with Trump during her 2017 campaign.

"I hope that Donald Trump is doing well," she told reporters in Villers-Cotterets, where she was promoting the French language against an Anglo-Saxon "invasion."



## Crisis looms in Syria camps, jails holding foreign nationals

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

ROJ CAMP, Syria (AP) — It was night when Zakia Kachar heard the sounds of footsteps approach her tent in a detention camp for foreigners affiliated with Islamic State group extremists. With rocks in their hands, the wives of IS fighters had come for her.

She fled with her children to another area of the Roj Camp in northeast Syria. "They wanted to kill me," she said.

Earlier that day, the dual Serbian-German national had fought back in an altercation with a camp resident disapproving of her wearing makeup. The woman had bitten her, and Kachar slapped her in defense.

Such clashes between hard-line IS supporters and those who have fallen away from the group's extreme ideology are exacerbating security challenges for the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, which runs Roj and other camps for IS detainees.

The SDF had spearheaded the fight against IS, driving the militants from their last sliver of territory in 2019. Three years later, tens of thousands of foreign IS supporters remain in SDF-run camps and detention centers, with their home countries largely unwilling to repatriate them. The foreigners had come to Syria from around the world, some with their children in tow, to join Islamic State's so-called "caliphate."

The SDF now points to the lockups—crammed with restless detainees, some with a history of violence—as a chief source of instability across the region they control.

A deadly prison attack in the Gweiran neighborhood in the town of Hassakeh last month sharpened the focus on the foreigners' uncertain futures and the limits of their Kurdish captors to supervise them. The assault killed 121 security personnel and took authorities nearly two weeks to contain.

Stretched thin amid an economic crisis and rising threats from IS sleeper cells, the Kurdish-led administration is renewing calls for countries to repatriate their citizens.

"We are struggling," said Mazloun Abdi, the region's top security chief and commander of the SDF.

NO WAY OUT

In Roj camp, home to some 2,500 women and children, a tune popular among youth in North America resonates.

For a few minutes, the melody cuts through the din of daily life, overpowering the sounds of U.N.-emblazoned tents flapping in the wind and children playing.

The music—a soulful song called "Later" by Somali-Canadian singer A'maal Nuux—came from the tent of Hoda Muthana, an Alabama native whose Supreme Court appeal to return to the U.S. with her 4-year-old child was denied last month. The lyrics describe the sisterhood of women on a long commute to visit their partners serving time in prison.

Her neighbor is Shamima Begum, a British-born woman stripped of her U.K. citizenship in a case that drew international attention and raised questions about the moral responsibilities of countries toward IS members.

Their days are marked by monotony. Mothers cook, clean and wait for word on their repatriation appeals.

Several women in the camp in Hassakeh province removed the black garb of IS wives, instead wearing jeans, baseball caps and makeup forbidden during IS's brutal rule. They are kept separate from their hardline neighbors who frequently attack them.

Tents, made of flammable cotton canvas, have been burned down to sow chaos.

Neither Serbia nor Germany has given Kachar any indication they would be willing to repatriate her or her five children, ages six to 16.

Kurdish authorities said up to 200 security personnel have been added to maintain Roj Camp since the Gweiran prison attack.

"Our security forces are present, but the problem is the ideology of some of the women," said one official in Roj, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the press.

Kachar's daughter was only 11 when they followed her husband to Syria from Stuttgart, Germany in 2015. "I want to go home, it is enough. My children need a normal life," she said.

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## 'A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY'

It is al-Hol Camp, many times larger than Roj with 56,000 refugees and displaced people, where security is the most dire and humanitarian needs most acute.

There is no law and order and women there have been killed just for removing their niqab, the veil worn by conservative Muslim women, security officials said.

Most, though not all, non-Arab foreigners are housed in an annex of al-Hol. The United Nations says there are 8,213, of whom two-thirds are minors. Another 30,000 are Iraqi nationals.

Kurdish security officials and non-governmental organizations present in the camp said security began deteriorating in March 2021 with targeted killings of camp community leaders.

Many reported increased cases of extortion, blackmail and death threats toward security and NGO workers.

Kurdish authorities say the camp is a breeding ground for IS, with active sleeper cells. Aid workers attributed the growing criminal activity to desperation arising from widespread poverty, stigma and limited freedom of movement.

Recent violence spurred by the smuggling of weapons and other illicit activity has also raised questions over the complicity of SDF authorities. Abdi, the SDF commander, acknowledged there were some incidents of corruption.

"Some trucks for example, are supposed to be water trucks but they are smuggling out human beings. And of course, if they can take out humans, they can bring in weapons," he said.

The SDF has been in talks with international NGOs over new security arrangements for al-Hol that would divide the camp into sections, limit movement between areas, and erect fences, checkpoints and watch-towers. Many aid workers fear this would turn the camp into a de facto prison for women and children.

To decrease the pressure on al-Hol, at least 300 families were recently transferred to Roj Camp. Another 150 families are expected this year.

"It has caused us more issues because these women are encouraging others to be radical like them," the Roj camp official said.

Some countries are taking their nationals back, gradually. The Netherlands and Sweden recently repatriated several women.

Abrar Muhammed, 36, a detainee and former IS logistics manager, believes his wife may have been among them. The Swedish citizen was informed in passing by a prison guard, he said.

Muhammed hasn't seen his wife since January 2019, when he fled the IS ranks and was detained at an SDF checkpoint, months before the fall of the group's last territorial foothold, the village of Baghouz in northeastern Syria. He has been jailed in one of the 27 detention centers across northeast Syria ever since.

"I want to go back, face justice in Sweden," Muhammed told The Associated Press in a facility in Hasakeh. "In a country with laws."

Abdi said the international community has to take some responsibility for the prisons and camps.

"It's not just our problem, we share the burden. This is our demand."

## National Guard deploys for new emergency: Teacher shortages

By CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press / Report for America

ALAMOGORDO, N.M. (AP) — On past deployments Army National Guard Spc. Michael Stockwell surveilled a desolate section of the U.S.-Mexico border during a migrant surge, and guarded a ring of checkpoints and fences around New Mexico's state Capitol after the January 2021 insurrection in Washington.

On his current mission, Stockwell helps students with assignments as a substitute science teacher at Alamogordo High School.

"You can't act Army with these kids. You can't speak the same way you would with another soldier with these kids. You can't treat them the same way. You have to be careful with corrective actions," he said with a laugh.

Dozens of National Guard Army and Air Force troops in New Mexico have been stepping in for an emergency unlike others they have responded to before: the shortage of teachers and school staff members

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that has tested the ability of schools nationwide to continue operating during the coronavirus pandemic.

While many other states and school districts issued pleas for substitute teachers amid omicron-driven surges in infections, New Mexico has been alone in calling out its National Guard members. In 36 of the state's 89 school districts, guard members have traded in mission briefs for lesson plans to work for school systems.

When Stockwell first walked into the freshman science class, wearing camouflage fatigues and combat boots, some students thought he was just visiting, like a recruiter. Then he took a seat in the teacher's chair.

"When he started taking attendance, I was like, 'whoa,'" said Lilli Terrazas, 15, of Alamogordo. "I was kind of nervous because, like, you know — a man in a uniform. But it was cool. He helped me."

Roughly 80 service members have volunteered to work in schools. The troops have gone through background checks and taken brief courses required for substitute teachers. As substitutes, they don't have to learn much about curriculum, but they need to be attentive to students.

Stockwell has been filling in since late January when his students' teacher moved to an administrative role in another school. One recent day, he shuffled through the rows of school desks, kneeling to meet students eye-to-eye as he helped them with assignments calculating the depth of the earth's crust, and other layers of the planet.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, called out the guard to help with the acute shortages in a state that like several others has struggled to find enough educators. At least 100 schools had reported closing down for at least one day this school year.

New Mexico saw a surge of teacher retirements last fall, and there are currently around 1,000 open teaching positions in a state with about 20,000 teachers. Grisham stressed the guard deployment is a temporary measure and state officials are working to bolster the teaching force and school staff through increased pay and other strategies.

In Alamogordo, the teacher shortage peaked on Jan. 13, when 30 teachers, about a third of the teaching staff, were out due to illness, professional training, or family emergencies.

"Everybody was enjoying their holiday and things like that, and then they came back and were sick," said Raeh Burns, one of two Alamogordo High School secretaries tasked with filling teaching slots each morning. "I know I'm going to have Mr. Stockwell every morning and that he's OK to go where I need him to go."

In some communities, there have been concerns raised about soldiers going in classrooms. In Santa Fe, the school district was asked if soldiers would wear uniforms and carry guns, school district spokesperson Cody Dynarski said. Guns were always out of the question. The district decided that soldiers would wear civilian clothing.

Ultimately, Santa Fe and Albuquerque, two of the largest urban school districts, did not receive any soldiers despite their requests as the deployments have prioritized smaller and more rural school districts.

Elsewhere, when given the choice, some soldiers have opted for military fatigues over civilian clothes to command respect in the classroom, particularly if they're not much older than their students.

"I think I look like an 18-year-old out of uniform," said Cassandra Sierra, 22, of Roswell, N.M., who has served as a substitute teacher in a high school in Hobbs.

Sierra already works with kids in her day job as a student coordinator at a military boarding school in Roswell, which has given her an edge as a substitute.

"Kids just need patience," she said. "I think I just have a lot of patience."

At a middle school on Alamogordo's Holloman Air Force Base, students are used to seeing people in uniform, but not in classrooms.

"I was like, 'Oh, we have somebody in the uniform that's going to teach us. That's kinda awkward.' It was weird," said Andrew George, 12, of his computer classes led by a woman trained in combat and with experience leading a platoon overseas. "Once she introduced herself I was like 'Oh yeah, this is going to be fun.'"

The substitute, Lt. Amanda Zollo, works in the 911 dispatch center in Albuquerque when she's not train-

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ing or serving with the guard. She kept students on task during a lesson about cybersecurity, as they created and then attempted to break each other's passwords.

She was subbing for a teacher who was having trouble finding childcare. The principal, Whitney Anderson, said that having Zollo's services meant that for the first time that week she didn't have to take over a classroom herself.

Zollo doesn't talk about her work as an infantry officer with her students, which, after a nervous laugh, she describes as "engaging with and destroying the enemies of the U.S. in close-quarter combat."

## Fear runs through Afghanistan's 'hazardous' media landscape

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Fear accompanies reporter Banafsha Binesh from the moment she leaves her Kabul home each morning for the newsroom at Afghanistan's largest television station.

It starts with the Taliban fighters, who roam the streets of the capital with weapons slung over their shoulders. Binesh, 27, says she is frightened by their reputation of harshness toward women, rather than any unsavory encounter.

Dread and uncertainty mount with every new report of a fellow journalist having been detained, interrogated or beaten by Taliban fighters.

"Working is full of stress," said Binesh, who works for TOLO-TV.

Since taking power six months ago, the country's new rulers have also issued directives requiring journalists to keep Islamic principles in mind and work for the good of the nation — rules that would seem aimed at quashing independent reporting.

Bilal Karimi, a deputy spokesman for the Culture and Information Ministry, said criticism is tolerated, but must be constructive.

He blamed attacks on journalists — often while they cover women's protests, explosions, and other news — on over-zealous Taliban. Other arrests of journalists were not linked to their work, he claimed.

Steven Butler from the Committee to Protect Journalists said it's not clear yet if attacks on journalists are systematic or "just semi-random events initiated by some Taliban official who has a grudge."

"I would describe the landscape as full of hazards that are not fully predictable," said Butler, the Asia program director at CPJ. "Journalists are being selectively picked up, interrogated about their coverage, beaten, and then released after hours or days."

Most recently, two journalists working for the U.N. refugee agency were held for six days and released last week after the U.N. raised alarms. The Taliban said they released the journalists after confirming their identities.

Butler expressed concerns that Taliban intelligence officials are becoming more "hands-on" and have increasingly been implicated in arrests and disappearances.

In one trend-bucking development, TOLO now has more female than male journalists, both in the newsroom and out on the streets.

TOLO news director Khpolwak Sapai said he made a point of hiring women after nearly 90% of the company's employees fled or were evacuated in the first days of the Taliban takeover.

He said female staffers have not been threatened by the Taliban authorities but have at times been denied access because of their gender.

In one case, a TOLO reporter was barred from a briefing by the acting minister of mines and petroleum when he found out the station had sent a woman to the event.

Sapai said TOLO promptly does stories on such incidents.

The ranks of journalists in Afghanistan thinned dramatically during the chaotic days of the Taliban takeover in August. Tens of thousands of Afghans fled or were evacuated by foreign governments and organizations.

A December survey by Reporters Without Borders and the Afghan Independent Journalist Association found that 231 out of 543 media outlets had closed, while more than 6,400 journalists lost their jobs after the Taliban takeover. The outlets closed for lack of funds or because journalists had left the country, ac-

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according to the report.

During their previous rule in the late 1990s, the Taliban had no opposition and banned most television, radio and newspapers. Foreign news organizations were able to operate at that time, along with some local outlets.

Faisal Mudaris, a broadcast journalist, blogger and YouTube personality, spent eight days in Taliban custody, where he said he was beaten and threatened.

Mudaris is from the restive Panjshir Valley, the only holdout against Taliban rule during their first weeks in power. Mudaris fears his ethnicity as a Panjshiri, not his journalism, landed him in a Taliban lockup. He believes he remains at risk, fearing that no one can hold the Taliban accountable.

Journalists from other ethnic minorities, including the Hazaras who have long faced discrimination from successive governments, also worry. In the first months after the Taliban takeover, several journalists of a small outlet called Etilaat Roz were arrested and beaten. Both were Hazaras.

Karimi denies anyone is targeted because of their ethnicity and promises investigations will be carried out against offending Taliban. CPJ's Butler said his advocacy group has no way to measure attacks based on ethnicity.

Still, there appears to be some room for critical reporting under the Taliban. For example, TOLO repeatedly aired a clip of Taliban fighters beating a former Afghan soldier.

Within days, top Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhunzada warned Taliban fighters against excesses, saying they would be punished. He reiterated a promise of amnesty for former soldiers.

"Did the news story bring about a change? I want to think it contributed to it," said Sapai, the TOLO news director.

Sapai said views among the Taliban range from those who cling to the strict views of the past, to those who want a more open society that embraces education and work for all — including girls and women.

He believes domestic and external pressures on the Taliban should not be underestimated. "Most of the Taliban leadership accept that Afghanistan and the world is different now and it's hard to turn back the clock but still the differences exist among them," he said.

It's the uncertainty about which view will prevail that has journalists worried.

"The fear that we have is for the day in the future when the Taliban will prevent us from the work that we do," said TOLO reporter Asma Saeen, 22. "This is my big fear and my constant anxiety."

She has no recollection of the harsh Taliban rule of the 1990s and said she has been able to work unhindered. Yet she resents the many restrictions imposed on girls and women, including banning teen-age girls from returning to school, at least for now, and many women not being allowed to return to their jobs.

Both Saeen and Binesh want to leave Afghanistan, saying they long for the freedoms they enjoyed before the Taliban swept to power.

"We were not expecting that after 20 years of democracy to face these many restrictions," said Binesh. "I am ready to go."

## Fight over subpoena for Trump's testimony heads to court

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge will hear arguments Thursday in former President Donald Trump's fight to avoid being questioned under oath in a New York investigation into his business practices.

New York Attorney General Letitia James is seeking to enforce subpoenas her office issued in December to Trump and his two eldest children, Ivanka and Donald Trump Jr.

James, a Democrat, said her civil investigation has uncovered evidence Trump's company used "fraudulent or misleading" valuations of assets like golf clubs and skyscrapers to get loans and tax benefits.

She wants her investigators to be able to question Trump and his children, both of whom have been executives in the Trump Organization.

"The Trumps must comply with our lawful subpoenas for documents and testimony because no one in this country can pick and choose if and how the law applies to them," James said in a statement. "We

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will not be deterred in our efforts to continue this investigation and ensure that no one is above the law.”

In a statement Tuesday, Trump railed against what he called a “sham investigation of a great company that has done a spectacular job for New York and beyond” and a racially motivated “continuation of a Witch Hunt the likes of which has never been seen in this Country before.”

In a court filing this week, James included a letter from Trump’s longtime accounting firm advising him to no longer rely on years of financial statements it prepared based on his company’s valuations, given the questions about their accuracy.

Testifying in a civil investigation could be a potential peril for the Trumps, if they did anything wrong. Anything they say could be used against them in a parallel criminal investigation being overseen by the Manhattan district attorney’s office.

Even if ordered to comply with the subpoenas, however, they would be free to invoke their Fifth Amendment right to remain silent at any time in a deposition. Trump’s son, Eric Trump, and the Trump Organization’s finance chief Allen Weisselberg did so hundreds of times when they were questioned by investigators in 2020.

Last summer, spurred by evidence uncovered in James’ civil investigation, the Manhattan district attorney’s office charged Weisselberg and the Trump Organization with tax fraud, alleging he collected more than \$1.7 million in off-the-books compensation. Weisselberg and the company have pleaded not guilty.

In court papers ahead of Thursday’s hearing, Trump’s lawyers wrote that James had “relentlessly targeted” Trump, his family, company and associates “because of her dislike of his speech and political views.”

The subpoena dispute is now before state Judge Arthur Engoron. He previously sided with James on other matters relating to the probe, including making Eric Trump testify after his lawyers abruptly canceled a scheduled deposition.

Engoron ruled immediately in that matter and ordered Eric Trump to sit for a deposition within 14 days.

## **Estimated 73% of US now immune to omicron: Is that enough?**

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The omicron wave that assaulted the United States this winter also bolstered its defenses, leaving enough protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less — if any — dramatic disruption to society.

Millions of individual Americans’ immune systems now recognize the virus and are primed to fight it off if they encounter omicron, or even another variant.

About half of eligible Americans have received booster shots, there have been nearly 80 million confirmed infections overall and many more infections have never been reported. One influential model uses those factors and others to estimate that 73% of Americans are, for now, immune to omicron, the dominant variant, and that could rise to 80% by mid-March.

This will prevent or shorten new illnesses in protected people and reduce the amount of virus circulating overall, likely tamping down new waves. Hospitals will get a break from overwhelmed ICUs, experts agree.

“We have changed,” said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. “We have been exposed to this virus and we know how to deal with it.”

The coronavirus — the current variant or future ones that are sure to pop up — remains a dangerous germ. It is still infecting more than 130,000 Americans and killing more than 2,000 every day. Tens of millions of people remain vulnerable.

And there will be future outbreaks. The notion of a “herd immunity” that could stop the virus has slipped away under the harsh reality of new variants, waning immunity, and the rejection of vaccines by some Americans.

But the coronavirus is no longer new. Two years ago it arrived in a nation where nobody’s immune system had seen it before. The entire population — 330 million people — were immunologically naive, that is, susceptible to infection.

“I am optimistic even if we have a surge in summer, cases will go up, but hospitalizations and deaths will

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not," said Mokdad, who works on the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation model, which calculated the 73% figure for The Associated Press.

With varying degrees of relief and caution, many Americans are starting to return to their pre-pandemic lifestyles.

Sarah Rixen, 41, of Bismarck, North Dakota, started singing again with a civic chorus after taking a year off. Now, with omicron winding down, she said she feels more confident than at any time since the crisis began.

"But I am still a little leery that there could be another variant around the corner," said Rixen, noting that her family and most of her relatives are fully vaccinated. "I am still going to wear a mask."

As mask mandates ease, workers return to offices and flights fill up, experts are trying to understand whether this return to normal can last, or if another setback is looming.

To address that, researchers are trying to answer questions about the virus, the vaccine, and how our bodies respond: How fast is booster protection waning against omicron? How long does protection from infection last? How many mild infections were never reported? How many people got infected but had no symptoms?

To find clues, they use health data from other countries such as Britain, Denmark, South Africa and Qatar to project what could be in store.

Scientists at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health estimates that about three out of four people in the United States will have been infected by omicron by the end of the surge.

"We know it's a huge proportion of the population," said Shaun Truelove, an epidemiologist and disease modeler at Johns Hopkins. "This varies a lot by location, and in some areas we expect the number infected to be closer to one in two."

That means different regions or groups of people have different level of protection — and risk. In Virginia, disease modelers are thinking about their population in terms of groups with different levels of immunity.

They estimate about 45% of Virginians have the highest level of immunity through boosted vaccination or through vaccination plus a recent infection with omicron. Another 47% have immunity that has waned somewhat; and 7% are the most vulnerable because they were never vaccinated and never infected.

In all, the vast majority of Virginians have at least some immunity, said Bryan Lewis, a computational epidemiologist who leads University of Virginia's COVID-19 modeling team.

"That's going to be a nice shield of armor for our population as a whole," Lewis said. "If we do get to very low case rates, we certainly can ease back on some of these restrictions."

Still, while the population is better protected, many individuals are not. Even by the most optimistic estimates for population immunity, 80 million or so Americans are still vulnerable. That's about the same as the total number of confirmed infections in the U.S. during the pandemic.

"The 26% who could still get omicron right now have to be very careful," Mokdad said.

Andrew Pekosz, a virus researcher at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is concerned that people — particularly unvaccinated omicron survivors — may have a false sense of security. "In an ideal world, unvaccinated individuals infected with omicron would be lining up for a vaccine shot," he said.

Also, estimating protection is far from an exact science. It's a moving target, as immunity wanes and new variants circulate. Protection varies widely from person to person. And it's impossible to know for sure how many people are protected at all. The IHME model estimates a wide range — from 63% to 81% of Americans.

"We've reached a much better position for the coming months, but with waning immunity we shouldn't take it for granted," Mokdad said.

## 'The brand is so toxic': Dems fear extinction in rural US

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

SMETHPORT, Pa. (AP) — Some Democrats here in rural Pennsylvania are afraid to tell you they're Democrats.

The party's brand is so toxic in the small towns 100 miles northeast of Pittsburgh that some liberals have

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removed bumper stickers and yard signs and refuse to acknowledge their party affiliation publicly. These Democrats are used to being outnumbered by the local Republican majority, but as their numbers continue to dwindle, the few that remain are feeling increasingly isolated and unwelcome in their own communities.

"The hatred for Democrats is just unbelievable," said Tim Holohan, an accountant based in rural McKean County who recently encouraged his daughter to get rid of a pro-Joe Biden bumper sticker. "I feel like we're on the run."

The climate across rural Pennsylvania is symptomatic of a larger political problem threatening the Democratic Party ahead of the 2022 midterm elections. Beyond losing votes in virtually every election since 2008, Democrats have been effectively ostracized from many parts of rural America, leaving party leaders with few options to reverse a cultural trend that is redefining the nation's political landscape.

The shifting climate helped Republicans limit Democratic gains in 2020 — the GOP actually gained House seats despite former President Donald Trump's loss — and a year later, surging Republican rural support enabled Republicans to claim the Virginia governorship. A small but vocal group of party officials now fears the same trends will undermine Democratic candidates in Ohio, Wisconsin, Georgia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, states that will help decide the Senate majority in November, and the White House two years after that.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party continues to devote the vast majority of its energy, messaging and resources to voters in more populated urban and suburban areas.

In Pennsylvania, Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, a leading candidate in the state's high-stakes Senate contest, insists his party can no longer afford to ignore rural voters. The former small-town mayor drove his black Dodge Ram pickup truck across five rural counties last weekend to face voters who almost never see statewide Democratic candidates.

Fetterman, wearing his signature hooded sweatshirt and gym shorts despite the freezing temperatures, described himself as a champion for "the forgotten, the marginalized and the left-behind places" as he addressed roughly 100 people inside a bingo hall in McKean County, a place Trump carried with 72% of the vote in 2020.

"These are the kind of places that matter just as much as any other place," Fetterman said as the crowd cheered.

The Democratic Party's struggle in rural America has been building for years. And it's getting worse. Barack Obama won 875 counties nationwide in his overwhelming 2008 victory. Twelve years later, Biden won only 527. The vast majority of those losses — 260 of the 348 counties — took place in rural counties, according to data compiled by The Associated Press.

The worst losses were concentrated in the Midwest: 21 rural counties in Michigan flipped from Obama in 2008 to Trump in 2020; Democrats lost 28 rural counties in Minnesota, 32 in Wisconsin and a whopping 45 in Iowa. At the same time, recent Republican voter registration gains in swing states like Florida and North Carolina were fueled disproportionately by rural voters.

Biden overcame rural losses to beat Trump in 2020 because of gains in more populous Democratic counties. Perhaps because of his victory, some Democratic officials worry that party leaders do not appreciate the severity of the threat.

Democratic Rep. Jim Cooper of Tennessee, who recently announced he would not seek reelection to Congress this fall, warns that the party is facing extinction in small-town America.

"It's hard to sink lower than we are right now. You're almost automatically a pariah in rural areas if you have a D after your name," Cooper told The Associated Press.

Even if Democrats continue to eke out victories by piling up urban and suburban votes, former Sen. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota fears her party will have "unstable majorities" if they cannot stop the bleeding in rural areas.

"Democrats have the House, they have the Senate, the presidency, but it's an unstable majority. By that, I mean, the narrowest kind, making it difficult to advance ideas and build coalitions," said Heitkamp, who now heads the One Country Project, which is focused on engaging rural voters.

She criticized her party's go-to strategy for reaching rural voters: focusing on farmers and vowing to



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improve high-speed internet. At the same time, she said Democrats are hurting themselves by not speaking out more forcefully against far-left positions that alienate rural voters, such as the push to “defund the police.”

While only a handful of Democrats in Congress support stripping such money from police departments, for example, conservative media popular in rural communities — particularly Fox News — amplifies such positions.

“We’re letting Republicans use the language of the far left to define the Democratic Party, and we can’t do that,” Heitkamp said. “The trend lines in rural America are very, very bad. ... Now, the brand is so toxic that people who are Democrats, the ones left, aren’t fighting for the party.”

To help win back rural voters, the Democratic National Committee has tapped Kylie Oversen, a former North Dakota state legislator, to work with rural organizers and state party rural caucuses as the chair of the national committee’s rural council. The DNC also says it’s sharing resources with people on the ground in rural areas to help improve training, recruiting and organizing.

So far, at least, those resources are not making life any easier for Democrats in northwestern Pennsylvania.

At one of Fetterman’s weekend stops in rural Clarion, a group of voters said they’ve been effectively ostracized by their community — and even family members, in some cases — for being Democrats. One woman brings her political signs inside at night so they aren’t vandalized or stolen.

“You have to be careful around here,” said Barbara Speer, 68, a retired sixth grade teacher.

Nearby, Michelle’s Cafe on Clarion’s main street is one of the few gathering points for local Democrats. A sign on the door proclaims support for Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights and other progressive priorities.

But the cafe owner, 33-year-old Kaitlyn Nevel, isn’t comfortable sharing her political affiliation when asked.

“I would rather not say, just because it’s a small town,” she said.

One patron, 22-year-old college student Eugenia Barboza, said the cafe is one of the few places in town she feels safe as a Latina immigrant. Just down the road, she said, a caravan of Trump supporters met up to drive to the deadly protests in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021.

Barboza said she’s grateful that Democrats like Fetterman are willing to come to rural areas, but she isn’t hopeful that it’ll change much.

“It would take a lot more than just him,” she said. “It would take years and years and years.”

## Use of rape-kit DNA to probe other crimes shocks prosecutors

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The San Francisco district attorney’s stunning claim that California crime labs are using DNA from sexual assault survivors to investigate unrelated crimes shocked prosecutors nationwide, and advocates said the practice could affect victims’ willingness to come forward.

District Attorney Chesa Boudin said he became aware of the “opaque practice” last week after prosecutors found a report among hundreds of pages of evidence in the case against a woman recently charged with a felony property crime. The papers referred to a DNA sample collected from the woman during a 2016 rape investigation.

Boudin read from the report Tuesday at a news conference and said he could not share it because of privacy concerns, but his office allowed the San Francisco Chronicle to review the documents. The newspaper said the woman was tied to a burglary in late 2021 during “a routine search” of a San Francisco Police Department crime lab database. The match came from DNA gathered from the same laboratory listed in a report on the sexual assault, The Chronicle reported.

Boudin said someone at the crime lab told his office the practice was a standard procedure. According to Rachel Marshall, Boudin’s spokeswoman, that person was crime lab Director Mark Powell.

Powell did not respond Wednesday to an email from The Associated Press seeking comment.

San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott said his department is investigating. If he finds his department is using victims’ DNA to investigate other crimes, he is committed to ending the practice.

A spokesman declined to comment Wednesday on when the results of the investigation can be expected.

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He said Scott would likely address the allegations later Wednesday during a Police Commission meeting.

There are strict government regulations surrounding DNA collection and analysis on the state and federal level, yet dozens of local police departments around the U.S. have amassed their own DNA databases to track criminals, AP found in 2017.

It's not clear whether that's what occurred in the San Francisco crime lab, or if it's what Boudin was referring to as a common practice.

"These databases work in the background with very little regulation and very little light," said Jason Kreag, a law professor at the University of Arizona who has studied forensic DNA issues. "It doesn't surprise me, and I wouldn't think this is the only instance where it actually happened."

California law allows local law enforcement crime labs to operate their own forensic databases that are separate from federal and state databases. The law also lets municipal labs perform forensic analysis, including DNA profiling, using those databases — without regulation by the state or others.

Kreag said there could be other instances where someone's DNA is collected for a specific purpose and then run through a database. For example, homeowners could submit their DNA in a burglary case to exclude them, but later that DNA could be linked to another crime.

"Would the district attorney have come out so forcefully" in a case like that? Kreag asked. He said he has not heard of such a case involving a sexual assault victim's DNA.

Several other law enforcement agencies in California and elsewhere around the U.S. pushed back against Boudin's assertion that it was a common practice.

New York Police Department Detective Sophia Mason said the agency "does not enter victims' DNA profiles into databases or use them in unrelated investigations."

Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore said: "Certainly the department does not do that."

District attorneys in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Sacramento counties also swatted down the suggestion, as did representatives from San Diego police, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department crime lab and others.

In Oakland, law enforcement uses sexual assault victim DNA only "in the context of the case for which the evidence was submitted, not to investigate other cases."

"As far as I know, it's not a widespread practice," said Ilse Knecht, director of policy and advocacy at the Joyful Heart Foundation, which assists survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse.

Knecht and others fear the effect on sexual assault victims, many of whom are already reluctant to report their experiences to law enforcement. Experts say only a third of sexual assaults are reported to authorities.

The possibility — however remote — that an accuser's DNA could be used against them could throw up additional barriers.

"I think anybody can understand how survivors would be fearful of reporting after hearing this story," Knecht said.

Nelson Bunn, executive director of the National District Attorneys Association, said he did not personally know of crime labs using DNA in such a manner. Rape-kit DNA should only be used in sexual assault investigations, he said.

"Otherwise, trust would be eroded," he said, citing "a detrimental effect on justice for victims of sexual assault."

Boudin's news conferences did not occur in a political vacuum. The progressive prosecutor faces a recall election in June and has been publicly feuding with local law enforcement.

The clash between his office and the police department intensified this month after the start of a trial against Terrance Stangel, a former police officer facing battery and assault charges for beating a man with a baton in 2019. It's the first excessive-force case against an on-duty San Francisco police officer to go to trial.

Earlier this month, Scott ended an agreement to cooperate in the district attorney's investigations of police shootings, in-custody deaths and uses of force resulting in serious injury because of concerns over the office's impartiality.

Boudin has denied violating the agreement, and the two have since pledged to renegotiate it with help of the state attorney general and San Francisco's mayor and city attorney.

## Crime, homelessness frame race for mayor of Los Angeles

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The contest to become the next mayor of Los Angeles can be distilled into a single question with no easy answer: Who can fix this mess?

Tourists still flock to Hollywood's Walk of Fame, the palm trees soar along Sunset Boulevard, and the Los Angeles Rams are Super Bowl champions. But in many ways the nation's second most populous city feels diminished.

An out-of-control homeless crisis plays out on the streets daily, sometimes with deadly consequences. A rising crime rate — spotlighted by home invasions and smash-and-grab thefts at luxury stores — has contributed to a creeping sense of civic disorder. Miles of streets and sidewalks are crumbling.

Sexual harassment and corruption scandals have tainted City Hall. Two years after the start of the pandemic, many yearn for a return to normalcy that hasn't come. Tellingly, a region once associated with stratospheric growth is losing population, in part from frustrated residents deciding a brighter future is somewhere else.

As voters in the city of 4 million people begin to assess a large, diverse cast of candidates to replace beleaguered two-term Democratic Mayor Eric Garcetti, at issue is whether LA might break from its liberal moorings and embrace a candidate with a strong emphasis on public safety. New York City has similar conditions, and last fall voters elected former police Capt. Eric Adams as their mayor.

What happens in New York, LA and other big cities can foreshadow the direction of national Democratic politics.

"These big cities are all Democratic strongholds, but they're not monolithic," said Raphael Sonenshein, executive director of the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles. "At least in theory, this year has some open doors for candidates who are the most critical of the political structure and system."

Last week was the deadline for candidates to enter the race. The primary is June 7. If no candidate wins a majority — which appears likely with more than two dozen people in the race — a runoff would be held in November between the top two finishers.

For now, the officially nonpartisan race is a scrum with no dominant candidate, though the leading contenders all are Democrats.

In a different year, the overwhelming favorite might be U.S. Rep. Karen Bass, a fixture in the party's progressive wing who was on President Joe Biden's short list when he was considering a vice presidential pick. Her election would be groundbreaking: She hopes to become the city's first female and second Black mayor, after Tom Bradley, who held the post from 1973 to 1993.

Bass needs to build support beyond her congressional district. Her recently announced plans to get more police on the streets was a recognition of the unsteady times.

The entry into the race last week of billionaire Rick Caruso, a business-friendly, political centrist known for building high-end shopping malls, reordered the contest and will give voters a starkly different choice. With the ability to invest tens of millions of dollars of his own money into his campaign, the one-time Republican who recently registered as a Democrat is running as an outsider who wants to add 1,500 police officers. He faults those holding office for allowing the city to go badly off track.

But most voters know little about Caruso, and inevitable challenges come with being a white billionaire with a nine-bedroom mega-yacht in a diverse city with a yawning gap between rich and poor. Forbes magazine estimates his wealth at \$4.3 billion. His campaign website introduces him as the grandson of Italian immigrants and a philanthropist with deep community roots who has served on several government commissions, including as president of the city's Police Commission.

Residents "are scared," Caruso said in a brief interview with The Associated Press. "They're fed up. Can

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you imagine running a small business and you're worried about crime, and you also have a (homeless) encampment in front of your business?"

Other candidates among a leading group include city Councilman Joe Buscaino, a former policeman pushing for an expanded police department; Councilman Kevin de Leon, a former state Senate leader and the most prominent Latino on the ballot in a city that is about half Hispanic; and City Attorney Mike Feuer, who has made gun violence a priority.

The widespread anxiety over unsafe streets shares some similarity to 1993, when LA voters turned to Republican Richard Riordan to lead the city in the aftermath of the deadly 1992 riots that erupted after four white police officers were acquitted of assault in the beating of Black motorist Rodney King. It also has parallels to New York City in the early 1990s, when the perception that crime was out of control helped usher in Republican Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Los Angeles, however, is much changed from Riordan's days. It's more Latino, less white and more solidly Democratic — Republicans comprise only about 13% of voters, while Democrats account for nearly 60%, with most of the remainder independents who lean Democratic.

Homelessness is the most pressing issue. An estimated 41,000 people live on city streets, a figure roughly equal to the population of North Miami Beach, Florida.

In recent weeks homeless men with long arrest records were implicated in two killings — a 70-year-old nurse died after being punched in an unprovoked attack at a bus stop and a 24-year old graduate student was stabbed to death while working alone in a store. Advocates worried public outrage over the crimes would leave a vulnerable population more endangered, noting people living on the streets are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

What's needed is permanent housing that is not yet available, paired with health services for those with mental illness or chronic drug addiction, said John Maceri of the People Concern, one of L.A.'s largest nonprofits serving the homeless.

Also lacking: a system to get those units built quickly, and with accountability. "People who are in temporary housing are still homeless," Maceri said.

Proposals to expand police numbers already are seeing resistance from activists who want funding reduced for the Los Angeles Police Department.

To urbanist Joel Kotkin, a presidential fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University who lived in LA for four decades, one of the long-running problems is the erosion of the middle class. It flourished for many years, fortified by unionized jobs in aerospace and entertainment.

"People came here, they bought a house, they raised a family, kids went to public schools," he said.

Many of those jobs are now gone, and what's left is a so-called a barbell economy of well-to-do residents on one end and the working class on the other.

"That whole middle sector of Los Angeles, which really was the great thing about L.A., that's disappeared," Kotkin said.

## Brazil mudslides kill at least 94, with dozens still missing

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and MARIO LOBÃO Associated Press

PETROPOLIS, Brazil (AP) — Rio de Janeiro state's government has confirmed 94 deaths from floods and mudslides that swept away homes and cars in the city of Petropolis. But even as families prepared to bury their dead, it was unclear Thursday how many bodies remained trapped in the mud.

Rubens Bomtempo, mayor of the German-influenced city nestled in the mountains, didn't even offer an estimate for the number of people missing, with recovery efforts still ongoing.

"We don't yet know the full scale of this," Bomtempo said at a news conference Wednesday. "It was a hard day, a difficult day."

More than 24 hours after the deadly deluge early Tuesday, survivors were digging to find lost loved ones. Rio de Janeiro's public prosecutors' office said in a statement Wednesday night that it had compiled a list of 35 people yet to be located.

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Footage posted on social media showed torrents dragging cars and houses through the streets and water swirling through the city. One video showed two buses sinking into a swollen river as its passengers clambered out the windows, scrambling for safety. Some didn't make it to the banks and were washed away, out of sight.

On Wednesday morning, houses were left buried beneath mud while appliances and cars were in piles on the streets.

Petropolis, named for a former Brazilian emperor, has been a refuge for people escaping the summer heat and tourists keen to explore the so-called "Imperial City."

Its prosperity has also drawn poorer residents from Rio's poorer regions. Its population grew haphazardly, climbing mountainsides now covered with small residences packed tightly together. Many are in areas unfit for structures and made more vulnerable by deforestation and inadequate drainage.

The state fire department said 25.8 centimeters (just over 10 inches) of rain fell within three hours on Tuesday -- almost as much as during the previous 30 days combined. Rio de Janeiro's Gov. Claudio Castro said in a press conference that the rains were the worst Petropolis has received since 1932.

"No one could predict rain as hard as this," Castro said. More rain is expected through the rest of the week, according to weather forecasters.

Castro added that almost 400 people were left homeless and 24 people were recovered alive.

They were fortunate, and they were few.

"I could only hear my brother yelling, 'Help! Help! My God!'" resident Rosilene Virginia told The Associated Press as a man comforted her. "It's very sad to see people asking for help and having no way of helping, no way of doing anything. It's desperate, a feeling of loss so great."

The stricken mountain region has seen similar catastrophes in recent decades, including one that caused more than 900 deaths. In the years since, Petropolis presented a plan to reduce risks of landslides, but works have been advancing only slowly. The plan, presented in 2017, was based on analysis determining that 18% of the city's territory was at high risk for landslides and flooding.

Local authorities say more than 180 residents who live in at-risk areas are sheltering in schools. More equipment and manpower is expected to help rescue efforts on Thursday.

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro expressed solidarity while on a trip to Russia. Petropolis' city hall declared three days of mourning for the tragedy.

Southeastern Brazil has been punished with heavy rains since the start of the year, with more than 40 deaths recorded between incidents in Minas Gerais state in early January and Sao Paulo state later the same month.

## On the slopes, a struggle for Black skiers' Olympic dreams

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Take an informal survey of elite American Alpine skiers and snowboarders, and most can name an organization that exposes Black and Hispanic children from urban areas to winter sports.

Whether it's on indoor halfpipes in New Jersey, or the Rocky Mountain slopes of Colorado and Wyoming, there seem to be plenty of programs aimed at developing a diverse new generation of skiers and snowboarders.

So where are the Black and Hispanic American athletes at the Winter Olympics?

The U.S. Alpine skiing team in Beijing is entirely white. The U.S. snowboarders and freestyle skiers include Asian American riders, but none who are Black or Hispanic.

"It's incredibly unfortunate," said Ryan Cochran-Siegle, an American silver medalist in super-G at Beijing. "We all want to figure out ways to close those gaps between different minorities and their access to skiing."

The past and present of the alpine sports are both working against that goal. White and elitist, they were born in the mountains of Europe, and are flourishing for the most part in mountain communities without a lot of racial or ethnic diversity.

Then there is the cost: A single day of skiing can cost \$100 or more, not including travel and equipment

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rental; owning your own gear costs even more. Wealth and easy access to resorts make a significant difference in one's ability to progress from recreation-level participation to an Olympic path.

It's one reason why few who make it to the Olympics are first-generation skiers, said Bode Miller, whose six Olympic Alpine medals are the most for any American skier.

"If your family didn't ski, or you weren't exposed to it through your upbringing, it's just very unusual," Miller said. "Your friends have to kind of push you into it."

The solution to the lack of diversity in skiing and snowboarding, according to Miller and others, is creating access to the slopes for underserved communities.

"Accessibility (splits into) subcategories of financial accessibility, geographic accessibility and cultural accessibility," said Miller, who is part of a group working to build indoor skiing facilities across the United States.

Advocates say the kind of two-day-a-week programs that create space on the snow for Black and Hispanic children are making a difference. But not enough so yet to be seen at the Olympics.

A young athlete's chances of making an Olympic team increase significantly with intensive training at elite boarding schools or academies that can cost of tens of thousands of dollars.

But Schone Malliet, a Black CEO and founder of Winter4Kids, a nonprofit that makes winter sports accessible to New York-area schoolkids, says programs like his are about much more than training elite athletes.

"When you see these kids out here, and they're in awe of what they see on a mountain and when they fall and get up and they keep going? That's the deal," Malliet said. "They change their whole perspective on their lives. Forget about skiing, snowboarding or cross-country, but just building the idea that, 'I can fall down and get up.'"

Racial diversity is still a novelty across most winter sports, not just skiing and snowboarding.

In Beijing, there is only one Black figure skater competing for any nation. On Sunday, American Erin Jackson became the first Black woman to win a gold medal in speedskating. In other events, a small number of Black and Hispanic athletes compete with longshot chances at medals.

There are, in fact, some people of color competing in ski events at the Beijing Olympics. They are from African and Caribbean nations -- Ghana, Nigeria, Eritrea, Jamaica. Haiti sent skier Richardson Viano to China as its first winter Olympian ever.

Jean-Pierre Roy, president of the Haiti Ski Federation, who was on hand Sunday to watch Viano ski in the giant slalom, skied in world championship races but said Haitians' interest in the sport has taken off with Viano's pioneering participation.

"There have to be dreams," he said. "Without dreams there is no progress."

Like Viano, who learned to ski in France after he was adopted by a French family, most of the African and Caribbean participants in the Games either trained or lived in countries with ski slopes and training facilities.

Sophie Goldschmidt, head of U.S. Skiing, said inclusion is a core value for her organization, but acknowledges the barriers to progress on skier diversity.

"Whether it's sort of being cost prohibitive or just exclusive for other reasons, it's something that I'm keen to change," she said.

A 2021 audit of diversity, equity and inclusion of U.S. Skiing revealed the organization is almost entirely white. Just 1% of the organization's staff identified as people of color, while all of its coaches and board members were white.

Seba Johnson first saw skiing on a tiny black and white TV in the housing project where she lived in Fredericksted, on the island of St Croix. She was awed. Seeing it in person at the age of 5 convinced her she wanted to be a ski racer.

Nine years later, Johnson broke barriers during the 1988 Calgary Games, becoming the first Black woman to ski in a Winter Games, and at 14, the youngest. She relied on support from ski equipment companies, celebrities and other donors, and even then was able to spend far less time training than her competitors.

"No one should have to beg for an opportunity to do what their heart desires," Johnson, 48, said in an interview.

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Although she competed at subsequent Olympics, representing the U.S. Virgin Islands, there wasn't another Black woman in an Olympic Alpine ski event until 30 years later, when Kenya's Sabrina Simader skied in the 2018 Games at Pyeongchang.

She called it "heartbreaking" that Black representation in skiing hasn't improved.

Alaska-born Andre Horton became the first Black man on the U.S. ski team in 2001, although he never competed at an Olympics.

Another Black skier introduced Horton to the National Brotherhood of Skiers, a Black-led organization advocating for greater representation in winter sports. The group's convention in Aspen, Colorado, was the first time Horton saw large numbers of other skiers who looked like him. He said other attendees were awed by the sight of him in his national ski team uniform.

Horton recalls sharing a chairlift ride that day with a 70-year-old Black woman, who drove home how important Black representation is for the sport.

"She said, 'When I was your age, I wasn't allowed to ski.'"

That's exactly why the National Brotherhood of Skiers exists, says its president, Henri Rivers. It aims to clear racial and social barriers for Black athletes so they can focus on excelling in winter sports.

Even then, the Black and Hispanic skiers coming through the pipeline aren't ready to compete for spots on an Olympic team. They'd do better if the greater ski community embraced them and saw them as the future of the sport, Rivers said.

"They don't even realize how many different obstacles are being put in their way to slow their progress."

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Associated Press writers Howard Fendrich, Pat Graham and John Leicester contributed. New York-based journalist Aaron Morrison is a member of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team on assignment at the Beijing Olympics. Follow him on Twitter at <https://www.twitter.com/aaronlmorrison>.

## Valieva to take to Olympic ice once more amid doping scandal

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Kamila Valieva aims for the top step of a podium she may never see when the Russian figure skating star, now at the center of the latest Olympic doping scandal, concludes her competition Thursday night with the women's free skate at the Beijing Games.

The International Olympic Committee already has said there will be no flower ceremony if Valieva places among the top three finishers, creating an awkward feeling of open-endedness when the event wraps up. There also will be no medal ceremony for the figure skaters because the IOC fears that Valieva someday could be stripped of hers.

"There will be an asterisk against the results, because they will be preliminary obviously pending the investigation," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said. "Would we prefer not to have all this going on? Absolutely."

The 15-year-old Valieva tested positive for a banned heart medication at the Russian championships in December. But the result wasn't announced until last week, shortly after she had helped win a team gold medal that is now also in doubt.

She was cleared to compete earlier this week by the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which ruled among other things that she had protected status as a minor and would suffer "irreparable harm" if she was not allowed to perform. But the court did not rule on the full scope of the case, leaving that to a more comprehensive investigation later.

The court's decision has cast a polarizing shadow over one of the marquee events of the Winter Games.

"Do I feel sorry for her? I don't think so. I wouldn't say so," said Kaori Sakamoto of Japan, who is in third place after her short program. "I'm focusing on the competition. At the moment, I'm actually trying not to think about things like that. Of course, there were moments where I thought: 'What's going to happen? What's happening?'"

Valieva has claimed the drug triggering her positive, trimetazidine, entered her system by accident. But the World Anti-Doping Agency filed a brief stating two other substances she acknowledged taking,

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L-carnitine and Hypoxen — though both legal — undercut the argument that a banned substance could have been ingested in error.

Hypoxen is used to increase blood flow to the heart, and L-carnitine is an oxygen-boosting performance enhancer that is banned if injected above certain thresholds. When those substances are combined with trimetazidine, U.S. Anti-Doping CEO Travis Tygart said, it's "an indication that something more serious is going on."

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

In the meantime, IOC President Thomas Bach offered Olympic torches to the U.S. figure skaters who won team silver medals as a holdover gift while they await the resolution of the doping case, The Associated Press learned late Wednesday.

Officials from the IOC have not responded to requests for comment on Bach's meeting with the team.

"That's definitely disappointing," said Karen Chen, who competed in the team event and enters Thursday night in 13th place after her short program. "I really was looking forward to being 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. So definitely, definitely disappointing."

While the doping case continues to unfold around her, Valieva has tried to go about her business as usual, taking part in every practice session on her schedule. And though she looked calm and collected during a run-through for her short program, the tension appeared to finally get to her when skated off the ice and broke down in tears.

Even though her performance, which included a shaky triple axel, left her in first place by nearly two points.

Valieva refused to speak to reporters after the short program, though she would be required to attend a news conference if she finishes in the top three Thursday night. In her only public comments so far, 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 plans to go big in her free skate, set to "Bolero" by the early 20th century French composer Maurice Ravel. The leader of the Russian team's "Quad Squad" is attempting three of the four-revolution jumps: a quad salchow on her opening jumping pass, a quad toe loop-triple toe loop combination and a quad toe loop-triple salchow combo.

Valieva's program has the highest base value — by far — of anyone in the field, which means she would have to miss several of the jumps and have an uncharacteristically poor performance to land anywhere but first place.

Her closest pursuer, teammate and world champ Anna Shcherbakova, is planning to open with a quad flip, while Alexandra Trusova has planned an ambitious five quads in her free skate as she tries to leap-frog third-place Sakamoto and give the Russians the first sweep of the women's figure skating event in Olympic history.

"If I skate clean, there is a chance I will get Olympic gold," Trusova said. "If not, then not. My goal is to skate clean."

## Baptisms by Arizona priest presumed invalid due to error

By JACQUES BILLEAUD, LUIS ANDRES HENAO and GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The priest was beloved by his parishioners — yet for years he made a one-word ritual mistake, repeatedly, that has caused confusion and anxiety for thousands of Catholics in the Phoenix area now worrying that they were improperly baptized.

Under scrutiny are baptisms performed by the Rev. Andres Arango, who served in Arizona for 16 years. Catholic officials estimate that thousands of baptisms are now presumed to be invalid because he used incorrect wording, and they say those affected may need to be re-baptized. Some may feel obliged to have other church ceremonies performed again, even including marriage.



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Arango's error was in saying, "We baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," when he should have begun the sentence by saying, "I baptize you." The difference is theologically crucial, the Vatican ruled in 2020, because it's not the "we" of the congregation doing the baptizing but the "I" of Jesus Christ, working through the priest.

Arango served in three parishes in metro Phoenix from September 2005 until his resignation Feb. 1, most recently at St. Gregory, where parishioners credited him with reversing a worrisome drop in membership.

"Without his heartfelt kindness, care, concern and shepherding, physically and spiritually, our church and school would be nonexistent," said Mona Shelley, a lifetime member of the parish. She said Arango had returned to the church several times since his resignation to perform re-baptisms with the proper wording.

Fellow parishioner Christina Moishe Collins, who is also a cantor at St. Gregory, said Arango received a standing ovation after his final service there, and people waited outside with banners to thank him and show support.

"I don't see him doing this with malice in any manner," she said. "Father Andres is an amazing priest and he may have made a mistake, but that doesn't change the fact that he really cares about his parishioners and really, truly, lives his faith."

Even a parishioner directly affected by a botched baptism, Eliana Najera, said she is grateful to Arango for his ministry and wishes he could return. Najera's 13-year-old daughter, Alysso, was baptized by Arango at another church and will be re-baptized at St. Gregory next week.

"As a mother I feel bad because all of these years I allowed her to receive Communion," Najera said, referring to another sacrament that requires the recipient to first be baptized. "I have more questions than answers."

The Diocese of Phoenix is trying to identify people baptized by Arango. It has set up an FAQ section on its website to confront issues related to the botched baptisms and created a form for people to fill out to start the process of getting re-baptized.

The Vatican in June 2020 issued the guidance declaring that the "We" formula was invalid and that anyone who was baptized using it must be re-baptized using the proper formula. The Holy See said it was taking action because some unnamed priests were using the "We" formula to make the baptism more of a communal affair involving parents, godparents and the community in welcoming a new member into the church.

In a note on the Phoenix diocese's website, Arango wrote: "It saddens me to learn that I have performed invalid baptisms throughout my ministry as a priest by regularly using an incorrect formula. I deeply regret my error and how this has affected numerous people in your parish and elsewhere."

There have been similar cases elsewhere in the past.

In Detroit, church officials in 2020 said a deacon used the wrong words while baptizing people from 1986 to 1999.

The most dramatic consequence in that case involved the Rev. Matthew Hood, who was baptized as a boy by the deacon and later became a priest: Because his baptism was invalid, so was his 2017 ordination. Hood discovered the error while watching a video of his childhood baptism, the local archdiocese said.

The archdiocese said marriages performed by Hood might not be valid and urged couples to speak to their pastor as soon as possible "so any steps can be taken to remedy your marital status in the church, if necessary."

Hood was baptized again and ordained as a priest a second time.

Also in 2020, in Oklahoma, a new priest, the Rev. Zachary Boazman, learned that his baptism was invalid. Oklahoma City Archbishop Paul Coakley subsequently validated marriages performed by Boazman, who was baptized and ordained again.

Katie Burke, a spokesperson for the Diocese of Phoenix, said rank-and-file Catholics brought the issue of Arango's baptisms to the attention of the church.

"Likely, the people who heard it happen in Phoenix were aware of these other stories and therefore knew the phrasing to be incorrect," Burke said.

Burke said the diocese was not aware of any seminarians, deacons or priests who were improperly

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baptized by Arango.

In a petition to the Phoenix Diocese, parishioners requested a town hall meeting at the church to hear their views on the removal of the priest and demand answers to the diocese's decision to invalidate thousands of sacraments. The petition also included a spreadsheet with hundreds of examples of how Arango positively impacted their lives.

Before serving at St. Gregory, Arango was pastor at Saint Jerome Catholic Church in Phoenix and the St. Anne Roman Catholic Parish in nearby Gilbert. Earlier, he served in San Diego and Brazil.

Andrea Reyes, a lifelong St. Gregory parishioner, became friends with Arango during a church trip to Israel in 2017 and has kept in contact since he resigned.

"He basically said that this is a very unique situation, and he understands that he made a mistake," she said. "I was like, 'We miss you so much.' And he was like, 'Yeah, I miss you guys too.' I feel like he's kind of grieving this as well as we are as a community."

Another parishioner, Johnny Martinez Jr., said he and 20 family members started a group chat in which they discussed whether any of them had been impacted by the botched baptisms. Martinez found old pictures confirming that his two children were not baptized by Arango, but said he interacted with the priest multiple times.

He praised Arango for his gentleness and diligence, yet said resigning was the right thing to do.

"We all have a job to do and you need to do that job correctly. It was effectively not done correctly," Martinez said. "We just have to pick up the pieces and move from there."

But María Vázquez, whose 6-year-old grandson was baptized by Arango and who still considers it to be valid, has sent a letter to the diocese seeking the priest's reinstatement,

"I'm asking them to reach into their hearts and forgive," said Vázquez. "There have been priests who have done far worse and have been allowed to remain in their churches."

## US investigators: Zinke misused his Interior secretary job

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Former U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke misused his position to advance a commercial development project that included a microbrewery in his Montana hometown and lied to an agency ethics official about his involvement, federal investigators said Wednesday.

The investigation by the Interior Department's inspector general found that Zinke continued work on the commercial project through a nonprofit foundation in the resort community of Whitefish even after he committed upon taking office to break ties with the foundation.

Zinke, who is now running for Congress, also gave incorrect and incomplete information to an Interior Department ethics official who confronted him over his involvement and ordered agency staff to help him with the project in a misuse of his position, according to the investigator's report.

The Great Northern Veterans Peace Park Foundation was created by Zinke and others in 2007 to build a community sledding hill in Whitefish, a tourist town about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Glacier National Park and near the Montana-Canada border. The BNSF Railway company donated several acres of land to the foundation in 2008 to establish the park.

After being named Interior secretary in 2017, Zinke agreed to stop providing the foundation with his services.

But after resigning as the foundation's president and while he was employed as the Interior Secretary, Zinke engaged in "repeated, ongoing substantive negotiations" with developers about the use of foundation property for the commercial project known as 95 Karrow, investigators said.

Zinke's campaign blasted the investigative report as "a political hit job" and said in a statement that the involvement of Zinke's family with the foundation led to the restoration of railroad land into a park where children can sled.

"They are proud of the children's sledding park that dozens of kids use every weekend and countless locals use for exercise every day," the statement said. Zinke is far outpacing his rivals in fundraising

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ahead of the June 7 Republican primary for an open Montana congressional seat — the position he held before joining former President Donald Trump's cabinet.

The department's inspector general's office — led by a Trump nominee, Mark Greenblatt — referred the results of the Zinke investigation to prosecutors. Federal prosecutors working under Attorney General Merrick Garland, who was appointed by President Joe Biden, declined to pursue criminal charges last summer, the report said.

Zinke and his wife, Lola, declined interview requests from federal investigators looking into the land deal. But emails and text messages from others who were involved in the development project show Zinke continued to communicate with developers even after resigning from the foundation in March 2017, according to investigators. The messages were obtained through subpoenas to the developers, who were not named.

"The evidence that we obtained reflected that Secretary Zinke exchanged at least 64 emails and text messages and engaged in multiple phone calls in which he represented the Foundation in negotiations related to the 95 Karrow project," investigators wrote.

The report added: "He was not simply a passthrough for information to and from the foundation; to the contrary, several of his own messages make clear that he personally acted for or represented the Foundation in connection with the negotiations."

In one emailed message, a person identified in the investigative report as "developer 1" wrote that Zinke wanted a piece of property transferred to the park for the brewery. The email also said Zinke had asked for the "exclusive right to produce alcohol on 95 Karrow," according to the report.

Investigators concluded Zinke had "apparent interest in operating a microbrewery on site." The report did not offer details about the proposed transaction or say who would be the owners of the microbrewery.

Zinke's Interior Department staff became involved when he directed them to arrange a meeting with three of the project's developers at his office in August 2017 and later to arrange dinner for the group following a tour of the Lincoln Memorial that was led by Zinke. Staff members also printed documents for Zinke related to 95 Karrow, a violation of rules against using subordinates to perform non-official duties, the investigative report said.

Zinke was questioned about his role in the foundation and the development project in July 2018 by an Interior Department ethics official, following news reports that the foundation had entered an agreement with 95 Karrow's developers.

During the interview, Zinke denied any substantive involvement in the project, according to the report. The ethics official later said that Zinke "misrepresented" the facts and called Zinke's statements "disappointing ... and very concerning," according to the report.

Democrats including Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, had requested an investigation into Zinke's involvement in the project. Grijalva said the findings show Zinke used his office to advance his personal interests and attempted to use the peace park to "force inclusion of a brewery" in the development.

City officials in Whitefish approved revised plans for 95 Karrow in September, the Whitefish Pilot reported. The plans include building a 70-room hotel, a microbrewery, restaurant, offices, shops and 84 residential units. Representatives of developer 95 Karrow LLC did not immediately respond to telephone messages seeking comment.

Investigators found no evidence that Zinke's actions benefitted the energy company Halliburton — its former chairman, David Lesar, was an investor in the Whitefish development — or that members of Zinke's staff tried to conceal Zinke's involvement.

The investigation into the land deal was one of numerous probes of Zinke that began when he was in Trump's cabinet.

In one case, investigators found that he violated a policy prohibiting non-government employees from riding in government cars after his wife traveled with him, but he said ethics officials approved it. Zinke was cleared of wrongdoing following a complaint that he redrew the boundaries of a national monument in Utah to benefit a state lawmaker and political ally. Another investigation looked into his decision to block

two tribes from opening a casino in Connecticut.

During his time overseeing an agency responsible for managing 781,000 square miles (2 million square kilometers) of public lands, Zinke's broad rollbacks of restrictions on oil and gas drilling were cheered by industry. But they brought a backlash from environmental groups and Democratic lawmakers who accused him of putting corporate profits ahead of preservation.

When he resigned from the Interior Department in 2018, Zinke said politically motivated attacks had created a distraction. In the weeks leading up to departure, the White House concluded Zinke was likely the Cabinet member most vulnerable to investigations led by Democrats who were poised to take the majority in the House, a Trump administration official said at the time.

## Mexico's avocados face fallout from violence, deforestation

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — With clever Super Bowl ads, an irresistible fruit and apparently insatiable appetite from U.S. consumers, Mexico's avocado producers have so far been able to separate avocados from the conflictive landscape that produces them — at least until a threat to a U.S. agricultural inspector essentially shut down their exports last week.

But as producers continue to suffer extortion from organized crime, and loggers continue to chop down pine forests to clear land for avocado orchards, another threat looms: Campaigns for greener competition and perhaps even a boycott.

Most advocates for more sustainable avocados stop short of calling for an outright boycott.

"They (avocados) are a very large portion of either their country or regional economy and, you know, banning them entirely would not be advantageous" for already struggling local farmers, said Gareth Elliott, a New Jersey restaurant manager who runs the Facebook page "Blood Avocados." "But if there were more environmental studies and they were grown in a responsible manner, we could solve this together."

So far, the association of Mexican avocado producers and packers has taken little action to solve the problems, nor has its U.S. promotional arm, Avocados from Mexico, even as growers in Mexico report having to pay thousands of dollars in protection payments to drug gangs for each acre of orchard.

Those who don't pay are threatened with having their families kidnapped, murdered and returned in pieces.

The producers' associations have bought multimillion-dollar Super Bowl commercials, but they have never bothered to come up with a serious certification program to assure consumers the avocado they buy has not involved protection money to drug cartels — the same cartels flooding the United States with deadly fentanyl pills counterfeited to look like Xanax, Adderall or Oxycodone.

Nor have they come up with a plan to certify that the avocado sold at a U.S. supermarket wasn't planted on illegally logged mountainsides that used to hold pine forests, threatening local water supplies.

Neither group responded to requests for comment on the issue. Mexico's president has suggested the suspension of avocado imports was part of a conspiracy against his country.

That kind of certification and information program is what many activists want.

"I think it could also help bring up awareness," said Elliott, who said many people now may not be conscious of the issue. "Bringing it out to the consumer that how they purchase things speaks a lot louder to American policy or even global policy, than sometimes protests will."

But Elliott's reluctance to boycott might vanish if illegal logging and planting of avocados reaches into the core of the monarch butterfly reserves in the western state of Michoacan.

So far planters have only nibbled around the buffer zones of the mountaintop pine forests where the butterflies spend the winter before heading back to the United States and Canada. At present, the mountaintops are too cold and too high for avocados, but with climate change that, as everything else, may change.

"The Monarch butterflies ... they don't have another option to hibernate elsewhere," Gareth said. "I don't think the Americans are going to want to say goodbye to monarch butterflies.

"I think that would be the likely be the line they'll draw, or at least they'll say, 'I'll have more expensive

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avocados.”

Chef J.P. McMahon, who runs the Aniar, Cava and Tartare restaurants in Ireland, has already started advocating avoiding avocados.

Avocados are “perceived as something healthy, and the contrast to what it is actually doing” to the environment and society, “you couldn’t get further, it’s poles apart, it’s absolutely not,” McMahon said.

McMahon has tried to promote more sustainable, locally produced guacamole recipes based on kale or mashed-up sunchokes. It has been an uphill struggle: He has received angry messages from growers in Mexico saying they need the income and diners and chefs who want avocados at brunch. “Still, I hold to my guns,” he said.

“The environmental disaster, the deforestation caused, to feed the avo-on-toast craze made me feel so disgusted that I decided to stop eating them altogether,” McMahon wrote in November. “Almost five years later I do miss avocados, but I won’t be part of the exploitation of land and people to satisfy a crave.”

And there are other countries without Mexico’s land disputes, water shortages, drug cartel extortion, sensitive species and illegal logging problems that might try to supplant Mexico’s now-dominant 80% share of U.S. imports by offering more sustainable avocados. Peru, Colombia and Chile all have their own problems, but drug cartel extortion of growers isn’t one of them.

“Colombian exporters see the United States as a market with great potential,” said Juliana Villegas, vice president of exports for the trade promotion agency ProColombia. “There are some enormous opportunities and advantages for avocado production in Colombia.”

“We are in the privileged position, given our agricultural land” Villegas said. “It is very large. Right now we have millions of acres available without deforestation. I think that is an advantage we have to seize on.”

Any sustained ban on avocado exports might actually benefit the Mexican families who can no longer afford the fruit because of international demand.

But the loss of income would be devastating for Mexican farmers, who — like those in most countries in Latin America — have spent almost five centuries looking for a miracle crop that would pull them out of poverty.

Sugar, rubber, bananas, natural dyes, coffee, cacao — the stuff of which chocolate is made — all came and went, but never really fulfilled that promise. Either they were only practical on large plantations with slave labor, or they could be grown more cheaply elsewhere or plant diseases and synthetic substitutes spelled disaster for the crops.

For Mexico, the avocado has been that miracle crop for almost 25 years. A farmer with only a few acres of avocado trees can send his children to college, or buy a new pickup truck to get his product to market and avoid middlemen, something no other crop has been able to offer.

But it’s not consumers in the United States who are on the front lines: Many lonely, threatened activists in Mexican villages are fighting illegal logging and the expansion of avocado orchards on former forest land.

Activist Guillermo Saucedo tried to institute farmers’ patrols to detect illegal logging and unauthorized avocado orchards in Villa Madero, Michoacan, last year. He got as many as 60 or 70 people to participate in the patrols, starting in May. But on Dec. 6, Saucedo was kidnapped, beaten and threatened by drug cartel gunmen who either protect or invest in avocado orchards.

This week, Saucedo said he detected a huge water retention pond of the kind dug by avocado growers in a hamlet near Villa Madero, but he doesn’t believe the government will stop them.

“The National Guard don’t do anything,” Saucedo said. “The only thing that can stop them is the people themselves, by protesting.”

## US official: Russia adds 7K more troops near Ukraine border

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU, LORNE COOK and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainians defied pressure from Moscow with a national show of flag-waving unity Wednesday, while the U.S. warned that Russia had added as many as 7,000 troops near Ukraine’s borders despite Kremlin declarations that forces were being pulled back from the region.

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While a Russian invasion of Ukraine did not materialize as feared, the United States and its allies maintained that the threat is still strong, with Europe's security and economic stability in the balance.

Russia has massed more than 150,000 troops east, north and south of Ukraine, according to Western estimates. Russian President Vladimir Putin has signaled that he wants a peaceful path out of the crisis, and U.S. President Joe Biden promised that the U.S. would continue to give diplomacy "every chance," but he struck a skeptical tone about Moscow's intentions. Biden also insisted that Washington and its allies would not "sacrifice basic principles" respecting Ukraine sovereignty.

Russian Defense Ministry video showed a trainload of armored vehicles moving across a bridge away from Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. It also announced that more tank units were being loaded on trains to move back to their permanent bases after training exercises.

But at the same time, Russia continued war games near Ukraine's borders and across its vast territory.

A senior U.S. administration official said the West detected that Russia had increased its force near Ukraine by 7,000 troops, with some arriving as recently as Wednesday, and that there had been a marked increase in false claims by Russians that the Kremlin might use as pretext for an invasion.

The official said those claims included reports of unmarked graves of civilians allegedly killed by Ukrainian forces, statements that the U.S. and Ukraine are developing biological or chemical weapons, and claims that the West is funneling in guerrillas to kill Ukrainians.

The official was not authorized to speak publicly about sensitive operations and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. The official did not provide underlying evidence for the assertions.

The U.S. and Europe are maintaining threats of harsh sanctions. Trust between East and West remains elusive.

"We haven't seen a pullback," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told ABC News. "He (Putin) can pull the trigger. He can pull it today. He can pull it tomorrow. He can pull it next week. The forces are there if he wants to renew aggression against Ukraine."

State Department spokesman Ned Price said the U.S. had seen "more Russian forces, not fewer."

Asked why Russians would claim to be withdrawing when government intelligence, commercial satellite photos and social media videos showed no evidence of that, Price said: "This is the Russian playbook, to paint a picture publicly ... while they do the opposite."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance also had not seen "any withdrawal of Russian forces," as did multiple European governments. Before chairing a NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels, he said: "If they really start to withdraw forces, that's something we will welcome, but that remains to be seen."

In the meantime, the alliance is examining this week how and when to rapidly dispatch troops and equipment to countries closest to Russia and the Black Sea region should Moscow order an invasion.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy similarly dismissed the Russian withdrawal claims.

"What is this? Rotations, withdrawal, returning back again," he said on a visit to the southeastern city of Mariupol. "It's too early to rejoice."

The Ukrainian leader has repeatedly sought to project calm as well as strength during the crisis, declaring Wednesday a "Day of National Unity."

"We are united by a desire to happily live in peace," Zelenskyy said in an address to the nation earlier in the day. "We can defend our home only if we stay united."

Across the country, Ukrainians of all ages waved flags in the streets and from apartment windows.

Hundreds unfolded a 200-meter (650-foot) flag at Kyiv's Olympic Stadium, while another was draped in the center of a shopping mall in the capital.

In the government-controlled part of Ukraine's eastern region of Luhansk, where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian troops since 2014, residents stretched another huge flag across a street.

"This event, this number of people united around Ukrainian flag will show that we stand for united Ukraine," said resident Olena Tkachova.

A 2015 deal brokered by France and Germany helped end the worst of the fighting in eastern Ukraine,

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but implementation has stalled. The deal, known as the Minsk agreement, would offer broad self-rule to the separatist territories and thus is resented by many in Ukraine.

A Ukrainian government official said in a television interview that Zelenskyy would consider holding a referendum on the Minsk agreement "if there are no other options or instruments." But Vice Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said she was unaware that such an idea was under serious discussion.

Russia has repeatedly complained that the U.S. and NATO have not responded satisfactorily in writing to its security concerns. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Wednesday that Russia is in the final phase of preparing its formal response to the West. "After that, a schedule of further steps will be developed," she said on state television.

The Kremlin 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.

For now, Russia is flexing its muscle. Russian fighter jets flew training missions Wednesday over neighboring Belarus 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 when the maneuvers end Sunday.

Maxar Technologies, a commercial satellite imagery company that has been monitoring the Russian buildup, reported Wednesday that new photos show heightened Russian military activity near Ukraine, including the construction of a pontoon bridge in Belarus less than 6 kilometers (4 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

Russia has mocked Western warnings about an imminent invasion as "paranoia" and "madness." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov pointed sarcastically at warnings of an invasion that could start Wednesday, saying that Russian officials had a good sleep.

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.

But British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told Sky News that instead of a Russian withdrawal, "we've seen continued buildup of things like field hospitals and strategic weapons systems."

The White House will lean on Vice President Kamala Harris to help with diplomatic efforts when she travels to Germany to take part in this weekend's Munich Security Conference, officials said. Harris is scheduled to meet Friday with Stoltenberg and hold a multilateral meeting with the leaders of the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. She's also scheduled to deliver a major address Saturday on the administration's efforts to stop Russian aggression. After the speech, Harris is slated to meet with Zelenskyy and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

## EXPLAINER: How figure skaters deliver quadruple jumps

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Russia's "Quad Squad" of figure skaters will try for an Olympics podium sweep by landing the thrilling quadruple jumps that remain rare in the women's competition. But could skaters one day add a fifth rotation to their jumps?

Sports experts say it's not clear what the human limits might be on the number of rotations a skater could complete. Quadruple jumps have become standard in the men's competition since Canadian Kurt Browning landed the first one in 1988. For women, Japan's Miki Ando achieved the feat in 2002.

Yet the quads on display in women's skating at the Beijing Games only came onto the scene in a big way in the last few years.

Here's a look at how the jumps are achieved.

WHAT DETERMINES THE ROTATIONS IN A JUMP?

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To get in as many rotations as possible during a jump, experts say skaters need to launch themselves as high and far into the air as possible to maximize their spinning time.

The speed and strength needed for launching — and landing — is partly why quads are more common in men's skating.

But a factor that could favor women is a skater's body dimensions. A skater with a narrow frame, for example, might have an advantage over those with wide shoulders, said Rajiv Ranganathan, an expert in body movements at Michigan State University. That could let them hold their bodies more tightly with their arms in the air, allowing them to achieve more rotations.

## WHAT DO QUADS ENTAIL?

A quadruple jump entails four rotations, as the name implies. But exactly how skaters achieve the feat can vary.

In recent years, it's become more common for skaters to start spinning before they launch off the ice, said Polina Edmunds, who competed in the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. That spin — known as pre-rotation — is another reason why quads in women's skating aren't as rare as they once were.

"The line is blurred right now because we're not looking at or penalizing pre-rotation," she said.

There's a push in the skating community for pre-rotation, which might consist of a half turn or more, to be factored into scoring, Edmunds said. Currently, the technical panel looks at whether the landing is clean.

## HOW ARE SKATERS AFFECTED?

Landing quadruple jumps can be extremely stressful on bodies.

With basketball or volleyball, for example, players land more gradually starting with the front of their feet, which helps spread absorption of the impact, said Karl Erickson sports performance coach at Mayo Clinic. With skating, the landing is more abrupt and on a single foot tied into a skate.

"It's a crazy amount of force that they have to be able to absorb quickly and land gracefully," Erickson said.

Since skaters are rewarded for attempting quads even if they don't land them, they can feel pressured to try them, Edmunds said.

"More young girls are going to be attempting these quads, even at the cost of them landing wrong and risking themselves injury," she said.

Edmunds also noted the young age of the skaters landing quads in women's skating, a reflection of the advantages of being small. Russian favorite Kamila Valieva, the leader after the short program, is 15 years old. Her teammates, Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova, are both 17.

## WHAT ABOUT THE DRUG SCANDAL?

A sample taken from Valieva weeks before the Olympics tested positive for a drug that's banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency.

The drug, trimetazidine, is intended to help increase blood flow to the heart, which would typically help older people with heart disease, said Dr. Michael Fredericson of Stanford University's School of Medicine.

For athletes, he said the increased blood flow could potentially help boost endurance, allowing them to exercise intensely for a longer period of time. He said it's not clear what benefit it might bring a skater.

Lawyers for Valieva have cited contamination from the heart medication her grandfather was taking.

## HOW MANY SPINS COULD A SKATER POSSIBLY ACHIEVE?

It's not known how many more rotations a skater could achieve. But past assumptions about the limits of human performance — such as the 4-minute mile — have been proven wrong, noted Michigan State's Ranganathan.

The next leap forward in jumping appears to be the quad axel, a 4 1/2-revolution jump that Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu fell on last week, when he tried to become the first to land the forward-starting jump in competition.

Still, Ranganathan noted the height needed for spins in skating jumps.

"That may eventually place a limit on how many rotations we could possibly achieve," he said.

**More virus rules fall as CDC hints at better times ahead**



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By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

The nation's leading health officials said Wednesday that the U.S. is moving closer to the point that COVID-19 is no longer a "constant crisis" as more cities, businesses and sports venues began lifting pandemic restrictions around the country.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing that the government is contemplating a change to its mask guidance in the coming weeks. Noting recent declines in COVID-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths, she acknowledged "people are so eager" for health officials to ease masking rules and other measures designed to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

"We all share the same goal – to get to a point where COVID-19 is no longer disrupting our daily lives, a time when it won't be a constant crisis – rather something we can prevent, protect against, and treat," Walensky said.

With the omicron variant waning and Americans eager to move beyond the virus, government and business leaders have been out ahead of the CDC in ending virus measures in the last week, including ordering workers back to offices, eliminating mask mandates and no longer requiring proof of vaccine to get into restaurants, bars and sports and entertainment arenas.

The efforts have been gaining more steam each day.

Philadelphia officials on Wednesday said the city's vaccine mandate for restaurants was immediately lifted, though indoor mask mandates remain in place for now. At Disney World, vaccinated guests will no longer have to wear masks at the Florida theme park starting Thursday. Professional sports teams including the Utah Jazz and Washington Wizards and Capitals have stopped requiring proof of vaccine for fans.

The most populous county in Washington — where Seattle is located — announced Wednesday it will no longer require COVID vaccination checks to enter restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms beginning March 1.

Health Commissioner Cheryl Bettigole said Philadelphia's average daily case count had dropped to 189 cases per day in the city of more than 1.5 million people. Bettigole said the plunge in infections has been steeper in Philadelphia than elsewhere in the state or the country, making it easier to lift the vaccine mandate for restaurants and other businesses announced in mid-December and that just fully went into effect this month.

"Our goal has always been to the least restrictive as possible while ensuring safety," she said.

In Provincetown, Massachusetts, a seaside town that became a COVID hot spot with an early outbreak of the delta variant last summer, officials on Tuesday lifted a mask mandate and vaccine requirement for indoor spaces like restaurants and bars. Town Manager Alex Morse said the community of about 3,000 recorded zero active cases last week among Provincetown residents — something that hasn't happened since the surge following last year's July 4 celebrations.

"We are learning to live with, and mitigate, the impact of the virus on our community," Morse said.

COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations have fallen sharply in the U.S., with the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases dropping from about 453,000 two weeks ago to about 136,000 as of Tuesday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Hospitalizations are at levels similar to September, when the U.S. was emerging from the delta variant surge. Almost 65% of Americans are fully vaccinated.

"As a result of all this progress and the tools we now have, we are moving to a time where COVID isn't a crisis but is something we can protect against and treat," said Jeff Zients, the White House coronavirus response coordinator.

Walensky said the CDC "will soon put guidance in place that is relevant and encourages prevention measures when they are most needed to protect public health and our hospitals." She suggested any changes will take into account measures of community transmission, as well as hospitalization rates or other gauges of whether infected people are becoming severely ill. They also would consider available bed space in hospitals.

Several states with indoor mask mandates announced last week they would be lifted in coming weeks, also citing promising numbers.

Two music festivals that draw thousands of people to the California desert town of Indio in April and May,

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Coachella and Stagecoach, also said this week there will be no vaccination, masking or testing mandates in accordance with local guidelines. Coachella also noted that could change along with COVID conditions.

In Philadelphia, Bettigole said the vaccine mandate helped spur "a very large" increase in pediatric vaccinations, pushing the city way ahead of the national average for first doses among kids ages 5 to 11. More than 53% of Philadelphia residents in that age group have received a first dose, compared to closer to 30% nationally, she said.

Not all businesses plan to immediately change course. Philadelphia Irish sports bar and restaurant O'Neals will keep asking to see customers' vaccination cards for now, said managing partner Greg "Spoonie" Rand, even though the city is lifting its vaccine mandate.

"Guests are more compliant and employees are more happy for us to continue doing vaccine cards inside," he said. He thinks vaccinated people will be wary of coming in if the pub stops checking cards.

Walensky said the CDC wants to "give people a break from things like mask-wearing" when circumstances improve, though be able to mask up again if things worsen. She also said there will be instances where people should continue to wear masks even if prevention measures ease. Examples include when individuals have symptoms of COVID-19 or are within 10 days after being diagnosed with it.

## More virus rules fall as CDC hints at better times ahead

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Several states with indoor mask mandates announced last week they would be lifted in coming weeks, also citing promising numbers.

Two music festivals that draw thousands of people to the California desert town of Indio in April and May, Coachella and Stagecoach, also said this week there will be no vaccination, masking or testing mandates in accordance with local guidelines. Coachella also noted that could change along with COVID conditions.

In Philadelphia, Bettigole said the vaccine mandate helped spur "a very large" increase in pediatric vaccinations, pushing the city way ahead of the national average for first doses among kids ages 5 to 11. More than 53% of Philadelphia residents in that age group have received a first dose, compared to closer to 30% nationally, she said.

Not all businesses plan to immediately change course. Philadelphia Irish sports bar and restaurant O'Neals will keep asking to see customers' vaccination cards for now, said managing partner Greg "Spoonie" Rand, even though the city is lifting its vaccine mandate.

"Guests are more compliant and employees are more happy for us to continue doing vaccine cards inside," he said. He thinks vaccinated people will be wary of coming in if the pub stops checking cards.

Walensky said the CDC wants to "give people a break from things like mask-wearing" when circumstances improve, though be able to mask up again if things worsen. She also said there will be instances where people should continue to wear masks even if prevention measures ease. Examples include when individuals have symptoms of COVID-19 or are within 10 days after being diagnosed with it.

## **CNN probe complete, yet mysteries on Cuomo, Zucker remain**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN's parent company says it has completed its investigation into circumstances surrounding the firing of anchor Chris Cuomo and ouster of network chief Jeff Zucker. But for a news organization, it has chosen to leave questions unanswered.

The internal report, commissioned in September and prepared by the law firm Cravath, Swaine & Moore, will not be made public, WarnerMedia said on Wednesday.

WarnerMedia CEO Jason Kilar told CNN employees late Tuesday that the report had been finished over the weekend. His memo said that marketing executive Allison Gollust, the woman whose relationship with Zucker led to his downfall, would also be leaving the company.

Kilar said the probe, based on interviews with more than 40 people and a review of over 100,000 texts and emails, "found violations of company policies, including CNN's news standards and practices, by Jeff Zucker, Allison Gollust and Chris Cuomo."

Cuomo, a former CNN prime-time host, was fired by Zucker in December after documents revealed how he had helped his brother, ex-New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, strategize over how to fight charges

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of sexual misconduct. Zucker was forced to resign earlier this month because he had violated company policy in not revealing that his relationship with Gollust was romantic.

Kilar said in his memo that "this news is troubling, disappointing and, frankly, painful to read."

But the statement did not specify the alleged violations of news standards. Even Kilar's memo wasn't completely clear — did each individual named violate both company policies and news standards? — and a WarnerMedia spokesman offered no clarification on Wednesday.

Zucker is prohibited from making further statements about his departure from CNN, according to someone familiar with the separation agreement who spoke under condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to talk about it.

"Jeff resigned due to an undisclosed personal relationship," said Risa Heller, a spokeswoman for Zucker.

But a spokesman for Cuomo, Steve Goldberg, said that "it is clear this was never about an undisclosed relationship. As Mr. Cuomo has stated previously, Mr. Zucker and Ms. Gollust were not only entirely aware but fully supportive of what he was doing to help his brother. The still open question is when WarnerMedia is going to release the results of its investigation and explain its supposed basis for terminating Mr. Cuomo."

Heller said that Zucker was never aware of the full extent to which Cuomo was helping his brother, "which is why Chris was fired."

News organizations have taken different approaches to how it deals with investigations into the actions of its journalists. CBS News issued an extensive public report by an independent panel in 2005 dissecting a discredited story on former President George W. Bush's National Guard service. A decade later, NBC News kept private its internal findings about how anchor Brian Williams had made inaccurate statements about things that he had covered.

The New York Times, in a story published Wednesday, offered details on a letter sent to CNN by Debra Katz, an attorney who has represented sexual harassment victims, accusing Cuomo of misconduct with a young woman when he worked at ABC News prior to joining CNN.

The letter said that years after the alleged misconduct, when the #MeToo movement was making news, Cuomo had contacted the woman about doing a CNN story on the company where she was then working, according to the Times. CNN did the story, although the woman tried to avoid contact with Cuomo, the newspaper said.

Katz wrote that the woman suspected Cuomo was trying to discourage her from coming forward to talk about the alleged misconduct, the Times said.

Katz declined to comment when reached by The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Cuomo's representatives vigorously denied the allegations of sexual misconduct and said Cuomo's motivations in later reaching out to the woman were mischaracterized and were entirely journalistic in nature.

"He was never asked about the allegations prior to being terminated nor given an opportunity to respond to the allegations," Goldberg said.

## Tensions mount in Ottawa as police warn truckers to leave

By ROB GILLIES and WILSON RING Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — A showdown appeared to be shaping up in Ottawa's nearly three-week siege by truckers protesting the country's COVID-19 restrictions as police in the capital warned drivers Wednesday to leave immediately or risk arrest.

The big rigs parked outside Parliament represented the movement's last stronghold after demonstrators abandoned their sole remaining truck blockade along the U.S. border.

With that, all border crossings were open for the first time in more than two weeks of unrest, centering attention on the capital, where drivers defiantly ripped up warnings telling them to go home.

Authorities in yellow "police liaison" vests went from rig to rig, knocking on the doors and handing truckers leaflets informing them they could be prosecuted, lose their licenses and see their vehicles seized under Canada's Emergencies Act. Police also began ticketing vehicles.

One protester shouted, "I will never go home!" Some threw the warning into a toilet put out on the street. Protesters sat in their trucks and honked their horns in a chorus that echoed loudly downtown.

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Police delivered a second round of more explicit warnings just before Wednesday evening, spelling out what charges and penalties could face those who stay. The city's interim police chief indicated officers might move in soon to clear the hundreds of trucks.

"We are going to take back the entirety of the downtown core and every occupied space. We are going to remove this unlawful protest. We will return our city to a state of normalcy," interim Chief Steve Bell told city leaders in a statement. "You will be hearing and seeing these actions in the coming days."

Protest leaders braced for action on Wednesday.

"If it means that I need to go to prison, if I need to be fined in order to allow freedom to be restored in this country — millions of people have given far more for their freedom," said David Paisley, who traveled to Ottawa with a friend who is a truck driver.

The warnings came two days after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked the emergency law to try to break the protests.

"It's not for politicians to tell police when and how to do things. What we have done with the emergency act is to make sure the police have the necessary tools," Trudeau said Wednesday. "It's something that I, like all residents of Ottawa, hope to happen soon."

The crisis has become one of the most serious tests yet for Trudeau, the boyish-looking 50-year-old who has long channeled the star power — if not quite the political heft — of his father, Pierre Trudeau, who was prime minister a generation ago.

Some lawmakers are faulting the younger Trudeau for not moving more decisively against the protests, while others are accusing him of going too far in assuming emergency powers.

Since late January, protesters in trucks and other vehicles have jammed the streets of the capital and obstructed border crossings. The demonstrations by the self-styled Freedom Convoy initially focused on Canada's vaccine requirement for truckers entering the country but soon morphed into a broad attack on COVID-19 precautions and Trudeau himself.

On Wednesday, protesters who had stopped traffic and trade for a week along the U.S. border at Emerson, Manitoba, opposite North Dakota, pulled away in tractors and trucks without any arrests.

Within hours, the crossing was fully open with no delays for commercial trucks, border officials said.

The protests have drawn support from right-wing extremists and have been cheered on and received donations from conservatives in the U.S., triggering complaints in some quarters that America and its pandemic politics have been a bad influence on Canada.

Daniel Bulford, a protest leader who described himself as a former officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and a recent member of Trudeau's security detail, accused the Trudeau government of resorting to "extreme and authoritarian" measures to quell the demonstrations.

Protest organizers encouraged supporters to come to the capital to make it difficult for police to clear them out. But the nation's top safety official warned them to stay away or face legal consequences.

Meanwhile, the premiers of two Canadian provinces and 16 U.S. governors sent a letter to Trudeau and U.S. President Joe Biden calling on them to end their nations' vaccine mandates for truckers crossing the border.

Over the past weeks, authorities hesitated to move against many of the protesters around the country, citing in some cases a lack of manpower and fears of violence.

But the bumper-to-bumper occupation has infuriated many Ottawa residents, who have complained of being harassed and intimidated on the clogged streets. The rising frustration cost Ottawa Police Chief Peter Soly his job this week.

As of Tuesday, Ottawa officials said 360 vehicles remained involved in the blockade in the city's core, down from a high of roughly 4,000.

"They don't want to give this up because this is their last stand, their last main hub," said Michael Kempa, a criminology professor at the University of Ottawa.

An Ottawa child welfare agency advised parents at the demonstration to arrange for someone to take care of their children in the event of a police crackdown. Some protesters had their youngsters with them.

Police in the capital appeared to be following the playbook that authorities used over the weekend to

break the blockade at the economically vital Ambassador Bridge connecting Windsor, Ontario, to Detroit. Police there handed out leaflets informing protesters they risked arrest.

After many of those demonstrators left, police moved in and arrested dozens who remained. The blockade had disrupted the flow of goods between the two countries and forced the auto industry on both sides to curtail production.

Stephanie Carvin, who once worked for Canada's domestic intelligence service and teaches national security at Carleton University in Ottawa, said police in the capital face a tricky situation. Some of the protesters are extremists, and police run the risk of violence if they try to disperse or arrest them, she said.

"The last thing we want is any kind of propaganda that can really feed the flames of this movement for years to come," Carvin said.

## Online harassment, real harm: Fixing the web's biggest bug

By DAVID KLEPPER The Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — It should have been a time of celebration: Brittan Heller would soon graduate from college and head to one of the nation's top law programs.

But when a classmate with unrequited feelings for Heller wasn't admitted to that same school, he turned his rage on her. He wrote a manifesto titled "A Stupid B---h to Attend Yale Law School" and posted it on a site popular with anonymous trolls. The man urged them to do their worst.

Soon strangers were making derogatory, sexualized comments and posting her pictures online. They made threats. Posted her personal information. At one point, FBI agents escorted Heller to class for her protection.

"People say, 'Oh, just log off. Don't read it. Turn off the computer,'" said Heller, who turned her personal experience from 15 years ago into a legal specialty as a leading expert on online harassment. "This the 21st century, and people have a right to use the internet for work, for pleasure or to express themselves. Telling people not to read the comments is no longer enough. We don't talk enough about this problem, and we need to."

Online harassment has become such a familiar part of the internet that it can be hard to imagine the web without it. From teen cyberbullying to authoritarian governments silencing dissent, online toxicity is a fact of life for everyone, with women, teens and religious and racial minorities the most likely to be targeted.

And there is evidence the problem is getting worse.

In 2014, 15% of Americans said they had faced severe or significant online abuse, defined as stalking, physical threats, sustained harassment or sexual harassment. In 2021 the number was 25%, according to studies by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Health care workers, journalists, teachers, police and government workers have all reported increases in online harassment in recent years, as the pandemic and political polarization led many people to release their anger and fear online.

Nearly three in four female journalists reported receiving threats or other forms of online harassment, according to a survey by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists that polled more than 700 journalists in more than 100 countries. One in five of those said the harassment escalated to offline abuse or even assault.

The growth of the internet has also expanded the ways that people can be targeted beyond merely email to social media posts, direct messages, texts and streaming video. And with the rise of smartphones and cheap, ubiquitous internet, harassment can now be a 24-7 problem for victims.

"We've made so many strides — there's more awareness now — but it's easy to get frustrated and to feel like we've gotten nowhere," said Tina Meier, who started a foundation to teach kids and parents about online harassment after her daughter's suicide in 2006.

Thirteen-year-old Megan Meier had been bullied by someone she met online who she thought was a teenage boy named Josh. The two had flirted until the person suddenly turned against Megan. "Everybody hates you," "Josh" wrote. "The world would be a better place without you."

Police later determined that "Josh" was actually an adult woman, the mother of one of Megan's classmates.

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While polls show all types of people are susceptible to online harassment, extensive research has shown that women and people of color are far more likely to be targeted. That's also true for people with disabilities, people who belong to religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community.

Women are more likely than men to say online harassment is a serious problem, Pew found. They're also more likely to report being the victims of online sexual harassment and more serious abuse such as threats of physical harm.

The difference is so great that many men may not understand the severity of the demeaning language, sexualized insults and unwanted attention that women frequently face online. A coordinated harassment campaign against female video game designers that began in 2014, known as Gamergate, became so pervasive — including threats of rape, torture and murder — that some women hired security or went into hiding.

Online harassment has also been used globally to attack journalists, dissidents and others in the public arena.

Political consultant Maria Cardona began receiving nasty emails and direct messages once she began presenting her opinions on national news shows. She's noticed that many of her critics seem focused on the idea that an outspoken Latina woman could be considered an authority on politics.

One typical message read: "I hope you get raped and have your throat slit."

"They want to shut us up, they want to scare us, they want to intimidate us," said Cardona, who now keeps her office locked after someone showed up to accost her in person.

Anonymity can make it easier to be cruel without fear of offline repercussions. It's a phenomenon called the online disinhibition effect, and it's one reason why trolls feel comfortable saying things they would never say to someone in person.

As part of a 2009 settlement of Heller's lawsuit against her harassers, she asked to meet them face to face. One was a 17-year-old boy who had posted that he'd like to gouge Heller's eyes out and have sex with her corpse.

"They all essentially said the same thing: that they didn't realize their actions were impacting a person in that way, that they didn't realize there was a person on the other side of the screen," Heller recalled. "And they all said, 'I am so sorry.'"

California enacted the nation's first law against cyberbullying in 1999, and most states have since followed suit. Enforcement can be difficult, however, as the lines between harassment and free speech can be blurry. Police and prosecutors often lack sufficient training or resources.

Tech companies say they are getting better at identifying and stopping harassment. For example, Instagram, which is owned by Facebook parent company Meta, made several changes designed to reduce harassment, including putting warning labels on potentially abusive language and making it easier to block or report harassers.

Yet those moves haven't been enough. Internal Facebook documents leaked by former employee Frances Haugen show that executives are aware of the potential for their products to be used to harass people. One internal study cited 13.5% of teen girls saying Instagram exacerbates suicidal thoughts and 17% saying it worsens eating disorders.

"Online harassment is a problem for everybody, but I think it's especially problematic for kids," said Natalie Bazarova, a professor at Cornell University who studies social media.

She said a multifaceted approach is required to address the problem: legislation to require minimum safeguards from tech companies, technical innovations and extensive educational efforts such as simulations that teach teens to spot cyberbullying and use social media safely.

Technical solutions include automated systems that flag posts for signs of harassing language — all-capital letters, repetitive phrases, certain key words — or instituting a short delay before users can respond to posts, giving them a chance to cool off.

Now in its "awkward adolescence," the internet is not the first invention to change how humans communicate, Heller said.

"People said similar things about the telegraph, the telephone and the television — that they were some-

how going to ruin society," she said. "They were all regulated about 25 years into their life cycle. Those regulations didn't kill the telephone, the television or the radio."

## **Businessman close to Maduro was DEA informant, records show**

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A businessman described as the main conduit for corruption in Venezuela was secretly signed up by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration as a source in 2018, revealing information about bribes he paid to top officials in President Nicolás Maduro's socialist government.

As part of his multi-year cooperation, Alex Saab also forfeited millions of dollars in illegal proceeds he admitted to earning from corrupt state contracts, new records in a closely-watched criminal case show. But his contact with U.S. law enforcement ended abruptly after he missed a May 30, 2019 deadline to surrender to or face criminal charges, according to prosecutors.

The stunning revelation was made public following a heated closed door hearing Wednesday in Miami federal court in which an attorney for Saab argued his family in Venezuela could be jailed or physically harmed by Maduro's government if his interactions with U.S. law enforcement became known.

"They are basically under the thumb of the government," attorney Neil Schuster argued in the hearing, a transcript of which was later unsealed by Judge Robert Scola. "If the Venezuelan government finds out the extent of what this individual has provided, I have no doubt that there will be retaliation against his wife and his children."

U.S. officials have presented Saab as a close associate of Maduro, someone who reaped huge windfall profits from dodgy contracts to import food while millions in the South American nation starved. The Maduro government considers him a diplomat who was kidnapped during a refueling stop while on a humanitarian mission to Iran made more urgent by U.S. sanctions.

"Saab was playing with fire," said Gerard Reyes, a Miami-based author of a recent book on Saab, including his past dealings with U.S. officials. "He believed that he could work as a snitch for the prosecution and at the same time pretend he was being persecuted by Yankee imperialism, without any consequences. But in the end he got burned."

The Associated Press in November reported that Saab has held several meetings with U.S. law enforcement in his native Colombia as well as Europe. As part of his cooperation, he wired three payments to a DEA-controlled account containing nearly \$10 million obtained through corruption.

However, he was deactivated as a source after failing to surrender as had been previously agreed during meetings in which he was represented by U.S. and Colombian attorneys. Two months later, he was sanctioned by the Trump administration and indicted in Miami federal court on charges of siphoning millions from state contracts to build affordable housing for Venezuela's government.

Saab, shackled and wearing a beige jumpsuit, attended Wednesday's hearing. The public was briefly barred from the courtroom as the two sides haggled over whether or not to make public two documents filed by prosecutors nearly a year ago, while Saab was fighting extradition from Cape Verde, detailing his past cooperation.

With the courtroom sealed, Schuster asked for Saab to be released on bond in light of his four years of assistance to the U.S. government — cooperation that other attorneys for Saab have always denied.

Judge Scola immediately rejected the idea, citing Saab's past attempts to evade extradition, according to the transcript of the closed proceedings.

"So you are going to have all this evidence that this guy is a flight risk, he's involved in this humongous crime, he's tried it, he fought extradition, and the judge inexplicably grants him a bond?" Scola said.

Prosecutors a year ago had sought to keep secret those meetings with U.S. law enforcement out of concern for Saab's safety and that of his family, some of whom are still in Venezuela.

But they downplayed any such dangers on Wednesday, saying Saab's legal team hadn't taken them up on an offer to assist his family in leaving Venezuela. Scola agreed, saying the public's right to access criminal proceedings outweighs any concerns about his family's safety.



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The details of Saab's outreach to U.S. law enforcement surfaced in a related case involving a University of Miami professor who served as an intermediary for payments Saab was making to his U.S. attorneys.

Another Saab attorney, who is fighting to get Saab's status as a Venezuelan diplomat recognized by the U.S. Court of Appeals in Atlanta, vehemently rejected claims that the businessman had been cooperating with U.S. investigators.

New York-based David Rivkin, who was not present in court Wednesday, said the sole purpose of Saab's meetings with U.S. law enforcement officials was to clear his name and were undertaken with the "full knowledge and support" of Maduro's government. He said the release of the document, at the request of the Department of Justice, is no more than an attempt to harm Venezuela's interests, its relationship with Saab, and illustrates the weakness of the government's case.

"Alex Saab remains a loyal citizen and diplomat of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and will never do anything to harm the interests of the country and people that have given him so much," Rivkin said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Saab's Italian-born wife, Camilla Fabri, said on social media that the U.S. was "brazenly lying, like it did with Russia and Iraq" and that her husband would never cause harm to Venezuela.

As part of U.S. criminal investigations, it's common for targets to meet with U.S. law enforcement agents to sniff out information about the probe and explore a possible plea deal.

However, the documents unsealed Wednesday described Saab's cooperation as "proactive" and more extensive and meaningful than previously believed.

According to prosecutors, the first debriefing with agents from the DEA and Federal Bureau of Investigation took place in Colombia's capital of Bogota over two days in August 2016. Other meetings ensued and in 2018 he was signed up as a cooperating source after stating to agents that he had paid bribes to Venezuelan officials, none of whom have been named in the court records.

At the last meeting, in Europe in April 2019, he was warned that if he didn't surrender by the May deadline he would be sanctioned and criminally charged, something that indeed happened in July 2019.

## Death toll rises to 78 from mudslides after storm in Brazil

By DIARLEI RODRIGUES and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

PETROPOLIS, Brazil (AP) — The death toll from devastating mudslides and floods that swept through a mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro state has reached 78, Gov. Claudio Castro said Wednesday afternoon.

The city of Petropolis was slammed by a deluge Tuesday, and Castro said almost 400 people were left homeless. Searchers picked through the wreckage throughout the day and 21 people were recovered alive.

Civilians joined official recovery efforts. Among them were Priscila Neves and her siblings, who looked through the mud for any sign of their disappeared parents, but found only clothing. Neves told The Associated Press she had given up hope of finding her parents alive.

And Rosilene Virgilio, 49, was in tears as she recalled the desperate pleas from someone she couldn't save. "There was a woman screaming, 'Help! Get me out of here!' But we couldn't do anything; the water was gushing out, the mud was gushing out," Virgilio told The Associated Press. "Our city unfortunately is finished."

Petropolis is a German-influenced city named for a former Brazilian emperor. Nestled in the mountains above the coastal metropolis, for almost two centuries it has been a refuge for people escaping summer heat and tourists keen to explore the so-called "Imperial City."

Petropolis was among the nation's first planned cities and features stately homes along its waterways. But its population has grown haphazardly, climbing mountainsides now covered with small residences packed tightly together. Many are in areas unfit for structures and rendered more vulnerable by deforestation and inadequate drainage.

The stricken mountain region has seen similar catastrophes in recent decades, including one that caused more than 900 deaths. In the years since, Petropolis presented a plan to reduce risks of landslides, but works have been advancing only slowly.

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The governor told reporters earlier that the situation "was almost like war" and that he was mustering all the state government's heavy machinery to help dig out the buried area.

The state fire department said late Tuesday the area received 25.8 centimeters (just over 10 inches) of rain within three hours Tuesday -- almost as much as during the previous 30 days combined. Petropolis' civil defense authority said moderate rain was expected Wednesday afternoon and evening.

Video posted on social media Tuesday showed cars and houses being dragged away by landslides, and water swirling through Petropolis and neighboring districts. On Wednesday, houses were buried beneath mud while appliances and cars were piled on streets where they had been swept the night before. Some people had attempted to flee the perilous hillsides.

"The neighbors came down running and I gave them shelter," bar owner Emerson Torre, 39, recalled.

But under torrents of water, his roof collapsed. He managed to get his mother and three other people out of the bar in time, but one neighbor and the person's daughter were unable to escape.

"It was like an avalanche, it fell all at once. I've never seen anything like it," Torre told the AP as rescue helicopters hovered overhead. "Every neighbor has lost a loved one, has lost two, three, four members of the same family, kids."

Petropolis' city hall declared three days of mourning. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro expressed solidarity while on a trip to Russia, as did his counterpart Vladimir Putin.

"May God comfort their family members," Bolsonaro said Wednesday in a press conference in Moscow.

Southeastern Brazil has been punished with heavy rains since the start of the year, with more than 40 deaths recorded between incidents in Minas Gerais state in early January and Sao Paulo state later the same month.

## **FBI: Defendants in Arbery killing used repeated racial slurs**

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Two of the three white men convicted of murdering Ahmaud Arbery repeatedly used racial slurs in text messages and social media posts, including some violent comments by Arbery's shooter about Black people, an FBI witness testified Wednesday in their federal hate crimes trial.

FBI intelligence analyst Amy Vaughan led the jury through more than two dozen conversations that Travis McMichael and William "Roddie" Bryan had with others, identified only by their initials, in the months and years before the 25-year-old Black man's killing. The FBI wasn't able to access the phone of Greg McMichael, Travis McMichael's father, because it was encrypted, Vaughan said.

In text and Facebook conversations with friends, Travis McMichael frequently used the N-word to describe Black people. In a Facebook conversation with a friend, he also shared a video of a young Black boy dancing on a TV show with a racist song that included the N-word playing over it. He also said that Black people "ruin everything" and said more than once he was glad he wasn't a Black person, using a racial slur.

In other social media posts, Travis McMichael mentioned violence against Black people. In December 2018, he commented on a Facebook video of a Black man playing a prank on a white person: "I'd kill that f---ing n---r."

And in June 2017, he shared a TV news story about a violent confrontation between two white women and two Black customers upset about cold food at a Georgia restaurant, using a racial slur to comment that he would beat the Black people "to death if they did that to (name redacted by the FBI) or my mother and sister." He added that he would have no more remorse than putting down a rabid animal.

The McMichaels armed themselves and used a pickup truck to chase Arbery as he ran through their coastal Georgia neighborhood on Feb. 23, 2020. Bryan, a neighbor, joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael blasting Arbery with a shotgun. No arrests were made until the video leaked online two months later.

All three men were convicted of murder in a Georgia state court last fall. Their second trial began Monday in U.S. District Court on hate crime charges. Prosecutors say the McMichaels and Bryan violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he was Black.

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Defense attorneys have insisted the deadly pursuit of Arbery was motivated by an earnest, though erroneous, suspicion that Arbery had committed crimes.

The hate crimes trial is being heard by a jury of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person.

Evidence presented in court Wednesday showed Bryan also used the N-word, but his preferred slur was a derogatory characterization of a Black person's lips. Over a number of years, Bryan exchanged racist messages on Martin Luther King Jr. Day that mocked the holiday. In messages sent in the days surrounding Arbery's killing, Bryan was upset that his daughter was dating a Black man.

Greg McMichael posted a meme on Facebook in 2016 saying white Irish slaves were treated worse than any race in the U.S. but that the Irish aren't asking for handouts.

"I ain't really shocked," Arbery's father, Marcus Arbery, told reporters outside the courthouse. Still, he said he didn't realize "all that hate was in those three men."

Defense attorneys had few questions for the FBI analyst and didn't dispute the racist posts. They said in their opening statements to the jury Monday that racist comments by their clients were offensive and indefensible but don't prove that they committed hate crimes.

Travis McMichael's attorney, Amy Lee Copeland, said some of his texts and posts lacked context, and "you can't hear that inflection of voice and see what's going on."

Copeland also asked Derek Thomas, who posted the prank video that elicited a violent comment from Travis McMichael, about their long friendship. Thomas testified that they have known each other since high school and frequently went hunting and fishing together. He said he often checks up on Travis McMichael's mother since the McMichaels' arrests and convictions.

"Is it fair to say you love the man but hate the words he used?" Copeland asked Thomas.

He replied: "Yes, ma'am."

Both McMichaels and Bryan were sentenced to life in prison in the state's murder case. Racist comments by the men weren't presented as evidence in the murder trial, in which prosecutors downplayed issues of race and focused on proving the three had no justification for pursuing and killing Arbery.

## 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 Russian 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 the United States and its allies said Wednesday they saw no sign of a promised pullback and it was too early to tell whether the 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

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is a risk that even a limited war could spread as a result of an accident, a miscalculation or a misunderstanding. Once the fighting started, a bit of bad luck could lead to more conflict.

An incident between American and Russian aircraft over the Mediterranean Sea that came to light Wednesday offered a glimpse at how even routine military movements can lead to unsafe results.

U.S. officials complained to Russia through diplomatic channels about three incidents last weekend in which American reconnaissance aircraft reported what they called unprofessional intercepts by Russian fighter aircraft. In one case, a Russian SU-35 was reported by American crew members to have flown within about 5 feet of a Navy P-8A plane, according to a U.S. defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details beyond a Pentagon statement.

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.

## High gas costs from Ukraine threat pose Biden political risk

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the continuing threat of Russia invading Ukraine, a foreign policy crisis is

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colliding with one of President Joe Biden's political vulnerabilities: Rising gasoline prices at home.

Americans are already dismayed by Inflation at a 40-year high, and Biden is warning that gas prices could get higher if Russian President Vladimir Putin chooses to invade. It's a recognition of Biden's own risks ahead of the 2022 midterm elections: Inflation has become an albatross for Democrats despite the nation's strong economic growth last year.

"We're prepared to deploy all the tools and authority at our disposal to provide relief at the gas pump," the U.S. president declared Tuesday. "We are taking active steps to alleviate the pressure on our own energy markets and offset rising prices."

The cost of crude oil — and gasoline— began to climb over the past month as Putin massed forces on the Ukrainian border. The diplomatic back-and-forth has whipsawed financial and commodity markets as investors try to price in what an armed conflict and U.S. sanctions against Russia would mean for the global economy.

Even though the broad U.S. economy can absorb higher energy prices, American families have been seeing sharp increases in the price of food, energy and other goods. Forecasts from JPMorgan and other investment firms suggest that crude oil — already at about \$95 a barrel — could exceed \$125 a barrel due to tight supplies, which an invasion would intensify.

Biden wants to put the focus on how the Ukraine situation is contributing to higher gasoline prices, but costs at the pump already were dramatically higher from a year ago. Efforts to coax more oil production in the U.S. and abroad have largely failed.

Republicans most certainly won't give Biden a pass due to tensions abroad. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell criticizes the president for higher energy and food prices, contending that "the Biden administration seems less interested in trying to solve this problem than in trying to persuade families the pain is just in their heads."

In a December AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, most Americans -- 85% -- said they'd experienced higher than usual prices for both groceries and gas in recent months. And in an open-ended question about top issues for the government to be working on, 10% named gas prices and energy costs, a sign of the political challenge confronting Biden.

"Given the world that we're in, any increase in prices of commodities, even if that is transitory, even if the Federal Reserve generally tries to look past obvious supply shocks in making its decisions, it adds to the policy conundrum," said Gerard DiPippo, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "It puts the White House in a bind."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that National Security Council Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk and the State Department's energy envoy, Amos Hochstein, were in Riyadh on Wednesday to meet with Saudi officials. She would not comment on whether they were pressing the Saudis to pump more oil to help stabilize the global oil market.

Biden did not spell out Tuesday what additional steps his administration would take to reduce oil prices should the situation in Ukraine worsen. In late November he ordered the release of a record 50 million barrels of oil from the U.S. strategic reserve to reduce price pressures.

Gasoline prices did fall in the weeks after the oil was released, though prices have since eclipsed the levels at the time when Biden announced the drawdown. He could order another release if diplomacy fails to cause the Russians to pull back.

Members of Congress are looking for other ways to ease the pain.

Democratic Sens. Mark Kelly of Arizona and Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire — both up for reelection — are already calling for a suspension of the federal gasoline tax. The White House has yet to endorse or rule out this option.

"What people are focusing on is what we can do immediately," said Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat. "People need relief right now, so this is a short-term way to do it."

Gas prices are up nearly 40% from a year ago and more than 6% over the past month, according to AAA. Suspending the federal tax of 18.4 cents a gallon would not offset the price increases that occurred

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recently as Russia threatened Ukraine. And there is no guarantee that energy companies would pass all of the savings on to consumers.

It's also unclear whether there is enough support in the Senate for a gas tax holiday to go forward. Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska equated it to a one-off "sugar high" that could wear off quickly.

"I don't think that's the solution here," Murkowski said. "This doesn't solve the problem for people paying high prices at the pump. This is a 'we're going to stop you from thinking about it by giving you a little bit of an offset here.'"

Adjusted for general inflation, gas prices are not necessarily that high. Average prices were generally higher from 2011 to 2014 during Barack Obama's presidency and during George W. Bush's second term, according to the Energy Information Administration.

Jason Furman, a former Obama aide, Harvard University economist and senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said that the U.S. economy is at a point where it can withstand higher oil prices, though pockets of the country could be hurt. High prices would, in fact, lead to more oil-related investments that could cause prices to eventually fall.

Furman said the best choice Biden could make is what he did on Tuesday, warning the American people that prices could rise if war occurs.

"There's just not a lot that the president can do," Furman said. "A certain amount of what the president should do is level with people that these events may drive prices up temporarily and that prices will also come back down."

## European companies' Russian ties could make sanctions tough

By DAVID McHUGH and COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe is contemplating sanctions against Russia if it invades Ukraine — and the work is far from simple.

Sanctions would seek to maximize the pain for the Kremlin, its key banks and energy companies but also avoid jeopardizing the continent's Russian-dependent energy supplies or inflicting too much damage on European companies with strong ties to Russia, including German industrial manufacturer Siemens AG, Italian tiremaker Pirelli and automakers like Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz.

Russia has ties to world energy and financial markets and is home to major foreign partnerships and investments, so any measures will have repercussions outside the country. The question is how much.

The European Union's executive commission isn't revealing the sanctions it's discussing in order to leave the Kremlin guessing. Officials say measures would be more sweeping and severe than those imposed in 2014 after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

Here are places where sanctions could affect Europe's economy:

WAITING FOR WORD

Given that it's not known what the measures would be, European corporations are warily watching developments and limiting their comments to hopes for a diplomatic solution.

BMW said "politics sets out the rules within which we operate as a company" and that "if the framework conditions change, we will evaluate them and decide how to deal with them."

Siemens AG, which gets about 1% of its revenue from Russia, is developing a new generation of high-speed trains with Russian partners to be built at a plant there. Siemens Energy, a separate company partly owned by Siemens AG, is building power plants and equipment for 57 wind farms in Russia.

European automakers have an extensive presence. Volkswagen, Stellantis, Renault and Mercedes-Benz have factories in Russia, while BMW makes cars there through Russian partner Avtotor. France's Renault owns Russia's biggest carmaker, Avtovaz, with its sprawling plant in Tolyatti. Stellantis plans to import commercial vans under its Peugeot, Opel and Citroen brands from its plant in Kaluga to meet Europe's increased demand for delivery services.

Italian tiremaker Pirelli, which is Chinese owned, operates two factories employing some 2,500 people in Russia, producing tires mostly for the domestic market but also for export.

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"We continue to invest, and we believe in the development of the Russian market and internationalization," CEO Marco Tronchetti Provera told reporters last month. "We believe that even in crises, we must find a meeting point, and we believe that equilibrium will be found in the end."

He and other CEOs met with Russian President Vladimir Putin last month to discuss business prospects. Italy's agribusinesses lost big when Russia imposed retaliatory import bans on produce, cheese and meat in 2014. Despite the new tensions, the Confartigianato association of craftsmen in Italy's northeastern Vicenza province is pressing ahead with a virtual product fair in Moscow next month. Those seeking to participate include the makers of Panettone Christmas bread, Colombo Easter bread and winemakers, products that don't fall under the embargo.

Likewise, Italian bank Intesa SanPaolo, which supports Italian businesses in Russia, says its mission hasn't changed.

"Frankly, we don't do geopolitics," CEO Carlo Messina said. "We respect the rules, but we serve Italian customers, and we do it in all countries, including in Russia. If the rules should change and present an impediment, we will take the necessary steps."

## WHAT SANCTIONS WOULD HIT

Much of the discussion has centered on big Russian banks, which could face measures from limits on borrowing to restrictions on transactions involving dollars.

Another target could be energy companies such as Rosneft and state-owned Gazprom, which could face bans on borrowing from Western investors and creditors. That would limit their ability to invest in new projects but would not immediately cut off energy supplies to Europe, which gets some 40% of its natural gas from Russia and is facing low reserves and high prices this winter.

## AVOIDING BLOWBACK

A key aspect will be to avoid disproportionate losses to Europe's economy or companies. Otherwise, it may be difficult to rally support among the 27 EU member governments, which would have to agree unanimously on sanctions.

For example, Russian natural gas producer Novatek could be a possible target for sanctions, but 19.4% of the company is owned by France's TotalEnergies, meaning harsh sanctions would require some "diplomatic finesse" given the connection to a NATO ally, said former U.S. diplomat Dan Fried, who crafted the 2014 sanctions against Russia.

Sanctions also could open the door to competitors from China and other countries that wouldn't punish Russia. After the 2014 sanctions banned exporting equipment with potential military use to Russia, some smaller German machinery companies gave up rather than deal with the bureaucracy and risk of unintentionally violating complex rules.

As a result, Chinese machinery makers surpassed German ones as suppliers to Russia in 2016. Overall, the number of German companies doing business in Russia dwindled from 6,000 in 2010 to 3,500 in 2021.

However, Conflict Armament Research, which investigates supply chains for weapons of war, found that Russian entities still acquired British, Czech, French, German, Spanish and U.S.-made components for military-grade spy drones.

In a November report, CAR said the parts were discovered in downed or crashed drones in Ukraine and Lithuania. Lead author Damien Spleeters said companies making electronics that can be used for both civilian and military purposes aren't generally required to check on the end use of their sales ahead of time.

## WALLED-OFF RUSSIA

The Kremlin has taken steps to reduce its economic dependence on other countries and outside sources of financing. It has low government debt and \$630 billion in reserves of foreign currency and gold. Russian companies have pushed to source parts locally, even when working with European partners.

But Harley Balzer, an expert on Russian-Chinese relations and an emeritus professor at Georgetown University, wrote in a recent analysis that despite those efforts, "localization is highly vulnerable to additional sanctions."

Barring Russia from getting U.S. electronic components could be a key pressure point, he says, because

Russian defense industries import some 20-30% of their electronics and China doesn't produce the sophisticated chips and processors Russia needs.

## MODEST IMPACT?

While Russia is a major energy supplier, it sends few other goods to Europe.

"Despite its size and potential, Russia's badly managed economy is not a major market for Europe," said Holger Schmieding, chief economist at Berenberg bank.

Germany, Europe's biggest economy, sends only 1.9% of exported goods to Russia, compared with 5.6% to neighbor and fellow EU member Poland.

Schmieding said Europe is almost through winter and could probably manage any temporary drop in natural gas from Russia. A long-term reduction isn't in Russia's interest.

"Some losses in non-energy trade with Russia as a result of sanctions and countersanctions would likely have an almost negligible impact on Europe's growth outlook beyond the next one or two months," he said.

## Biden orders release of Trump White House logs to Congress

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is ordering the release of Trump White House visitor logs to the House committee investigating the riot of Jan. 6, 2021, once more rejecting former President Donald Trump's claims of executive privilege.

The committee has sought a trove of data from the National Archives, including presidential records that Trump had fought to keep private. The records being released to Congress are visitor logs showing appointment information for individuals who were allowed to enter the White House on the day of the insurrection.

In a letter sent Monday to the National Archives, White House counsel Dana Remus said Biden had considered Trump's claim that because he was president at the time of the attack on the U.S. Capitol, the records should remain private, but decided that it was "not in the best interest of the United States" to do so.

She also noted that as a matter of policy, the Biden administration "voluntarily discloses such visitor logs on a monthly basis," as did the Obama administration, and that the majority of the entries over which Trump asserted the claim would be publicly released under the current policy.

A Trump spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the decision.

The Presidential Records Act mandates that records made by a sitting president and his staff be preserved in the National Archives, and an outgoing president is responsible for turning over documents to the agency when leaving office. Trump tried but failed to withhold White House documents from the House committee in a dispute that was decided by the Supreme Court.

Biden has already made clear that he is not invoking executive privilege concerning the congressional investigation unless he absolutely must. Biden has waived that privilege for much other information requested by the committee, which is going through the material and obtaining documents and testimony from witnesses, including some uncooperative ones.

The committee is focused on Trump's actions from Jan. 6, when he waited hours to tell his supporters to stop the violence and leave the Capitol. Investigators are also interested in the organization and financing of a Washington rally the morning of the riot, when Trump told supporters to "fight like hell." Among the unanswered questions is how close organizers of the rally coordinated with White House officials.

Investigators also are seeking communications between the National Archives and Trump's aides about 15 boxes of records that the agency recovered from Trump at his Florida resort and are trying to learn what they contained.

Meanwhile, White House call logs obtained so far by the House committee do not list calls made by Trump as he watched the violence unfold on television on Jan. 6, nor do they list calls made directly to the president.

That lack of information about Trump's personal calls is a particular challenge as the investigators work



to discern what the then-president was doing in the White House as supporters violently beat police, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the congressional certification of Democrat Joe Biden's election victory.

There are several possible explanations for omissions in the records, which do not reflect conversations that Trump had on Jan. 6 with multiple Republican lawmakers, for example. Trump was known to use a personal cell phone or he could have had a phone passed to him by an aide. The committee is also continuing to receive records from the National Archives and other sources, which could produce additional information.

## 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 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.

Adolfson 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."

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## Amid debate, women lift their voices with Muslim sacred text

By MARIAM FAM of The Associated Press and AYSHA KHAN of Religion News Service  
CAIRO (AP) — The young woman could hear her heart pounding so hard that she worried the microphone placed in front of her would pick up its sound. Seated around her were officials from Islamic nations, including her country's president. Cameras clicked.

She closed her eyes.

Al-Zahraa Layek Helmee's voice filled the spacious, columned hall with a melodic recitation of the Quran, a role customarily held by men in her country, Egypt. For the 18-year-old, the high-profile recitation of Muslim holy text at a Cairo conference of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation was a personal milestone — one that she also hopes would send a message to women and girls: That can be you.

"I wanted to prove that women have a great role to play when it comes to Quran recitation," she said.

Across cultures and Muslim communities, the boundaries of such a role can be subject to debate. Attitudes vary toward women publicly reciting the Quran within earshot of nonrelated men — in person, online or in other media. While the most skilled female reciters may attain celebrity-like status in some countries, others are largely confined to private spaces or all-women audiences.

Campaigns have been springing up online to amplify the voices, and widen the reach, of female Quran reciters across the world, with many posting their recitations and encouraging others to follow suit. It's part of a larger effort by some Muslim women who say they want to build on the historical examples of other women in their faith to expand their spiritual leadership roles in Islamic spaces.

Online, where Helmee has 1.2 million followers on Facebook, many cheer her on. Others — men and women — reprimand her in messages, urging her to "fear God" or arguing that her voice can tempt men, an idea she rejects.

The controversy "is a matter of convention more than law," said Zahra Ayubi, a Dartmouth College associate professor who studies gender and Islamic ethics.

The concern over women's public recitation, she said, emerges from the interpretation by some that a woman's voice is part of her "awrah" — nakedness or vulnerability — and should therefore be guarded from nonrelated men to prevent temptation. But many scholars and religious bodies have contested the argument that a woman's voice in itself can be "awrah," saying it's what she says and her manner of speech that matters.

"When women are reciting the Quran, it's an incredibly powerful response to the idea that their voices are awrah," Ayubi said. "Because they are speaking the most honorable truth for Muslims, and in doing so keeping true to God's command to speak honorably."

Learning to read and understand the Quran is considered crucial for men and women alike. But perfect-

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ing recitations, or reciting professionally, usually takes rigorous studying and practice to master elaborate rules governing such things as proper pronunciation and articulation.

For many Muslims, the voice of Quran reciters permeates daily life, blaring from car radios and smart-phones or playing out on television channels. Reciters are often invited to religious or social events, sometimes moving their listeners to tears. Many devout Muslims play recordings of favorite reciters at homes or businesses to contemplate the verses or soothe their souls.

Seemi Ghazi, who teaches Quranic Arabic at the University of British Columbia, recalls how —growing up — she would wake up to the sound of her mother reciting the Quran.

“For so many Muslims, we actually experience the Quran primarily and initially through the breath, the tone, the embodiment, the voice of women, most often our mothers,” she said. “So it’s not as though hearing a woman’s voice is something so new. It’s the question of the public sphere which may be distinctive.”

Ghazi, who recites Quran as part of Sufi circles she leads in Vancouver and at interfaith events, sees a blossoming of Muslim women’s voices in alternative Islamic spaces, particularly on social media.

There was a time when Maryam Amir didn’t even know women could be Quran reciters; today she is part of that blossoming. The California-based Amir recalls recoiling the first time she heard a girl reciting at an event where men could hear her. She complained to the organizer.

“She was from Indonesia, and she told me, ‘In Indonesia, women recite the Quran on television, in conferences, in competitions.’”

One of those women, Maria Ulfah, has made a name for herself that transcends Indonesia’s borders. She’s won and judged competitions at home and abroad and has been invited to recite in many parts of the world. Her recordings have carried her voice to the faithful outside of Indonesia. At home, where she says female reciters enjoy the same status as men, some fans have named their children after her.

“In Indonesia, people are very appreciative and proud,” Ulfah said.

Differences in attitudes, she argued, are largely cultural.

In California, Amir’s views on the topic have evolved through her research and interactions with Muslims abroad. She has memorized the Quran, becoming a “hafiza,” a role that is highly prized and encouraged in Muslim communities. She’s also studied Islamic sciences, launched a social media campaign to get women to post recitations of themselves and is now working on a new app. It features recitations by Muslim women around the world, created in collaboration with a council of Islamic scholars.

Amir says she’s seen signs of a shift in attitudes.

“Since people started hearing that scholars have different opinions on this issue ... people are starting to think about this differently,” she said. “There are many women who memorize the Quran, but they had no idea they could recite in these spaces.”

Madinah Javed, who grew up in Scotland and now lives in Chicago, has also turned to social media to highlight female reciters like herself while campaigning to inspire more to share recitations. She is amazed by the resulting connections among women from different cultures and with different styles of recitations.

“It’s important for both men and women to hear women reciters,” she said. “It’s important for men and boys to make space for women too, because they might have more accessibility in certain places or more privilege.”

Online, Javed has encountered strong support from some, while she found others to be more focused on appearance, like whether her neck was showing, than the recitation.

As great as social media has been to raise awareness, she said, real change takes face-to-face interactions. “It’s going to take a much longer time for change to happen” in some communities.

In Egypt, the makeup of the country’s syndicate for reciters and those who teach Quran memorization provides one indication of the road ahead for those advocating female representation. Of 10,000 members, there are just about 100 women and they are focused on teaching memorization, according to the syndicate’s head, Mohamed Hashad.

Hashad said he, personally, sees no theological reasons to stop public female reciters. “It’s more like social reasons,” he said. “Women don’t feel comfortable sitting among the men to read Quran.”

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Helmee, who started learning the Quran with a tutor shortly after she turned 3 and memorized it at 10, hopes that will change.

"I run into women who tell me they wish they could do the same thing I do but that it's too late for them now," she said. "I also meet women who tell me they pray their daughters would grow up to be like me."

## Olympics Live: US, Canada both out of men's hockey

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

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

Slovakia beat the U.S. 3-2 in a shootout Wednesday to knock the top-seeded Americans out in the quarterfinals. Canada exited hours after the U.S. with a 2-0 loss to Sweden.

It's the first Olympic semifinals without the U.S. and Canada since 2006.

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. Slovakia forward Juraj Slafkovsky scored his tournament-leading fifth goal of the tournament.

The Russians and Finland also moved on to the semifinals.

The Associated Press has learned IOC president Thomas Bach offered U.S. figure skaters Olympic torches as holdover gifts while they await a resolution of the Russian doping case that is preventing them from receiving their silver medals.

Two people familiar with the events told AP late Wednesday that Bach, in a private meeting with the skaters in Beijing, reiterated the IOC stance that no medals ceremonies would be held for events involving Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva. The people did not want their names used because the meeting was confidential.

Officials from the International Olympic Committee did not immediately respond to an email query from AP.

Men's champion Nathan Chen and the U.S. finished runner-up to Russia in the team event last week, but the outcome was quickly thrown into chaos when reports surfaced that Valieva had used a banned medication.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled Valieva was still eligible to compete in this week's women's event while her case wound through the anti-doping system. That case will ultimately determine the status of the medals. Valieva led the women's contest after the short program.

The U.S. women's curling team is out of the Olympics. The men have one more chance to advance to the playoffs at the Beijing Games.

Tabitha Peterson's foursome lost 10-7 to Japan on Wednesday night in its round-robin finale. That dropped the Americans to 4-5 at the Winter Games.

Switzerland (7-1) had already qualified, and reigning gold medalist Sweden (6-2) joined them with an 8-5 victory over Russia. There are five teams fighting for the remaining two spots: 2018 bronze medalist Japan (5-3) and '18 silver medalist South Korea (4-4) along with Canada (4-4), Britain (4-4) and China (4-5).

The U.S. men will have a chance to repeat as gold medalists — as long as they beat Denmark in the final round-robin session on Thursday morning.

After eight of nine matches played, the Americans are 4-4 and in fourth place in the race for the four spots in the Beijing Olympics semifinals. Britain and Sweden are already in at 7-1, and Canada also clinched a berth with an 8-6 victory over Russia on Wednesday.

John Shuster's foursome would reach the playoffs with a victory over last-place Denmark. They could also advance if they lose, but they would need help.

The International Testing Agency says cross-country skier Valnetyna Kaminska has tested positive for

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doping with a steroid and a banned stimulant.

Valentyna Kaminska already competed in all her three events at the Beijing Olympics and did not come close to the medals.

The 34-year-old athlete is competing for Ukraine now after representing Belarus at the Winter Games in 2014 and 2018.

The ITA says Kaminska's sample taken last Thursday tested positive for mesterolone and heptaminol. She's now provisionally suspended from all competitions pending a prosecution of her doping case.

It's the second doping sample taken at the Beijing Olympics to test positive. The first involved Alpine skier Hossein Saveh Shemshaki of Iran. The contentious case of Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva involves a test taken before the Olympics.

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Susanna Tapani scored her team-leading sixth goal, Anni Keisala stopped 15 shots and Finland claimed its fourth Olympic women's hockey bronze medal with a 4-0 win over Switzerland.

Wednesday night's victory earned Finland a bronze medal in consecutive Olympics.

Viivi Vainikka and Nelli Laitinen also scored in a rematch of last year's world championship bronze medal game, which Finland won 3-1. The Finns bounced back from a 3-2 loss to the Swiss in the preliminary round.

Switzerland's Andrea Braendli stopped 34 of the first 35 she faced, and 43 overall in a game the Finns pulled away by scoring three times in the third period. The Swiss fell short in an attempt to match their best finish at the 2014 Sochi Games, when they beat Sweden to win the bronze medal.

Vainikka opened the scoring 11:38 into the first period by driving to the front of the net and slipping in a loose puck after Braendli stopped a shot from Noora Tulus. Tapani scored on a shorthanded 2-on-1 break 3:24 into the third period. Laitinen and Karvinen sealed the win with power-play goals in the final 5:36.

Keisala finished the tournament stopping 173 of 189 shots, while appearing in all seven games. Her best save against Switzerland came midway through the second period, when she got her glove up to stop Lena Marie Lutz's shot on a breakaway.

On Thursday, the defending Olympic champion United States and Canada meet in the gold-medal game for the sixth time in seven tournaments.

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Germany's Eric Frenzel, a three-time Olympic gold medalist, took a leap toward competing in the final Nordic combined medal event of the Beijing Games.

Frenzel jumped three times in a training session on Wednesday, a day before a four-man team competition. He tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival in China and was in isolation for about two weeks.

In Nordic combined, the athlete who jumps the farthest and impresses judges the most starts the cross-country portion of the event with a lead. The rest of the field follows, in order of the finish in ski jumping. The first to cross the finish line wins gold.

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Choi Minjeong of South Korea has successfully defended her Olympic title in 1,500-meter short track speedskating.

She won in 2 minutes, 17.789 seconds, extending the tradition of an Asian woman winning the event.

Arianna Fontana of Italy took silver by two-thousandths of a second over Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands.

It was Fontana's 11th career Olympic medal and third in Beijing. The most decorated short track skater in history also won the 500 and took silver in the mixed team relay.

Schulting earned her fourth medal in Beijing. She finished second in the 500, won the 1,000 and won the 3,000 relay.

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Canada has won the 5,000-meter relay in short track speedskating.

The team of Charles Hamelin, Steven Dubois, Jordan Pierre-Gilles and Pascal Dion skated cleanly Wednesday night to take their nation's eighth gold medal in the 45-lap race with a time of 6 minutes, 41.257 seconds.

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At age 37, Hamelin broke his own record as the oldest male short track skater to win an Olympic medal. It was his sixth career medal, making him Canada's most decorated male Olympian.

South Korea earned silver. Italy claimed bronze.

Dubois won his third medal in Beijing. He finished second in the 1,500 and third in the 500.

China crashed later in the race, much to the dismay of the fans at Capital Indoor Stadium, who waved the host country's flag.

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Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands has advanced to the final of 1,500-meter short track speedskating.

—She won her semifinal in a bid to earn her fourth Olympic medal in Beijing. No non-Asian woman has ever won this event.

Defending Olympic champion Choi Minjeong of South Korea rallied from sixth using a big move on the outside to take the lead with two laps remaining in her semifinal. She set an Olympic record of 2 minutes, 16.831 seconds.

Also making the A final are Arianna Fontana of Italy, Lee Yubin of South Korea, Hanne Desmet of Belgium, Xandra Velzeboer of the Netherlands and Han Yutong of China.

The B final includes such big names as Kim Boutin and Courtney Sarault of Canada and Kim A Lang of South Korea. American Kristen Santos was advanced when another skater was penalized.

U.S. skaters Corinne Stoddard and Julie Letai were eliminated.

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China's Qi Guangpu finally flipped his way onto an Olympic podium in men's aerials, winning a gold medal after near misses in Sochi and Pyeongchang.

Qi cleanly landed a quint-twisting triple back flip in the medal round Wednesday night, when five of his six competitors tried the same trick and only he did it clean. Qi earned 129 points, easily beating defending champion Oleksandr Abramenko of Ukraine at 116.5.

Ilia Burov of the ROC downgraded to a quad-twisting triple as the event's last competitor, knowing that a clean back full-full-double full would be enough for the podium. He earned bronze at the second straight Olympics.

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Suzanne Schulting of the Netherlands is keeping alive her bid for a fourth Olympic medal on the last night of short track speedskating.

She easily won her quarterfinal in the 1,500 meters Wednesday. Schulting has already earned silver in the 500, gold in the 1,000 and gold in the 3,000 relay in Beijing.

No non-Asian woman has ever won the 1,000.

Defending Olympic champion Choi Minjeong of South Korea skated to a big lead in winning her quarterfinal.

Also advancing to the semifinals are Arianna Fontana of Italy, Kim A Lang and Lee Yubin of South Korea, and Kim Boutin of Canada.

Three American skaters moved on, led by Kristen Santos, who won her quarterfinal. Julie Letai was advanced because of a penalty to another skater. Corinne Stoddard was third, which was good enough to continue.

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

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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. 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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

By ALICE FUNG and DAVID RISING Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Coronavirus patients lay in hospital beds or open-air tents amid record numbers of infections as Hong Kong 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, and the city's Caritas Medical Center was forced Wednesday to treat some patients in beds outside the building. Others were waiting in tents, some appalled by 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 homemaker.

Xi directed Vice Premier Han Zheng to express to Hong Kong leader 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 report said.

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 strategy 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 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.

Yancey Yau, a 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%.

## After dip in 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. 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.”

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"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."

## Valieva listed 2 legal oxygen boosters on Olympic forms

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — Two legal substances used to improve heart function were 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 on her behalf.

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.

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Combining those with 2.1 nanograms of the heart medicine 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 the 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 the 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. But WADA said that explanation was not enough to clear her of a doping violation.

The brief also says Valieva's mother testified that her daughter used Hypoxen to treat "heart variations."

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 the Court of Arbitration for Sport, 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 medal ceremony for events in which Valieva makes the podium. She's a favorite for gold, and was leading after the short program.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 17, the 48th day of 2022. There are 317 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 17, 1801, the U.S. House of Representatives broke an electoral tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, electing Jefferson president; Burr became vice president.

On this date:

In 1815, the United States and Britain exchanged the instruments of ratification for the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812.

In 1863, the International Red Cross was founded in Geneva.

In 1864, during the Civil War, the Union ship USS Housatonic was rammed and sunk in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, by the Confederate hand-cranked submarine HL Hunley in the first naval attack of its kind; the Hunley also sank.

In 1897, the forerunner of the National PTA, the National Congress of Mothers, convened its first meeting in Washington.

In 1944, during World War II, U.S. forces invaded Eniwetok (ehn-eh-WEE'-tahk) Atoll, encountering little initial resistance from Imperial Japanese troops. (The Americans secured the atoll less than a week later.)

In 1959, the United States launched Vanguard 2, a satellite that carried meteorological equipment.

In 1964, the Supreme Court, in *Wesberry v. Sanders*, ruled that congressional districts within each state had to be roughly equal in population.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon departed the White House with his wife, Pat, on a historic trip to China.

In 1988, Lt. Col. William Higgins, a Marine Corps officer serving with a United Nations truce monitoring group, was kidnapped in southern Lebanon by Iranian-backed terrorists (he was later slain by his captors).

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In 1995, Colin Ferguson was convicted of six counts of murder in the December 1993 Long Island Rail Road shootings (he was later sentenced to a minimum of 200 years in prison).

In 2014, Jimmy Fallon made his debut as host of NBC's "Tonight Show."

In 2015, Vice President Joe Biden opened a White House summit on countering extremism and radicalization, saying the United States needed to ensure that immigrants were fully included in the fabric of American society to prevent violent ideologies from taking root at home.

Ten years ago: Congress voted to extend a Social Security payroll tax cut for 160 million workers and to renew unemployment benefits for millions more.

Five years ago: Over the strong objections of environmental groups, the Senate confirmed Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency. Making his debut on the world stage, Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Germany, looking to reassure skeptical allies in Europe about U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump, who had made his "America First" mantra a centerpiece of his new administration.

One year ago: Nearly 1.9 million utility customers in Texas still had no power after historic snowfall and single-digit temperatures created a surge in demand for electricity to heat homes, buckling the state's power grid and causing widespread blackouts; a large swath of Texas was under yet another winter storm warning. Rush Limbaugh, the talk radio host who became the voice of American conservatism, died at age 70, a year after he announced he had Stage Four lung cancer. Japan launched its coronavirus vaccination campaign, months after other major economies started giving shots. Officials said Homeland Security agents intercepted hundreds of thousands of counterfeit 3M masks in an East Coast warehouse.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-comedian Barry Humphries (aka "Dame Edna") is 88. Actor Christina Pickles is 87. Football Hall of Famer Jim Brown is 86. Actor Brenda Fricker is 77. Actor Becky Ann Baker is 69. Actor Rene Russo is 68. Actor Richard Karn is 66. Actor Lou Diamond Phillips is 60. Basketball Hall of Famer Michael Jordan is 59. Actor-comedian Larry, the Cable Guy is 59. TV personality Rene Syler is 59. Movie director Michael Bay is 58. Singer Chante Moore is 55. Rock musician Timothy J. Mahoney (311) is 52. Actor Dominic Purcell is 52. Olympic gold and silver medal skier Tommy Moe is 52. Actor Denise Richards is 51. Rock singer-musician Billie Joe Armstrong (Green Day) is 50. Rock musician Taylor Hawkins (Foo Fighters) is 50. Actor Jerry O'Connell is 48. Country singer Bryan White is 48. Actor Kelly Carlson is 46. Actor Ashton Holmes is 44. Actor Conrad Ricamora is 43. Actor Jason Ritter is 42. TV personality Paris Hilton is 41. Actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt is 41. TV host Daphne Oz is 36. Actor Chord Overstreet is 33. Singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran is 31. Actor Meaghan Martin is 30. Actor Sasha Pieterse is 26.