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UpComing Events

Sunday, Feb 20: Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.

Monday, Feb. 21

NO SCHOOL - President's Day

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla. - RETURNING

Junior High Basketball vs. Warner. Starting at 4 p.m. in the arena with 8th graders playing first.

Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina - JV game to start after JH games followed by varsity.

Tuesday, Feb. 22

Girls Basketball regions begin. Groton plays Milbank at Sisseton at 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 24

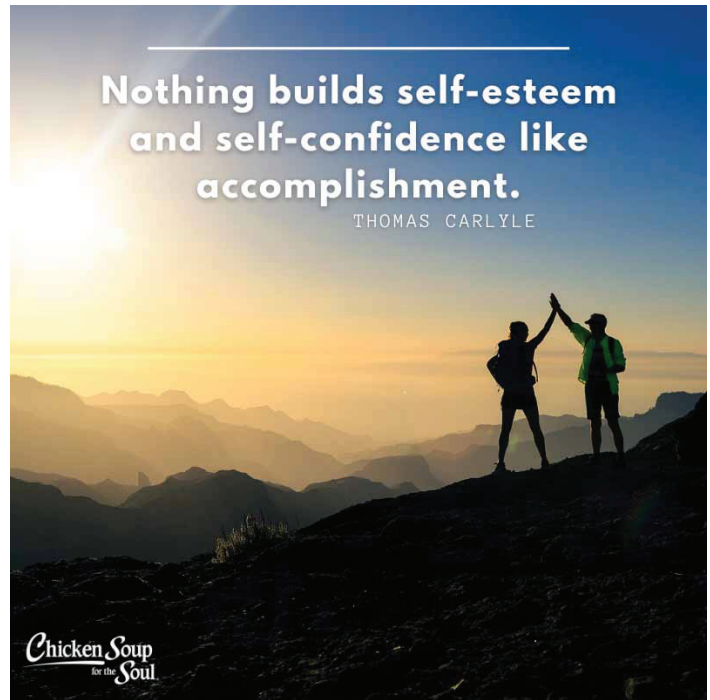
Girls Basketball regions

Friday, Feb. 25

Boys Basketball vs. Aberdeen Christian at the Aberdeen Civic Center. Not sure if there is a C game yet.

Junior High Basketball at Webster with 7th grade playing at 7 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

Debate National Qualifiers



Winter returning with a vengeance

Winter weather is returning in full power the closer we get to spring. Snow, wind and cold are creating difficult travel conditions and dangerous windchills are on the horizon as overnight lows are expected to tank a -20 Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday night. A winter storm warning in effect until 6 p.m. and then a winter advisory takes effect until 6 p.m. Tuesday. The biggest band of snow slid to the North Dakota border, but the area still received a few inches of snow creating snow drifts and blowing and drifting snow.

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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#516 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We passed 78 million total cases on Wednesday and are at 78,302,961 at midday today. That's slowing down—makes sense when you consider we've recorded a million new cases in a single day before and we're now down to just over a tenth of that with a seven-day new-case average of 107,962. Another million's never good, but it is good to see them coming farther apart. A history of the past month:

January 19 – 68 million – 1 day
January 20 – 69 million – 1 day
January 21 – 70 million – 1 day
January 24 – 71 million – 3 days
January 25 – 72 million – 1 day
January 27 – 73 million – 2 days
January 29 – 74 million – 1 day
February 1 – 75 million – 3 days
February 4 – 76 million – 3 days
February 9 – 77 million – 5 days
February 16 – 78 million – 7 days

Hospitalizations continue to decline too; they're at 76,585 today. Deaths, however, are dropping much more slowly; from day to day it's difficult to see movement at all really. The current seven-day average is still well over 2000 at 2247; total's at 932,738.

I really, really want to display unalloyed joy at the decline in cases in the US and the world; but I feel impelled to point out that the BA.2 subvariant of Omicron is, according to the WHO, "steadily increasing" in prevalence. It has become dominant in China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Philippines and has already overtaken Denmark. We don't have good evidence yet that it is more lethal, but we've talked about the fact that a more transmissible virus can easily kill more people than a more lethal one. If you want a review of the math, have a look at my Update #357 posted February 14, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4436334386382933>.

And we do have some unsettling hints about it. I read a study from the University of Tokyo that focuses on this subvariant, and the findings are not comforting. This paper is in preprint, which means it has not yet been peer-reviewed. We already knew it did not exhibit the S-gene target failure in the PCR test that made BA.1 quite easy to spot; we're back to having to do the slower, more expensive genomic testing to identify it in patient specimens. Now these authors have found that the effective reproduction number for BA.2 is 1.4 times higher than BA.1—we do currently see it in around four percent of specimens sequenced in the US. That transmissibility spells trouble, as described above. Further, there are hints it may be better at causing disease; it is more replicative in nasal epithelium than BA.1, the current subvariant of Omicron. It has a tendency to get infected cells to stick together and fuse into large cells called syncytia; these can be quite destructive in lung tissue, contributing to severity of disease. There are indications it causes more inflammation and more damage in the lungs of hamsters experimentally infected than does BA.1. We do want to remember that the evidence on this point has been mixed—hospitalizations, for example, continue to decline in countries where this sub-variant is seen more; so it's too soon to draw firm conclusions. Then, there's the matter that BA.2 is antigenically different from BA.1, which could mean trouble at least for our humoral (antibody) immune response to the virus. It is also concerning that we have some preliminary indications BA.1 is resistant to our only remaining effective monoclonal antibody treatment, sotrovimab; there's going to be a lot of work centered on this question. The work reported in this paper does conclude, however, that preexisting antibodies in those with hybrid immunity does confer at least some protection against BA.1. This group is suggesting that, given the degree of virological and genomic difference, this should perhaps be given its own Greek letter and not viewed as simply a subvariant of Omicron. We are not clear, however, that this subvariant is going to cause another surge; so we can hope on that front that our evolving responses to this clearly still evolving virus can keep up.

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As the Omicron variant moved in to take over from the Delta variant, hospitalization rates among children increased. A CDC study found that weekly hospitalization rates in children were four times higher when Omicron was dominant than when Delta was the dominant variant. This study of around 2000 pediatric hospitalizations compares the period of Delta between July and mid-December and the period of Omicron in the end of December and shows real risk for the unvaccinated. The greatest increase, more than five times greater than during Delta, was among children under five who are not yet eligible for vaccination. Considering that while both variants were circulating, hospitalization rates among unvaccinated 12-to-17 year-olds were six times higher than those in the vaccinated, it is reasonable to assume vaccination may have a similar impact in younger children now that they are eligible as well; but with vaccination rates lagging those of adults, this could represent a significant risk to children.

We talked just a week or so ago about the risks to fetuses from SARS-CoV-2 infection during pregnancy. Now, I've seen a study in Tuesday's CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly looking at hospitalization rates in infants of mothers who received Covid-19 vaccination during pregnancy. In this study involving researchers at 20 pediatric hospitals in 17 states, the scientists looked at 379 children under six months hospitalized between July 1, 2021, and January 17, 2022. Since the time of the study spans a period when first the Delta variant, then the Omicron variant prevailed, we do not know how this pertains to each. Of these infants, 176 (the case-infants) had been admitted with symptoms of Covid-19 and had positive tests; 203 of them (the control-infants) tested negative. They included only infants of mothers who were not vaccinated at all or who were vaccinated with two mRNA doses during pregnancy with the second dose coming at least 14 days before delivery.

Findings included that maternal vaccination rates were higher among children who were not infected than among those who were. Of the case-infants (those with Covid-19), 84 percent were born to unvaccinated mothers. Forty-three were admitted to an ICU, 25 were critically ill and received life support including mechanical ventilation, vasoactive infusions, and/or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO), and one of them died. Of the case-infants admitted to ICU, 88 percent had mothers who were not vaccinated. Overall, vaccination was 61 percent effective at preventing infant hospitalization in the first six months of life with later vaccination more effective than earlier vaccination. The infants who received ECMO and who died had mothers who were unvaccinated. With such a small sample, these findings are only suggestive of an effect; but certainly make follow-up reasonable.

Given that we don't really want people going into pregnancy unprotected because of the increased risk of severe disease during pregnancy, the evidence might come to indicate early (before pregnancy) vaccination with a booster during pregnancy. We know that maternal antibodies against many diseases cross the placenta well and can provide immune protection to their infants after birth and have seen some pretty strong evidence this is true for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies as well; these findings fall into line with that body of knowledge. I am still not seeing any evidence to support pregnant women holding off on vaccination and plenty of evidence to support going ahead and receiving vaccine.

We've talked many times about the fact that antibody levels decrease with time after vaccination against Covid-19. We've also discussed the fact that the studies of antibody titers miss one entire arm of the immune response that involves T cells, the so-called cell-mediated response. I read a study of just this cell-mediated response from a group at La Jolla Institute for Immunology published late last month in the journal *Cell*.

The group took a look at responses to several variants including Omicron in 96 subjects vaccinated with the Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech, Janssen/Johnson & Johnson, and Novavax vaccines, comparing humoral (antibody) and cell-mediated (T cell) responses at intervals up to six months after vaccination to a control group of convalescent (recovered from infection) donors collected one month after symptom onset. Sub-cohorts were approximately matched for age and gender. They ran nucleocapsid IgG assays (identifying antibodies not associated with vaccination) to determine whether vaccinated individuals had also experienced prior infection and account for that in their assessment. They did evaluate CD4+ and CD8+ T cells for their capacity to cross-recognize spike genetic sequences from Omicron.

Findings were that there were substantial reductions in memory B cells (which generate new antibodies) and neutralizing antibodies six months after vaccination, which increases the risk for breakthrough infections.

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This is because, with those reductions, humoral responses are going to be slower and lower in amplitude. Antibodies are also affected by the fact that the receptor-binding domain (RBD), the place on the viral spike where antibodies bind, is highly affected by the mutations seen in later variants, which further interferes with antibody effectiveness. On the other hand, findings with respect to T cells are that they recognized later variants, including Omicron, pretty much as well six months after vaccination as they did earlier variants. Eighty-four percent of CD4+ T cell responses and 85 percent of CD8+ T cell responses were as strong

against Omicron as against earlier variants irrespective which vaccine was used. Their conclusions included "that the vast majority of T cell epitopes are fully conserved, not only in the 'early' variants previously analyzed but also in newer variants, suggesting that the continued evolution of variants has not been associated with increased escape from T cell responses at the population level." Translation: Your vaccine-induced cell-mediated responses are highly protective against Omicron. Additionally, one of the authors notes your memory B cells, even in diminished numbers, are also useful in providing an additional line of defense against severe disease. This is all good news.

Another team, this one at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, took a look at the same thing—antibody and cell-mediated responses against Omicron. This work was published in *Nature* in late January. These scientists looked

Guest Speaker
Nicole J Phillips
The Kindness Podcast

You're Invited!

RESET
womens conference

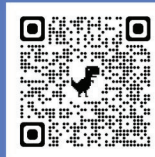
SATURDAY, MARCH 5
AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

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.

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at specimens from 47 people vaccinated with Janssen/Johnson & Johnson or Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, measuring CD4+ and CD8+ responses up to eight months after vaccination. Individuals with prior infection were excluded from the study, so any protection seen is going to be vaccine-associated. Antibody levels and CD4+ and CD8+ responses were quantified.

Findings were that antibody titers to Omicron were two- to three-fold lower than to earlier variants, but both vaccines "elicit broadly cross-reactive cellular immunity against SARS-CoV-2 variants including Omicron." The authors conclude that, given the cross-reactivity is noted across two different vaccine platforms (mRNA and adenovirus vector), the findings are likely generalizable. This is probably because cell-mediated responses target multiple regions in the S protein, so the response is conserved across variants. This work found 82 to 84 percent cross-reactivity of CD8+ T cell responses, very similar to the study we just discussed above. That strengthens our confidence in both pieces of work.

This has been the week for studies of vaccine protection to drop. There was another pair of them, these dealing with hybrid immunity, published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine. You may recall that hybrid immunity is derived from a combination of infection and vaccination, and we have for a long while seen evidence it is stronger and more durable than immunity elicited by either of the two alone.

The first, from a group in Israel, took a look at 149,032 patients who had recovered from Covid-19; 83,356 of those received at least one dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine between March 1 and November 26, 2021, which covers the period when Delta was the dominant variant before Omicron arose in the country. Vaccine effectiveness (VE) was 82 percent in those 16 to 64 years old and 60 percent in those 65 or older. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between those receiving one dose of vaccine and those receiving two doses, although we should note that only 19 percent of the vaccinated patients received more than one dose during the study period, so this could be an artifact of small numbers. And, as we've seen repeatedly, "receipt of the BNT162b2 [Pfizer/BioNTech] vaccine in patients who had recovered from Covid-19 was associated with substantially lower reinfection rates." They concluded the primary dose in recovered patients might be producing a larger and more durable response than the primary dose does in those who have never been infected and suggest that perhaps only one dose is required to achieve a protective effect in recovered individuals. We will point out here that this doesn't account for Omicron which has showed higher reinfection and higher breakthrough rates than Delta such that we're seeing a need for a third, booster, dose to protect against it.

The other study conducted in the UK between December 7, 2020, and September 21, 2021, took a look at data from the SIREN study of health care workers who were PCR-tested for SARS-CoV-2 every two weeks throughout. They focused on a group of 35,768 participants, 27 percent of whom had a previous infection and 95 percent of whom were, by the end of the analysis, vaccinated with either the Pfizer/BioNTech or the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine. There were 2747 primary infections and 210 reinfections observed over the course of the study period which we should note included the weeks during which the Delta variant became dominant in the UK.

Findings were that, among those not previously infected, VE for the Pfizer/BioNTech when administered with a short interval between doses (as it was administered in the US) decreased from 89 percent at 73 days after the second dose to 53 percent after 201 days. (It was just slightly less, but not significantly different, in those with a long-interval administration schedule as was used in the early days in the UK.) For the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, VE was 58 percent at 73 days and did not decline appreciably after that. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that the rise of Delta accounts for a good deal of the diminishment in VE toward the end of the study period. Those with previous infections showed VE of 90 percent which did not wane for more than a year after infection or more than six months after vaccination, even well into the Delta period. This would seem to indicate the immune response elicited by the initial natural infection received a substantial boost and extension of the immune response with vaccination. The authors noted that this protection (infection plus two doses of vaccine) is similar to three doses of vaccine. People with prior infection but no vaccination dwindled in numbers throughout the period of the study as more and more of them were vaccinated, but there was evidence of substantial loss in infection-conferred protection by a year after infection; the immunity from infection alone is not highly durable, whereas hybrid immu-

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nity is permitting the development of a wider diversity of response which seems to respond to a greater variety of variants over a longer time period. I'll remind us all that none of these data cover a time when the Omicron variant was circulating, so how these findings generalize to this variant is simply not known.

The CDC is signaling they'll update mask guidance next week; this will quite likely include loosening recommendations. As case numbers continue to fall, an update is not out of place. While there is plenty of room for individuals to continue to use high-quality masks as they deem appropriate, it would be irresponsible for the CDC to fail to recognize changing conditions on the ground across much of the country. And there's always the need for public health science to factor in not just the virus science, but also the social science in terms of what the public is able and willing to tolerate. I know this will disappoint some of us here and relieve others, but reality is still reality. At this point, leaving decisions at the local level is not unreasonable. Those of us concerned about our own exposure to risk now have the option to use high-quality masks which are highly protective to the wearer in any setting we deem risky.

Throughout this pandemic, people on islands that are more geographically isolated have had some pretty good success holding off this virus. Many island nations have undertaken considerable economic sacrifice in the recognition that they do not have access to adequate medical resources for managing an outbreak and will be hampered from accessing resources by their geographic isolation. Yet despite their efforts, at this late stage, more and more of them have begun to experience outbreaks. We've been talking about Tonga since early last month and more recently Samoa and the Cook Islands. Today is another such as the Solomon Islands reported an outbreak this week. Here, the population has a very low vaccination rate, and the virus is tearing through it. They've had to open a field hospital and permit only the most ill patients to come; others are being asked to isolate at home. Many of the hundreds of islands that compose the country have only a small clinic or no health care at all; I'm not sure what it takes to deliver a patient needing hospitalization from an outlying island to the capitol, Honiara, where the field hospital is; but I'm guessing it's a difficult process. Officials estimate half the population of Honiara has symptoms, but there isn't sufficient testing capacity to differentiate Covid-19 cases amidst a flu outbreak that was already underway. The good news is that folks are lining up for vaccination, partly in response to the outbreak, but also because the government has passed new regulations limiting access to many facilities to the vaccinated. They're only up to 28 percent with at least one dose, so there's a way to go. I hope they can stay ahead of this. Meanwhile, some other Pacific Island nations have also reported outbreaks recently: Fiji, Kiribati, Palau. Some of these have high vaccination rates and have experienced limited outbreaks of relatively milder disease; others are racing to shore up vaccinations in an attempt to get ahead of this virus.

In case we needed it (spoiler: we did not), we have further evidence ivermectin does not prevent severe disease from SARS-CoV-2 infection any better than simple symptom management by doctors. A new study published Friday in JAMA, dealing with 490 PCR-confirmed positive patients at 20 public hospitals and a Covid-19 quarantine center in Malaysia between May 31 and October 25, 2021, was an open-label (not blind) randomized clinical trial. The intervention (ivermectin treatment) group included 241 patients taking a relatively high dose of the drug, and the control (standard-of-care) group included 249 patients. The patients were 50 years and older (median age 62.4 years) with confirmed Covid-19, comorbidities (75.3 percent with hypertension, 53.5 percent with diabetes mellitus, 37.6 percent with dyslipidemia—high blood cholesterol and/or triglycerides, and 23.9 percent with obesity), and mild to moderate disease; and the endpoint was clinical deterioration progressing to severe disease with mechanical ventilation, intensive care unit admission, and/or in-hospital death. The mean duration of symptoms was 5.1 days, and two-thirds had moderate disease.

Findings were that "[a]mong patients who progressed to severe disease, the time from study enrollment to the onset of deterioration was similar across ivermectin and control groups." There was no significant difference between the groups in mechanical ventilation or intensive care unit admission, and the 28-day in-hospital mortality rate and length of hospital stay were similar for the two groups. The proportion of patients who achieved complete symptom remission was comparable between the groups. Chest x-ray findings were similar. There was no significant difference between incidence of disease complications and oxygen requirements. Vaccination status had no effect on these findings, so ivermectin had no more or

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less effect on the vaccinated and the unvaccinated.

There were 55 adverse events in the patients; 33 of these were in the ivermectin group, significantly more than those in the control group. Five of these were classified as serious adverse events, four of which were in the ivermectin group—two myocardial infarctions (heart attacks), one severe anemia, and one hypovolemic shock (due to low blood volume) secondary to severe diarrhea, which decreases the amount of fluid in the body. Six patients discontinued ivermectin due to adverse effects, and three withdrew from the study for that reason. There were 13 deaths, some due to Covid-19 and none attributed to the ivermectin treatment.

The primary conclusion is that, "In this randomized clinical trial of early ivermectin treatment for adults with mild to moderate COVID-19 and comorbidities, we found no evidence that ivermectin was efficacious in reducing the risk of severe disease." The authors mention that the effective concentrations of ivermectin in plasma are high such that establishing an effective dose without causing toxic effects is difficult, and finish up with a note that the "notably higher incidence of AEs [adverse effects] in the iverectin group raises concerns about the use of this drug outside of trial settings and without medical supervision." They further noted that the often-mentioned safety of this drug as a proven therapeutic is always related to its use as an antiparasitic which uses lower doses, adding that "[t]he use of ivermectin as an antiviral in COVID-19 is an entirely different ball game, with notable differences in dosing, duration and mechanism of actions." So there you go. Nothing new here: It's still a bad idea to treat Covid-19 with ivermectin. It doesn't work, and it can hurt people.

And that's it for today. Hoping you stay well until we talk again in a few days.

Glimpses From Greenfield 2022—Week 6

I will kick off this week's article by noting that on Wednesday, we took a few moments out of our busy day to pause and recognize the Watertown Vietnam Era Veterans Chapter who have been recognized as the national chapter of the year. It was also "Watertown day" at the Capitol, so there were dozens of friendly faces in the gallery when the Veterans' group was recognized. While I did not know everybody present, some of the Veterans in attendance with the honorees were Greg Overby, Bob Syring, and Dennis Brenden, all of whom have strong ties to this legislative district. To all who have served, and to those who were recognized, we are eternally grateful for your service and your sacrifice, as well as that of your families! Thank you, and God bless you!

On the floor, we took up SB 211, which was brought by the Governor's office, and calls for statutory exemptions from COVID-19 vaccination mandates. This bill speaks to the process by which people can claim exemptions and stipulates that those who are otherwise subject to federal mandates—such as SD National Guardsmen and healthcare professionals who are subject to Medicare, Medicaid, or CDC mandates—are not able to claim the exemptions, due to the fact that federal policy trumps state policy. In the final analysis, this is largely what many people have been calling for, and I truly appreciate the Governor's office for bringing this forth. This is not an anti-vaccine measure, but it recognizes that some people have medical or religious reasons for not complying with mandates. Moreover, it allows for a "natural immunity exemption" as well. The bill passed the Senate, 31-4.

The surrogacy issue (SB 137) I mentioned last week was narrowly defeated on the Senate floor, and a competing bill that would have gone further to restrict surrogacy arrangements (the antithesis of SB 137) was defeated on the House side. However, there were conversations behind-the-scenes, and it appears the two sides are beginning to find some middle ground. Whether this year or next year, I am hopeful that the Legislature is able to establish a public policy relative to surrogacy that will provide for a better road forward.

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Several bills seeking to undermine our criminal justice code have come out of the Judiciary Committee. Two such bills were SB's 173 and 207. They were brought on behalf of an out-of-state group called the Great North Innocence Project. In addition to that group, proponents included the Chief of Police from Norwood, Massachusetts, the Deputy Chief of Police from Albuquerque, NM, and a person from the Washington, DC, Police Department. Obviously, there is a concerted effort by these radical leftists to spread their soft-on-crime agenda to the masses. One bill would have banned lineups of suspects and would have gone to a "photographic lineup" instead, in which a potential suspect's picture may or may not appear. This would be to try to sow seeds of doubt and confusion in the minds of witnesses. The other bill would have undermined the way law enforcement conducts interrogations. Both bills, thankfully, were defeated soundly on the floor on votes of 13-22. This week, we will see two more bills that have come out of the Judiciary Committee. One seeks to effectively repeal the death penalty in South Dakota, while the other seeks to remove life imprisonment if a murderer commits his or her heinous crime before the age of 25. People have heartfelt feelings about the death penalty that I will not question. All I will say is that prosecutors exercise great discretion in determining whether to seek the death penalty. Having that option available to them sometimes leads to plea bargain and guilty pleas. As for the undermining of life sentences for younger murderers, this, too, is part of a nationwide soft-on-crime approach that defies logic. The same people who argue that no child is too young to undergo permanent, life-changing, elective medical procedures, then flip the script and argue that until people are 25, their brains are still developing, and they cannot fully comprehend that murdering somebody is irreversible and wrong. The latter two bills will have been heard on the Senate floor by the time most of you read this article. If last year is any indication, the repeal of the death penalty will be killed on the Senate side, and the end of life sentences for young murderers will die on the House side.

SB 186 sought to expand Medicaid in SD. This issue will be voted on in November. By all accounts provided by legislators in other states where they have expanded Medicaid coverage for more able-bodied individuals, the number of people who come under the expanded portion of the program always exceeds projections, and the dollar amount borne by the taxpayers is higher-than-projected. Many people game the system and determine what it will take for them to come under the government program. They ask their employers to cut their hours or maneuver things in other ways so they are eligible for the program. This is part of a broader attempt at establishing single-payer, government-run healthcare across the country. In every other country where that has happened, medical services become less available and are subject to rationing. Capable practitioners leave the field because the government handcuffs them in ways they do not agree with and they are unwilling to subject themselves to. As a blanket statement, research and development is disincentivized and the medical system becomes less efficient when the government takes over the system. While we could do better in terms of providing Medicaid reimbursements, Medicaid expansion is NOT the answer. This bill failed 12-23, and I would encourage you to vote against this ill-conceived plan when you see it on the ballot. If MedEx passes in SD, it will result in one of two things. Either existing funding for education, caring for those who cannot care for themselves, and other priorities will be cut OR taxes will be increased. Something will have to give.

The Physician Assistant bill I mentioned last week was delayed with a pending amendment. I have asked Sen. Tobin, the Nurse Practitioner who is the prime sponsor of the bill, and Senator/Dr. Curd who came out against the amendment to try to work out a compromise that both sides can agree with. They seemed willing to try to strike a middle ground that will allow for P.A.'s to be able to expand their scope of practice in SD. I will hope to have good news on that front when I write next week.

Until then, take care and God bless you!

Brock

Choose Behaviors That Reduce Cancer Risk

Cancer is a broad term which encompasses many different diseases, and each type of cancer has different patterns and tendencies. But at its core, cancer means a group of cells which is growing uncontrollably, due to one or multiple genetic mutations.

Cancer prevention is a topic we see frequently in the media, and it can be hard to separate fact from fiction.

Truthfully, many cancers occur at random, and even modern science does not yield any clues as to how to prevent such cancers. Supplements and products marketed as "cancer prevention" do not have sound medical data, and I would advise skepticism of any product purporting to "cleanse" or "detox." However, there are environmental factors that increase the risk of many cancers. Let's focus on those.

Smoking increases the risk of cancer – not just lung, but also bladder, kidney, cervical, and numerous other types of malignant tumors. Additionally, chewing tobacco significantly increases the risk of head and neck cancers. Quitting tobacco is the most impactful lifestyle change one can make to reduce their lifetime cancer risk.

Sun protection is essential for reducing the risk of most skin cancers, including melanoma and the more common basal or squamous cell cancers. Experts recommend sun avoidance, protective clothing, and use of sunscreen with SPF 30 or greater when out in the sun.

Human papilloma virus is a common virus which increases risk of cervical, penile, and many head and neck cancers. We have highly effective vaccines which can prevent this cancer-causing virus. The first vaccine is recommended at age 11 or 12, as it is most effective when administered in adolescence; but the vaccines are now FDA approved up to age 45.

Other components of a healthy lifestyle including a healthy diet, exercise, and lowering alcohol intake, can also reduce your lifetime cancer risk. Most importantly, have a yearly conversation with your primary care provider about age-appropriate cancer screening. In rare cases, a strong family history of cancer may warrant genetic counseling, as some inherited abnormalities merit more aggressive cancer screening. Thus, providing a thorough family history to your care provider is crucial too.

In summary, though many cancers appear out of sheer bad luck, there are many things one can do to reduce overall risk of cancer. None of those things include spending money on products touted as "anti-oxidant," "detoxifying," or "cleansing." So, my advice: save your money and focus on the data-driven recommendations.

Kelly Evans-Hullinger, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices internal medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show celebrating its twentieth season of truthful, tested, and timely medical information, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Kelly Evans-Hullinger, MD

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Four-way tie going into final week for boys NEC title

Hamlin, Clark/Willow Lake, Groton Area and Tiospa Zina all have two losses and are in the lead for a share of the Northeast Conference Title.

Games scheduled for tonight, weather permitting, have Clark/Willow Lake playing Webster and one team will be eliminated from the title share as Groton Area hosts Tiospa Zina. Games on Friday have Hamlin taking on Redfield, Milbank taking on Aberdeen Roncalli and Sisseton taking on Tiospa Zina.

Hamlin	7-2
Clark/Willow Lake	7-2
Groton Area	7-2
Tiospa Zina	6-2
Deuel.....	6-4
Milbank	4-5
Webster	4-5
Redfield	4-5
Sisseton	3-6
Aberdeen Roncalli	2-7
Britton-Hecla	0-10

Hamlin wins Girls NEC Title

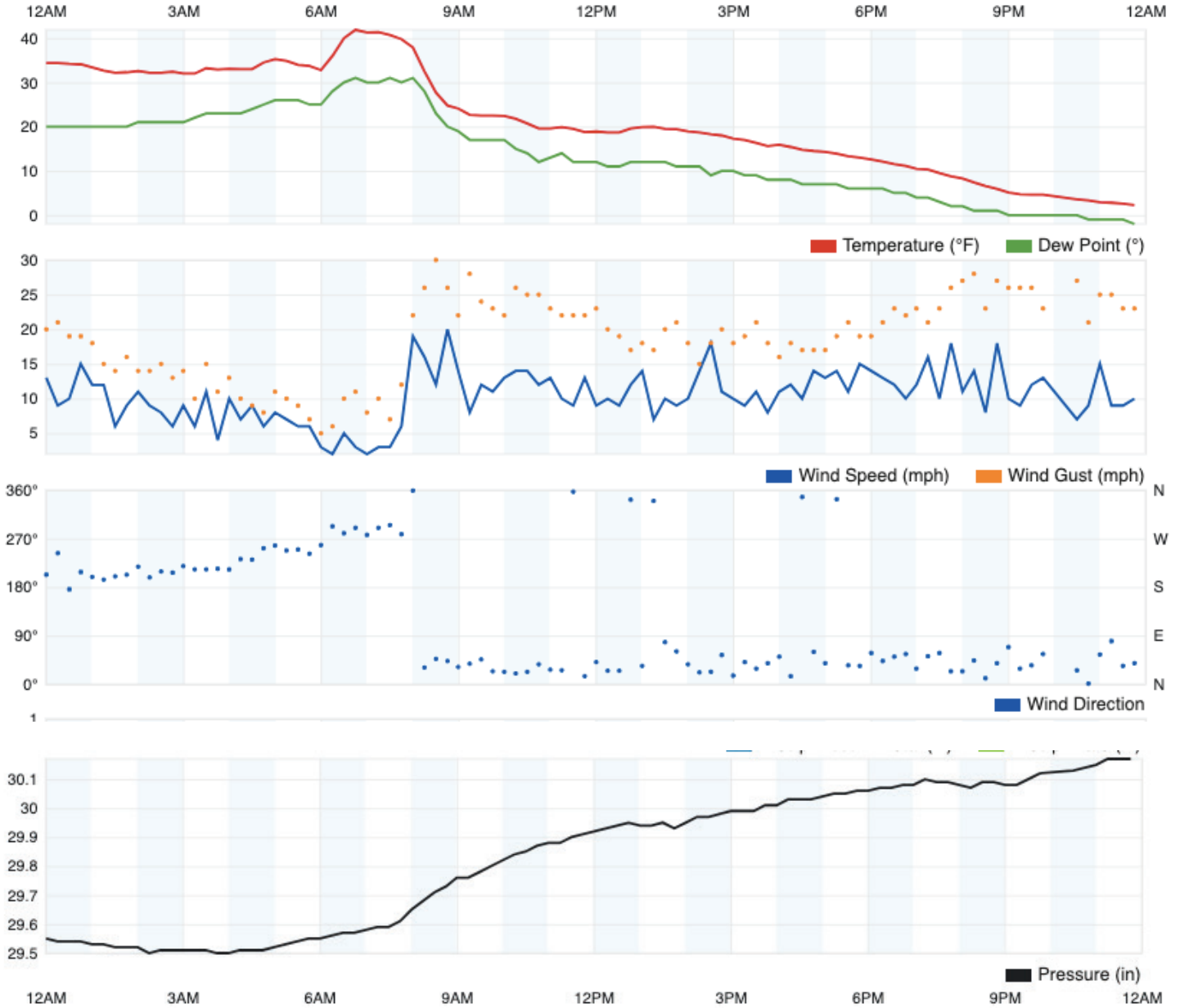
Hamlin went undefeated to win the girls Northeast Conference Title with Aberdeen Roncalli taking second.

Hamlin	10-0
Aberdeen Roncalli	9-1
Sisseton	8-2
Milbank	5-5
Groton Area	5-5
Britton-Hecla	5-5
Redfield	4-6
Deuel.....	3-7
Webster	3-7
Clark/Willow Lake	3-7
Tiospa Zina	0-10

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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Winter Storm Warning

Washington's Birthday




90%

Snow and Blowing Snow

High: 1 °F

Winter Weather Advisory

Tonight




80%

Snow and Areas Blowing Snow

Low: -8 °F

Tuesday




90%

Snow and Blowing Snow

High: -2 °F

Tuesday Night




10%

Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Cloudy

Low: -19 °F

Wednesday



Cold

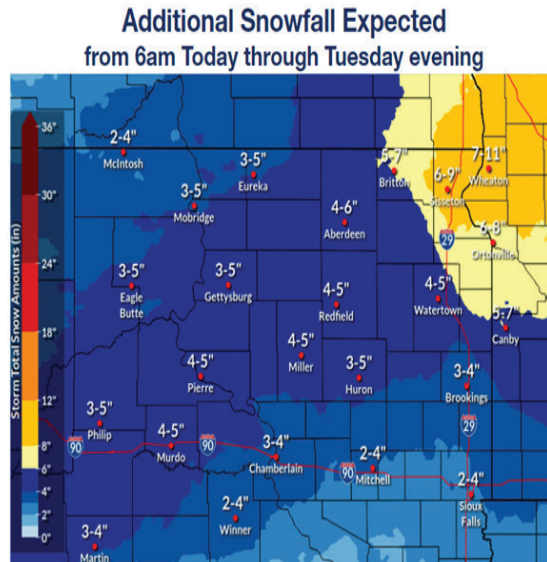
High: -2 °F



Additional Snowfall & Timing

February 21, 2022
4:59 AM

- Moderate to heavy snow remains possible near the North Dakota border through this afternoon
- Another round of light to moderate snow will move in this evening, and focus from southwestern to northeastern South Dakota and western Minnesota
- This snow will be on the lighter/fluffier side



Forecast: 6-Hourly Snowfall Amounts

	Mon			Tue			
	6am-noon	noon-6pm	6pm-midnight	midnight-6am	6am-noon	noon-6pm	6pm-midnight
Aberdeen	0.9	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.0	0.5	0.1
Britton	1.5	0.7	0.9	1.0	1.1	0.7	0.1
Eagle Butte	1.2	0.7	0.8	0.8	1.0	0.3	0.0
Eureka	1.6	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.0
Gettysburg	0.3	0.5	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.4	0.0
Kennebec	0.0	0.2	0.9	1.9	0.8	0.2	0.0
McIntosh	1.8	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.0
Milbank	0.7	0.6	0.8	1.5	2.2	0.7	0.3
Miller	0.1	0.2	0.9	1.8	1.2	0.6	0.0
Mobridge	1.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.4	0.0
Murdo	0.1	0.3	1.7	1.8	1.0	0.3	0.0
Pierre	0.1	0.4	1.5	1.6	1.1	0.4	0.0
Redfield	0.3	0.3	0.9	1.7	1.0	0.6	0.0
Sisseton	2.0	0.9	1.3	1.5	1.7	0.6	0.3
Watertown	0.2	0.1	0.3	1.3	2.0	0.5	0.1
Wheaton	2.6	1.2	1.3	1.3	2.1	0.8	0.4

*Table values in inches



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Snow will continue over far northern and northeastern South Dakota today, becoming lighter this afternoon. Additional light to moderate snow will move across the entire area tonight into Tuesday. Snow to diminish west to east through the day and evening hours Tuesday.

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Arctic Outbreak Through the Week

February 21, 2022
5:38 AM

Min|Max Temperature Forecast

	2/21 Mon	2/22 Tue	2/23 Wed	2/24 Thu	2/25 Fri	2/26 Sat					
Aberdeen	2	-19	-1	-19	0	-23	1	-23	7	-8	24
Britton	1	-20	-3	-20	-4	-24	-1	-24	2	-9	19
Eagle Butte	-2	-20	-4	-20	1	-18	3	-18	13	-4	28
Eureka	-2	-22	-5	-22	-2	-25	1	-25	6	-7	23
Gettysburg	1	-23	-4	-23	1	-23	3	-23	10	-8	26
Kennebec	10	-18	2	-18	5	-19	8	-19	15	-8	32
McIntosh	-5	-24	-6	-24	-2	-23	0	-23	9	-5	23
Milbank	12	-14	1	-15	-1	-17	3	-17	7	-8	22
Miller	7	-21	0	-21	1	-23	3	-23	10	-8	27
Mobridge	1	-20	-1	-20	3	-20	5	-20	13	-3	30
Murdo	8	-17	0	-17	4	-18	7	-18	15	-6	31
Pierre	8	-19	2	-19	6	-19	8	-19	15	-6	33
Redfield	6	-22	-1	-22	1	-25	4	-25	8	-11	25
Sisseton	8	-13	-1	-15	-1	-15	1	-15	5	-5	20
Watertown	10	-16	-1	-16	-2	-18	2	-18	5	-8	20
Wheaton	8	-16	-1	-20	-4	-22	-1	-22	2	-10	19

Record or Near Record Cold

Highs in the single digits either side of zero

Dangerous Wind Chills At Times

Values exceeding -35 F across portions of the area through Friday

Minimum Wind Chill Forecast

	2/21 Mon	2/22 Tue	2/23 Wed	2/24 Thu	2/25 Fri	2/26 Sat	2/27 Sun	2/28 Mon
Aberdeen	-28	-34	-34	-35	-39	-23	-12	-17
Britton	-28	-36	-36	-35	-42	-26	-17	-17
Eagle Butte	-35	-42	-37	-32	-34	-17	-8	-8
Eureka	-35	-39	-39	-36	-42	-22	-14	-14
Gettysburg	-32	-40	-39	-32	-37	-22	-13	-13
Kennebec	-27	-35	-31	-24	-34	-19	-8	-8
McIntosh	-39	-42	-43	-41	-43	-21	-14	-12
Milbank	-16	-29	-31	-27	-32	-20	-12	-14
Miller	-29	-36	-36	-29	-40	-21	-12	-12
Mobridge	-30	-36	-31	-29	-29	-13	-4	-5
Murdo	-31	-37	-35	-27	-35	-16	-5	-3
Pierre	-26	-34	-29	-23	-31	-19	-6	-6
Redfield	-28	-36	-35	-31	-39	-24	-11	-15
Sisseton	-23	-32	-33	-30	-33	-19	-14	-14
Watertown	-20	-30	-34	-27	-32	-21	-13	-14
Wheaton	-20	-31	-35	-36	-40	-23	-17	-23

*Table values in °F



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Record to near record cold is expected, with highs in the single digits above or below zero across much of the area through Friday. Wind Chills will become dangerously low at times, exceeding -35 degrees at times.

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Today in Weather History

February 21, 1918: An unusual warm-up of 83 degrees in just 12 hours at Granville, North Dakota from Chinook winds. The temperature soared from an early morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon temperature of 50 degrees. Chinook winds are caused by the compression of Pacific air descending the Rockies. Compressing the air causes it to heat up, resulting in the dramatic temperature rises.

February 21, 1969: Heavy snow, along with winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow which closed many roads. Snowfall amounts of 5 to 12 inches were typical across eastern South Dakota from the 20th to the 22nd. Some snowfall amounts included, 5 inches at Clear Lake and Brookings, 6 inches at Wilmot, 7 inches at Milbank, Redfield and Mitchell, 8 inches at Conde, 9 inches at Webster, Sioux Falls, and Huron.

1971: A massive tornado outbreak occurred in the Delta region of northeastern Louisiana and Mississippi. The first significant tornado touched down at about 2:50 p.m. in Louisiana and crossed into Mississippi. 46 were killed by this twister, which struck the towns of Dehli and Inverness. 121 people lost their lives that day, including 110 in Mississippi. A total of 1600 people were injured, 900 homes severely damaged or destroyed. The total loss was around 19 million dollars.

1918 - A spectacular chinook wind at Granville, ND, caused the temperature to spurt from a morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon high of 50 degrees above zero. (David Ludlum)

1935 - Frequent duststorms occurred in eastern Colorado during the month, forcing schools to close and people to stay indoors. A fatality occurred on this date when two section cars collided on the railroad near Arriba CO, due to poor visibility. (The Weather Channel)

1936 - The temperature at Langdon, ND, climbed above zero for the first time in six weeks. Readings never got above freezing during all three winter months. (David Ludlum)

1971 - An outbreak of tornadoes hit northeastern Louisiana and northern and central Mississippi. The tornadoes claimed 121 lives, including 110 in Mississippi. Three tornadoes accounted for 118 of the deaths. There are 1600 persons injured, 900 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, and total damage was 19 million dollars. (David Ludlum)

1971 - Elk City, OK, was buried under 36 inches of snow to establish a 24 hour snowfall record for the state. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Low pressure over central California produced gale force winds along the coast, and produced thunderstorms which pelted Stockton, Oakland and San Jose with small hail. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A storm tracking across southern Canada produced high winds in the north central U.S., with gusted to 90 mph reported at Boulder CO. The high winds snapped trees and power lines, and ripped shingles off roofs. The Kentucky Fried Chicken Bucket was blown off their store in Havre MT. An eighteen foot fiberglass bear was blown off its stand along a store front in west Cody WY, and sailed east into downtown Cody before the owners were able to transport their wandering bear back home in a horse trailer. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing during the morning hours spread severe weather across Georgia and the Carolinas. Strong thunderstorm winds caused one death and thirteen injuries in North Carolina, and another four injuries in South Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Overnight thunderstorms produced heavy rain in central Texas. Rainfall totals ranged up to 2.80 inches at Camp Verde, with 2.20 inches reported at Leakey. Thunderstorms early in the day produced high winds in southern Texas, with wind gusts to 60 mph reported at Alice. Daytime thunderstorms in eastern Texas drenched Rosenberg with four inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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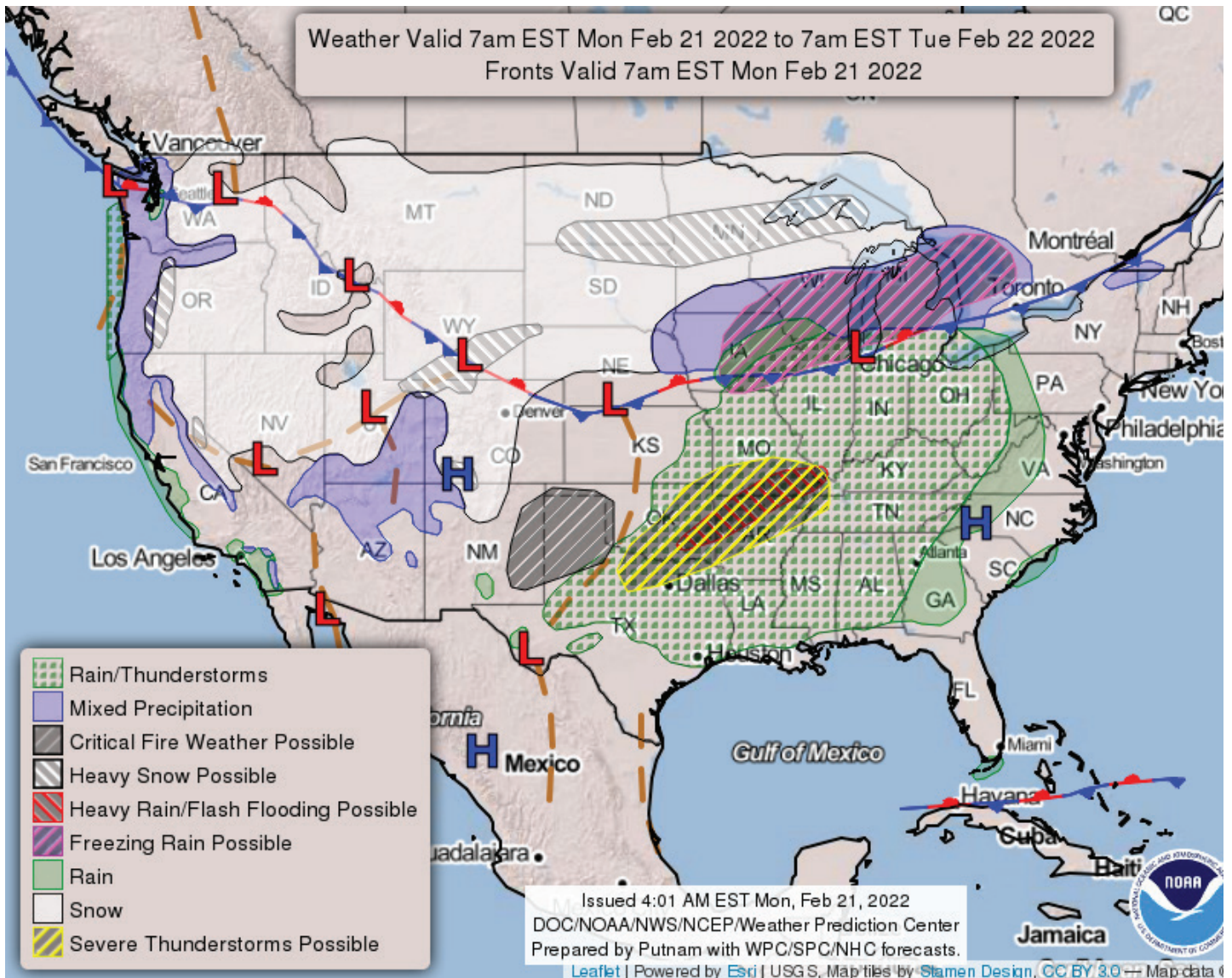
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 6:46 AM
Low Temp: 2 °F at 11:58 PM
Wind: 30 mph at 8:22 AM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 50 minutes
Tomorrow will be 3 minutes longer than today in Groton

Today's Info

Record High: 64 in 2017
Record Low: -30 in 1918
Average High: 31°F
Average Low: 9°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.44
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.99
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 6:09:37 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:20:36 AM



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TO THINK OR NOT TO THINK

Someone said that there are two types of people: those who stop to think or those who stop thinking. If someone stops thinking, life will go on without them. On the other hand, it is important for those who do think to think about things that matter.

There is a good example of this principle in Psalm 119:59: "I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to Your statutes." What we spend our time thinking about matters more than anything else in our lives. It is our thinking that enables us to discern right from wrong, good from bad, what is helpful from what is hurtful. And the list goes on. Thinking leads to choices, and our choices determine our destiny. In fact, that's what the Psalmist wrote about: "When I stopped to consider what I was doing and where I was going, it led me to change my course of direction and follow the laws of the Lord."

Many are too involved in the things of this world to "stop and consider" where they are going or whom they are following. Life becomes a blur and there is not much difference between night and day: everything looks like a long piece of grey flannel that has no beginning or end.

The Psalmist said, "I considered - I turned." It does not take much time to see the difference between God's way and the world's way. And, when one sees the benefits of what God has to offer us in contrast to what the world takes from us, the choice is clear: life or death. It is wise to stop, consider our choices and turn to God.

Prayer: We have in You, Father, all that we need for today and after "today" a life with You in Heaven. Call to our minds the direction we are going and where we need to go. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to Your statutes. Psalm 119:59

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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

North Dakota takes cue from South Dakota to recruit lawyers

By JACK DURA The Bismarck Tribune

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Taylor Olson has just about done it all in the legal profession in her corner of North Dakota.

The Williston city attorney in 2013 and 2014 filled in as interim state's attorney for Divide and McKenzie counties. She also works as a municipal judge in New Town and as a tribal judge for the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation.

"People think Williston is the edge of the world and that there's nothing for anybody here," said Olson, who has practiced in Williston since 2011. "And in all of these areas, we all need the same services that the bigger communities do."

A shortage of attorneys in rural areas of the state led Olson and others to champion a bill in the 2021 Legislature that established the Rural Attorney Recruitment Program -- now open for applications from attorneys and eligible cities and counties until April 1. A second recruitment cycle could come in the fall if all the spots aren't filled.

The pilot program of the state Supreme Court aims to place attorneys willing to work for at least five years in cities with 5,000 or fewer people or counties with 16,000 or fewer people. Attorneys "must agree to live in close proximity" to the community.

The incentive program is for four initial placements. It's modeled after a program in South Dakota that currently has 24 participants, The Bismarck Tribune reported.

Attorneys in the North Dakota program will receive an incentive of \$45,000 given in five equal, annual payments. The Supreme Court will pay 50%, the city or county will pay 35% and the North Dakota Bar Foundation will pay 15%.

The program is open to any attorney, whether they plan to work or are already working in the public or private sector.

Rep. Rick Becker, R-Bismarck, opposed the bill for the program, viewing the state funding as inappropriate and the success of similar programs unclear.

North Dakota's seven most-populous counties have 87% of the 1,695 licensed attorneys living in the state, according to a 2021 breakdown from the State Board of Law Examiners.

"As a judge, I think it's hard for the judiciary when you need a state's attorney and you need defense counsel and you need public defenders and you need assistance for mental health cases ... I think it can get difficult and very burdensome for people to travel so much, especially in the winter, to do some of those jobs," Olson said.

Five counties have no attorneys; 35 counties have fewer than 10 lawyers. The attorneys include ones not in practice, retirees, corporate counsel and judges.

"The joke is that you need two lawyers in every community so you have someone to be on the other side," Bar Association Executive Director Tony Weiler said.

Remote technology makes many things easier, but a lot of people want to meet face to face with professionals, be it an attorney, a doctor or an insurance agent, he said.

Consulting an attorney is a lot like seeing a doctor, according to State Court Administrator Sally Holewa. "You're going to expose your very personal things to them," she said, as in divorces or complicated probates.

Other work includes real estate, wills, family law, adoptions, guardianships and counsel to local governments.

People also respect a professional they know personally, someone who knows the system and the jargon and different avenues of solutions, Holewa said.

"You may not know the law, but you know how you feel about that person's abilities," she said. "I think

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that's not a connection you're going to make looking up somebody's website or by a random phone call to a stranger."

Olson said the program might "take a specific type of person, someone willing to jump in the deep end and really put in the time and effort.

"But I think it can be really satisfying for people," she said.

Weiler sees the shortage as a nationwide, generational issue of younger people wanting to be in bigger cities with others of their age and more amenities.

Northeast District Judge Michael Hurly, of Rugby, is concerned "these courthouses just become museums" in a worst-case scenario of rural decline.

He helped lead the recruitment program proposal, hoping to improve access to lawyers.

At the least, rural residents have to travel many miles to consult an attorney if none is practicing nearby, he said.

Hurly senses a hesitancy among attorneys and young professionals to move to rural areas, but he points out the routine of daily life isn't much different than in urban areas, especially for parents.

Also, "I think that people get caught up with there's more things to do in the cities than there is in rural areas, but the question is, do you really ever go and do those things?" he said.

Hurly, 45, prefers the rural quality of life, and he keeps busy with volunteerism and his work.

His vision for the recruitment program is to see at least 30 attorneys participate at some point. Olson would like to see a mentorship component one day.

"When an attorney moves into a community, I think by nature attorneys become very active in the community," Hurly said. "They're going to buy a house in the community. They're going to pay property taxes. If they're going to have children, those children are going to go through the school. There's a lot of benefits to the community to do this."

Police: Man shot, killed at downtown Rapid City bar

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say one man is dead after a shooting at a bar in downtown Rapid City early Sunday.

Police Lt. Kevin Masur said officers were called to Teddy's Sports Bar at about 1 a.m. and found a man who had been shot.

The Rapid City Journal reports the victim was taken to a local hospital where he died.

The man's identity has not been released.

No arrests have been made.

Ukraine-Russia crisis: What to know amid a push for a summit

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — World leaders are making another diplomatic push in hopes of preventing a Russian invasion of Ukraine, even as heavy shelling continues in Ukraine's east.

The White House said President Joe Biden had agreed "in principle" to meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin if he refrains from launching an assault on his neighbor that U.S. officials say appears increasingly likely.

A Biden-Putin meeting would hold offer some new hope of averting a Russian invasion that U.S. officials said could begin any moment from the estimated 150,000 Russian troops that have amassed near Ukraine.

Here is a look at the latest developments in the security crisis in Eastern Europe:

WILL BIDEN AND PUTIN MEET?

The U.S. and Russian presidents have tentatively agreed to meet in a last-ditch diplomatic effort to stave off Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Yet but both seem cautious about a possible meeting.

The White House says the meeting will only happen if Russia does not invade Ukraine, noting that heavy shelling is continuing in eastern Ukraine.

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Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, for his part, said Monday that "it's premature to talk about specific plans for a summit."

French President Emmanuel Macron sought to broker the possible meeting between Biden and Putin in a series of phone calls that dragged deep into the night. Macron's office said both leaders had "accepted the principle of such a summit," to be followed by a broader summit meeting involving leaders.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are to lay the groundwork for the summit at a meeting Thursday, according to Macron's office.

WHAT'S THE SITUATION ON THE UKRAINE'S EASTERN FRONT?

Heavy shelling has increased in recent days along the tense line of contact between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatist rebels in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of Donbas.

It's a war that began in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. The fighting has claimed at least 14,000 lives but had been largely quiet for long spans of time.

Ukrainian military spokesman Pavlo Kovalchuk said Ukrainian positions were shelled 80 times Sunday and eight times early Monday, noting that the separatists were "cynically firing from residential areas using civilians as shields." He insisted that Ukrainian forces weren't returning fire.

In the village of Novognativka on the government-controlled side, 60-year-old Ekaterina Evseeva, said the shelling was worse than at the height of fighting.

"It's worse than 2014," she said, her voice trembling. "We are on the edge of nervous breakdowns. And there is nowhere to run."

RUSSIAN TROOPS STAY IN BELARUS, ADDING TO FEARS

Russian troops who have been carrying out military exercises in Belarus, which is located on Ukraine's northern border, were supposed to go home when those war games ended Sunday. But now Moscow and Minsk announced that the Russian troops are staying indefinitely.

The continued deployment of the Russian forces in Belarus raised concerns that Russia could send those troops to sweep down on the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, a city of 3 million less than a three-hour drive away from the Belarus border.

UKRAINE PROJECTS CALM

Despite Biden's assertion that Putin has made the decision to roll Russian forces into Ukraine, Ukrainian officials sought to project calm, saying that they aren't seeing an invasion as imminent.

Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said Monday that Russia has amassed 147,000 troops around Ukraine, including 9,000 in Belarus, arguing that the number is clearly insufficient for an offensive on the Ukrainian capital.

"The talk about an attack on Kyiv from the Belarusian side sounds ridiculous," he said, charging that Russia is using the troops there as a scare.

Over the weekend at the Polish border, many Ukrainians were also returning home from shopping or working in the neighboring EU country. Many said they were not afraid and vowed to take up arms against Russia in case of an assault.

EU OFFERS TO ADVISE UKRAINE

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Monday that the European Union has agreed to set up a military education advisory mission in his country.

Kuleba told reporters in Brussels after meeting with the bloc's foreign ministers that an agreement had been reached in principle to roll out an advisory training military mission in Ukraine.

"This is not combat forces. This is a new element in the cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union," he said, adding that details about the mission are still being decided. "It is critical that we open this new page in our relations."

The move could involve sending European officers to Ukraine's military schools to help educate its armed forces. It's likely to take several months to set up.

THE LATEST BRITISH WARNING

U.K. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss is warning that an invasion of Ukraine appears likely and that her country

is preparing.

"Diplomacy must be pursued but a Russian invasion of Ukraine looks highly likely. The U.K. and allies are stepping up preparations for the worst-case scenario. We must make the cost for Russia intolerably high," she wrote on Twitter.

With all eyes on Ukraine, Putin to send his envoy to Balkans

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — With all eyes on a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is sending his top security envoy to the Balkans where Moscow has been trying to maintain influence mainly through its ally Serbia, according to reports.

Serbia's pro-government media said Monday Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful secretary of the Kremlin's Security Council, is due to arrive in Belgrade in the coming days for talks with Serbia President Aleksandar Vucic. Moscow hasn't made an announcement about Patrushev's trip.

The talks are reportedly to focus on Moscow's claims that "mercenaries" from Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia are being sent from those Balkan states to fight on the Ukrainian side against the pro-Russia rebels amid fears of a Russian attack.

Officials from Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia have rejected those claims, which were made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week.

"There's information that mercenaries are being recruited in Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to knock Russia out of balance and send them to places including Donbass," Lavrov said according to the Russian TASS news agency, referring to the rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine. "We are now double-checking that."

Vucic on Monday called a meeting of Serbia's top security officials who reportedly also discussed the reports of "mercenaries" from the Balkans going to Ukraine. Dozens of Serb fighters have in the past fought in eastern Ukraine, but on the side of the pro-Russia rebels.

Serbia has formally declared neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine standoff that threatens a major war in Europe. However, Serbia's state-controlled media is squarely supporting Moscow in the crisis, carrying Russian propaganda without any questions raised.

Although formally seeking European Union membership, Serbia has refused to align its foreign policies with the 27-nation bloc and has instead strengthened its political, economic and military ties with Russia and China.

The increasingly autocratic Vucic, who faces an April 3 general election, opened his campaign this past weekend by declaring that as long as he is in power, Serbia will never join NATO and will maintain its close ties with Moscow and Beijing.

Illustrating growing ties between the two Slavic allies, Serbia and Russia have recently formed a "working group" tasked with combating popular revolts known as "color revolutions" that the two countries' top security officials described as instruments of the West to destabilize "free states."

Western officials have accused Kremlin of "malign" influence in the Balkans that has helped fuel a wave of nationalism which threatens to undo peace in Bosnia after its 1992-95 war, reignite armed conflict over Kosovo that split from Serbia in 2008, and stir up political troubles in NATO-members North Macedonia and Montenegro.

Moscow has repeatedly denied those claims, although maintaining that Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo must never join NATO.

Bosnia is in the middle of a political crisis, with EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels to discuss ways to ease tensions and prevent the possible breakup of the ethnically divided Balkan country. Bosnian Serbs, who have the support of Serbia and Russia, are threatening to split from the federation.

Biden-Putin summit discussed but fears of Ukraine war remain

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, YURAS KARMANAU and LORNE COOK Associated Press

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MOSCOW (AP) — The U.S. and Russian presidents tentatively agreed to meet in a last-ditch effort to stave off a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, even as sustained shelling continued Monday in a conflict in eastern Ukraine that Western powers fear could provide the spark for a broader war.

If Russia invades, as the U.S. warns Moscow has already decided to do, the meeting will be off. Still the prospect of a face-to-face summit resuscitated hopes that diplomacy could prevent a devastating conflict, which would result in massive casualties and huge economic damage in Europe, which is heavily dependent on Russian energy.

Russia has massed an estimated 150,000 troops on three sides of Ukraine — the biggest such buildup since the Cold War. And Western officials have warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin is now merely looking for a pretext to invade the country, a western-looking democracy that has defied Moscow's attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

Moscow denies it has any plans to attack, but wants Western guarantees that NATO won't allow Ukraine and other former Soviet countries to join as members. It has also demanded the alliance halt weapons deployments to Ukraine and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

With the prospect of war looming, French President Emmanuel Macron scrambled to broker a meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Putin.

Macron's office said both leaders had "accepted the principle of such a summit," to be followed by a broader meeting that would include other "relevant stakeholders to discuss security and strategic stability in Europe."

The language from Moscow and Washington was more cautious, but neither side denied a meeting is under discussion.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the administration has always been ready to talk to avert a war — but was also prepared to respond to any attack.

"So when President Macron asked President Biden yesterday if he was prepared in principle to meet with President Putin, if Russia did not invade, of course President Biden said yes," he told NBC's "Today" show on Monday. "But every indication we see on the ground right now in terms of the disposition of Russian forces is that they are, in fact, getting prepared for a major attack on Ukraine."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Monday that Putin and Biden could meet if they consider it "feasible," but emphasized that "it's premature to talk about specific plans for a summit."

Macron's office said that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are set to lay the groundwork for the potential summit when they meet Thursday. The French leader has been trying to play go-between to avert a new war in Europe, and his announcement followed a flurry of calls by Macron to Putin, Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Even as the diplomacy pressed ahead, there were signs it might not head off a broader conflict. In on particularly dire signal, Russia and its ally Belarus announced Sunday that they were extending massive war games on Belarus' territory, which could offer a staging ground for an attack on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, located just 75 kilometers (less than 50 miles) south of the border.

Starting Thursday, shelling also spiked along the tense line of contact that separates Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of Donbas. Over 14,000 people have been killed since conflict erupted there in 2014, shortly after Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Ukraine and the separatist rebels have traded blame for massive cease-fire violations with hundreds of explosions recorded daily. The world is watching the fighting warily since Western officials have warned for weeks that Russia would look for a pretext to invade — and that the conflict in Donbas could provide just such an excuse.

On Friday, separatist officials announced the evacuation of civilians and military mobilization in the face of what they described as an imminent Ukrainian offensive on the rebel regions. Ukrainian officials have strongly denied any plans to launch such an attack and described the evacuation order as part of Russian provocations intended to set the stage for an invasion.

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While Russia-backed separatists have charged that Ukrainian forces were firing on residential areas, Associated Press journalists reporting from several towns and villages in Ukrainian-held territory along the line of contact have not witnessed any notable escalation from the Ukrainian side and have documented signs of intensified shelling by the separatists that destroyed homes and ripped up roads.

Some residents of the main rebel-held city of Donetsk described sporadic shelling by Ukrainian forces, but they added that it wasn't on the same scale as earlier in the nearly 8-year-old conflict in the east.

The separatist authorities said Monday that at least four civilians were killed by Ukrainian shelling over the past 24 hours and several others were wounded. Ukraine's military said two Ukrainian soldiers were killed over the weekend, and another serviceman was wounded Monday.

Ukrainian military spokesman Pavlo Kovalchuk said the Ukrainian positions were shelled 80 times Sunday and eight times early Monday, noting that the separatists were "cynically firing from residential areas using civilians as shields." He insisted that Ukrainian forces weren't returning fire.

Oleksiy Danilov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, also denied that Ukrainian forces were firing on rebel-held territory, noting that "our military can only retaliate and fire back if their lives are in danger."

In the village of Novognativka on the government-controlled side, 60-year-old Ekaterina Evseeva, said the shelling was worse than at the height of fighting early in the conflict.

"We are on the edge of nervous breakdowns. And there is nowhere to run," she said, her voice trembling.

Evseeva said that residents were hunkering down in basements amid the renewed fighting: "Yesterday I saw my neighbor with her 2-month-old as she was running to the basement. It shouldn't be like this."

Amid the heightened invasion fears, the Kremlin reacted angrily to a New York Times report that the U.S. administration has sent a letter to the United Nations human rights chief claiming that Moscow has compiled a list of Ukrainians to be killed or sent to detention camps after the invasion. Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said the claim was a lie and no such list exists.

Russian officials have shrugged off Western calls to deescalate by pulling back troops, arguing that Moscow is free to deploy troops and conduct drills wherever it likes on its territory — and at the invitation of allies, Belarus.

Throughout the crisis, Ukraine's leaders have sought to project calm — repeatedly playing down the threat of an invasion.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said Monday that Russia has amassed 147,000 troops around Ukraine, including 9,000 in Belarus, arguing that the number is clearly insufficient for an offensive on the Ukrainian capital from the north.

"The talk about an attack on Kyiv from the Belarusian side sounds ridiculous," he said, charging that Russia is using the troops there as a scare tactic.

The European Union's top diplomat, foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, welcomed the prospect of a Biden-Putin summit but said the 27-nation bloc has finalized its package of sanctions for use if Putin orders an invasion.

"The work is done. We are ready," said Borrell. He provided no details about who might be targeted.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Monday that the European Union has also agreed to send military officers to the country in an advisory role. It's likely to take several months to set up.

UN court to open hearings in Rohingya genocide case

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Myanmar's shadow civilian administration called on the United Nations' top court Monday not to allow the country's military rulers to represent the Southeast Asian nation at hearings into a case accusing the country of genocide against the Rohingya ethnic minority.

Four days of hearings into the Myanmar military's deadly 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya are scheduled to open Monday afternoon at the International Court of Justice amid a dispute over who should represent the country in court.

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Representatives of Myanmar are scheduled to address judges to outline why they believe the case that was filed by the African nation of Gambia, representing a group of Muslim nations, should be dropped.

But members of Myanmar's National Unity Government, urged the court not to accept representatives of the military rulers.

"We do not believe that the International Court of Justice will want to allow the military to appear before them as if they speak for the Republic of the Union of Myanmar," said the unity government's foreign minister, Zin Mar Aung. "It would be a most profound injustice to the Rohingya if the military were to be both their abusers and have any voice in the court."

The shadow administration said it has contacted the court to withdraw Myanmar's preliminary objections to the case, but it remains to be seen whether the court will recognize the unity administration.

The shadow administration is made up of a diverse group of representatives including elected lawmakers who were prevented from taking their seats by the military takeover. It says it is the country's only legitimate government but no foreign government has recognized the unity group.

The dispute at the world court in The Hague reflects a broader struggle in the international community over whom to accept as Myanmar's legitimate rulers in the aftermath of the coup.

Southeast Asian foreign ministers held their annual retreat last week without their counterpart from Myanmar, who was blackballed from participating but allowed to attend online as an observer.

The military launched what it called a clearance campaign in Rakhine state in 2017 after an attack by a Rohingya insurgent group. More than 700,000 Rohingya fled into neighboring Bangladesh and security forces were accused of mass rapes, killings and torching thousands of homes.

In 2019, lawyers representing Gambia at the ICJ outlined their allegations of genocide by showing judges maps, satellite images and graphic photos of the military campaign. That led the court to order Myanmar to do all it can to prevent genocide against the Rohingya. The interim ruling was intended to protect the minority while the case is decided in The Hague, a process likely to take years.

Former pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi represented Myanmar at the 2019 hearings, but she now is imprisoned after being convicted on what supporters call trumped-up charges.

Last year's military takeover in Myanmar sparked widespread peaceful protests and civil disobedience that security forces suppressed with lethal force. About 1,500 civilians have been killed, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Akila Radhakrishnan, president of the Global Justice Center, said this week's International Court of Justice hearings "are laying the groundwork for accountability in Myanmar — not only for the Rohingya, but for all others who have suffered at the hands of the military."

The International Court of Justice rules on state responsibility for breaches of international law. It is not linked to the International Criminal Court, also based in The Hague, which holds individuals accountable for atrocities. Prosecutors at the ICC are investigating crimes committed against the Rohingya who were forced to flee to Bangladesh but have not yet filed any indictments.

Australia welcomes back tourists with toy koalas, Tim Tams

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — International tourists and business travelers began arriving in Australia with few restrictions on Monday, bringing together families in tearful reunions after separations of two years or longer forced by some of the most draconian pandemic measures of any democracy in the world.

Australia closed its borders to tourists in March 2020 in a bid to reduce the local spread of COVID-19, but on Monday removed its final travel restrictions for fully vaccinated passengers.

Tearful British tourist Sue Witton hugged her adult son Simon Witton when he greeted her at Melbourne's airport.

"Seven hundred and twenty-four (days) apart and he's my only son, and I'm alone, so this means the world to me," she told reporters.

Travelers were greeted at Sydney's airport by jubilant well-wishers waving toy koalas and favorite Aus-

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tralian foods including Tim Tams chocolate cookies and jars of Vegemite spread.

Federal Tourism Minister Dan Tehan was on hand to welcome the first arrivals on a Qantas flight from Los Angeles which landed at 6:20 a.m. local time.

"I think there'll be a very strong rebound in our tourism market. Our wonderful experiences haven't gone away," Tehan said.

Danielle Vogl, who lives in Canberra, and her Florida-based partner Eric Lochner have been separated since October 2019 by the travel restrictions.

She said she burst into tears when she heard about the lifting of the restrictions, which will allow them to reunite in April, and telephoned him with the news.

"I actually woke him up to tell him, because I thought it was big enough news to do that," Vogl told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

"He couldn't believe it. ... He was like 'Are you sure, is this true?' and I'm like 'Yes, it's happening. This is over now: we can be together again,'" she added.

Lochner was not eligible for an exemption from the travel ban because the couple weren't married or living together.

"It's been a very long and very cruel process for us," Vogl said.

Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews said all travelers' vaccination status would be checked before they arrived to avoid a repeat of Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic's visa debacle.

Djokovic was issued with a visa through an automated process before he left Spain to compete in the Australian Open in January but was deported after he arrived in Melbourne because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Tourism Australia managing director Phillipa Harrison said she expected tourist numbers would take two years to rebound to pre-pandemic levels.

"This is a really great start," Harrison said. "This is what the industry had been asking us for, you know, just give us our international guests back and we will take it from there."

Qantas on Monday was bringing in passengers from eight overseas destinations including Vancouver, Singapore, London and New Delhi.

The Sydney-based airline's chief executive Alan Joyce said bookings have been strong since the federal government announced two weeks ago that the country was relaxing restrictions.

"It has been a tough two years for everybody in the tourism industry, but today is really one of the big steps on the way back to a full recovery so we are very excited," Joyce said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said 1.2 million people had visas to enter Australia with 56 international flights due to touch down in the first 24 hours of the border reopening.

Australia on Monday reported 17,736 new COVID-19 infections and 34 deaths. Australia's death toll since the pandemic began is 4,929.

Australia imposed some of the world's toughest travel restrictions on its citizens and permanent residents in March 2020 to prevent them from bringing COVID-19 home.

Travelers had to apply for an exemption from the travel ban, but tourism wasn't an accepted reason. International students and skilled migrants were prioritized when the border restrictions were relaxed in November in response to an increasing vaccination rate among the Australian population. Tourists from New Zealand, Japan and South Korea were also allowed in early.

Australian states and territories also have their own COVID-19 rules. The strictest are in Western Australia state, which covers a third of the island continent.

California tribe confronts crisis of missing, murdered women

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

YUROK RESERVATION, Calif. (AP) — The young mother had behaved erratically for months, hitchhiking and wandering naked through two Native American reservations and a small town clustered along Northern California's rugged Lost Coast.

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But things escalated when Emmilee Risling was charged with arson for igniting a fire in a cemetery. Her family hoped the case would force her into mental health and addiction services. Instead, she was released over the pleas of loved ones and a tribal police chief.

The 33-year-old college graduate — an accomplished traditional dancer with ancestry from three area tribes — was last seen soon after, walking across a bridge near a place marked End of Road, a far corner of the Yurok Reservation where the rutted pavement dissolves into thick woods.

Her disappearance is one of five instances in the past 18 months where Indigenous women have gone missing or been killed in this isolated expanse of Pacific coastline between San Francisco and Oregon, a region where the Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Tolowa and Wiyot people have coexisted for millennia. Two other women died from what authorities say were overdoses despite relatives' questions about severe bruises.

The crisis has spurred the Yurok Tribe to issue an emergency declaration and brought increased urgency to efforts to build California's first database of such cases and regain sovereignty over key services.

"I came to this issue as both a researcher and a learner, but just in this last year, I knew three of the women who have gone missing or were murdered — and we shared so much in common," said Blythe George, a Yurok tribal member who consults on a project documenting the problem. "You can't help but see yourself in those people."

The recent cases spotlight an epidemic that is difficult to quantify but has long disproportionately plagued Native Americans.

A 2021 report by a government watchdog found the true number of missing and murdered Indigenous women is unknown due to reporting problems, distrust of law enforcement and jurisdictional conflicts. But Native women face murder rates almost three times those of white women overall — and up to 10 times the national average in certain locations, according to a 2021 summary of the existing research by the National Congress of American Indians. More than 80% have experienced violence.

In this area peppered with illegal marijuana farms and defined by wilderness, almost everyone knows someone who has vanished.

Missing person posters flutter from gas station doors and road signs. Even the tribal police chief isn't untouched: He took in the daughter of one missing woman, and Emmilee — an enrolled Hoopa Valley tribal member with Yurok and Karuk blood — babysat his children.

In California alone, the Yurok Tribe and the Sovereign Bodies Institute, an Indigenous-run research and advocacy group, uncovered 18 cases of missing or slain Native American women in roughly the past year — a number they consider a vast undercount. An estimated 62% of those cases are not listed in state or federal databases for missing persons.

Hupa citizen Brandice Davis attended school with the daughters of a woman who disappeared in 1991 and now has daughters of her own, ages 9 and 13.

"Here, we're all related, in a sense," she said of the place where many families are connected by marriage or community ties.

She cautions her daughters about what it means to be female, Native American and growing up on a reservation: "You're a statistic. But we have to keep going. We have to show people we're still here."

Like countless cases involving Indigenous women, Emmilee's disappearance has gotten no attention from the outside world.

But many here see in her story the ugly intersection of generations of trauma inflicted on Native Americans by their white colonizers, the marginalization of Native peoples and tribal law enforcement's lack of authority over many crimes committed on their land.

Virtually all of the area's Indigenous residents, including Emmilee, have ancestors who were shipped to boarding schools as children and forced to give up their language and culture as part of a federal assimilation campaign. Further back, Yurok people spent years away from home as indentured servants for colonizers, said Judge Abby Abinanti, the tribe's chief judge.

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The trauma caused by those removals echoes among the Yurok in the form of drug abuse and domestic violence, which trickles down to the youth, she said. About 110 Yurok children are in foster care.

"You say, 'OK, how did we get to this situation where we're losing our children?'" said Abinanti. "There were big gaps in knowledge, including parenting, and generationally those play out."

An analysis of cases by the Yurok and Sovereign Bodies found most of the region's missing women had either been in foster care themselves or had children taken from them by the state. An analysis of jail bookings also showed Yurok citizens in the two-county region are 11 times more likely to go to jail in a given year — and half those arrested are female, usually for low-level crimes. That's an arrest rate for Yurok women roughly five times the rate of female incarcerations nationwide, said George, the University of California, Merced sociologist consulting with the tribe.

The Yurok run a tribal wellness court for addiction and operate one of the country's only state-certified tribal domestic violence perpetrator programs. They also recently hired a tribal prosecutor, another step toward building an Indigenous justice system that would ultimately handle all but the most serious felonies.

The Yurok also are working to reclaim supervision over foster care and hope to transfer their first foster family from state court within months, said Jessica Carter, the Yurok Tribal Court director. A tribal-run guardianship court follows another 50 children who live with relatives.

The long-term plan — mostly funded by grants — is a massive undertaking that will take years to accomplish, but the Yurok see regaining sovereignty over these systems as the only way to end the cycle of loss that's taken the greatest toll on their women.

"If we are successful, we can use that as a gift to other tribes to say, 'Here's the steps we took,'" said Rosemary Deck, the newly hired tribal prosecutor. "You can take this as a blueprint and assert your own sovereignty."

Emmilee was born into a prominent Native family, and a bright future beckoned.

Starting at a young age, she was groomed to one day lead the intricate dances that knit the modern-day people to generations of tradition nearly broken by colonization. Her family, a "dance family," has the rare distinction of owning enough regalia that it can outfit the brush, jump and flower dances without borrowing a single piece.

At 15, Emmilee paraded down the National Mall with other tribal members at the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. The Washington Post published a front-page photo of her in a Karuk dress of dried bear grass, a woven basket cap and a white leather sash adorned with Pileated woodpecker scalps.

The straight-A student earned a scholarship to the University of Oregon, where she helped lead a prominent Native students' group. Her success, however, was darkened by the first sign of trouble: an abusive relationship with a Native man whom, her mother believes, she felt she could save through her positive influence.

Later, Emmilee dated another man, became pregnant and returned home to have the baby before finishing her degree.

She then worked with disadvantaged Native families and eventually got accepted into a master's program. She helped coach her son's T-ball team and signed him up for swim lessons.

But over time, her family says, they noticed changes.

Emmilee was uncharacteristically tardy for work and grew more combative. She often dropped off her son with family, and she fell in with another abusive boyfriend. Her son was removed from her care when he was 5; a girl born in 2020 was taken away as a newborn as Emmilee's behavior deteriorated.

Her parents remain bewildered by her rapid decline and think she developed a mental illness — possibly postpartum psychosis — compounded by drugs and the trauma of domestic abuse. At first, she would see a doctor or therapist at her family's insistence but eventually rebuffed all help.

After her daughter's birth, Emmilee spiraled rapidly, "like a light switched," and she began to let go of the Native identity that had been her defining force, said her sister, Mary.

"That was her life, and when you let that go, when you don't have your kids ... what are you?" she said.

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In the months before she vanished, Emmilee was frequently seen walking naked in public, talking to herself. She was picked up many times by sheriff's deputies and tribal police but never charged.

The only in-patient psychiatric facility within 300 miles (480 kilometers) was always too full to admit her. Once, she was taken to the emergency room and fled barefoot in her hospital gown.

"People tended to look the other way. They didn't really help her. In less than 24 hours, she was just back on the street, literally on the street," said Judy Risling, her mother. "There were just no services for her."

In September, Emmilee was arrested after she was found dancing around a small fire in the Hoopa Valley Reservation cemetery.

Then-Hoopa Valley Tribal Police Chief Bob Kane appeared in a Humboldt County court by video and explained her repeated police contacts and mental health problems. Emmilee mumbled during the hearing then shouted out that she didn't set the fire.

She was released with an order to appear again in 12 days after her public defender argued she had no criminal convictions and the court couldn't hold her on the basis of her mental health.

Then, Emmilee disappeared.

"We had predicted that something like this may ... happen in the future," said Kane. "And you know, now we're here."

If Emmilee fell through the cracks before she went missing, she has become even more invisible in her absence.

One of the biggest hurdles in Indian Country once a woman is reported missing is unraveling a confusing jumble of federal, state, local and tribal agencies that must coordinate. Poor communication and oversights can result in overlooked evidence or delayed investigations.

The problem is more acute in rural regions like the one where Emmilee disappeared, said Abigail Echo-Hawk, citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma and director of the Urban Indian Health Institute in Seattle.

"Particularly in reservations and in village areas, there is a maze of jurisdictions, of policies, of procedures of who investigates what," she said.

Moreover, many cases aren't logged in federal missing persons databases, and medical examiners sometimes misclassify Native women as white or Asian, said Gretta Goodwin, of the U.S. Government Accountability Office's homeland security and justice team.

Recent efforts at the state and federal level seek to address what advocates say have been decades of neglect regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Former President Donald Trump signed a bill that required federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement agencies to create or update their protocols for handling such cases. And in November, President Joe Biden signed an executive order to set up guidelines between the federal government and tribal police that would help track, solve and prevent crimes against all Native Americans.

A number of states, including California, Oregon, Washington and Arizona, are also taking on the crisis with greater funding to tribes, studies of the problem or proposals to create Amber Alert-style notifications.

Emmilee's case illustrates some of the challenges. She was a citizen of the Hoopa Valley Tribe and was arrested on its reservation, but she is presumed missing on the neighboring Yurok Tribe's reservation.

The Yurok police are in charge of the missing persons probe, but the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office will decide when to declare the case cold, which could trigger federal help.

The remote terrain where Emmilee was last seen — two hours from the nearest town — created hurdles common on reservations.

Law enforcement determined there wasn't enough information to launch a formal search and rescue operation in such a vast, mountainous area. The Yurok police opted to forgo their own search because of liability concerns and a lack of training, said Yurok Tribal Police Chief Greg O'Rourke.

Instead, Yurok and Hoopa Valley police and sheriff's deputies plied the rain-swollen Klamath River by

boat and drove back roads.

Emmilee's father, Gary Risling, says the sheriff's office failed to act on anonymous tips, was slow to follow up on possible sightings and focused more resources on other missing person's cases, including a wayward hunter and a kayaker lost at sea.

"I don't want to seem like I'm picking on them, but that effort is sure not put forward when it becomes a missing Indian woman," he said.

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal declined interview requests, saying the Yurok are in charge and there are no signs of foul play. O'Rourke said the tips aren't enough for a search warrant and there's nothing further the tribal police can do.

The police chief, who knew Emmilee well, says his work is frequently stymied by a broader system that discounts tribal sovereignty.

"The role of police is protect the vulnerable. As tribal police, we're doing that in a system that's broken," he said. "I think that is the reason that Native women get all but dismissed."

Emmilee's family, meanwhile, is struggling to shield her children, now 10 and almost 2, from the trauma of their mother's disappearance — trauma they worry could trigger another generational cycle of loss.

The boy has been having nightmares and recently spoke everyone's worst fear.

"It's real difficult when you deal with the grandkids, and the grandkid says, 'Grandpa, can you take me down the river and can we look for my mama?' What do you tell him? 'We're looking, we're looking every day,'" said Gary Risling, choking back tears.

"And then he says, 'What happens if we can't find her?'"

Curry sets 3s record, LeBron the winner in NBA All-Star Game

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Stephen Curry got another 3-point record. LeBron James got another All-Star win. Not a bad night in Ohio for the two All-Stars from Akron.

"It's right on the nose of how it should go," Curry said.

Curry turned boos to oohs and aahs with the greatest long-distance shooting performance in All-Star Game history, then James made a turnaround jumper that gave Team LeBron a 163-160 victory over Team Durant on Sunday night.

Curry made 16 3-pointers and scored 50 points, two off Anthony Davis' record. He was clearly hunting it, asking on the sideline during a sizzling third quarter how many points it would take.

On a night both players were among the greats of the game who were honored during a halftime ceremony celebrating the NBA's 75th anniversary team, Curry and James showed why they continue to stand out among today's best.

Curry, who earlier this season became the NBA's career leader in 3-pointers, missed his final attempt beyond the arc that would have allowed him to surpass Davis. But with James' team needing a basket to reach the target score of 163 points, they couldn't afford to keep feeding Curry.

So James pulled up from deep on the right side for the winning bucket, making him 5-0 in the format where the leading vote-getters in each conference draft teams.

The All-Star Game's return to Cleveland was expected to be James' night. He is the Cavaliers franchise's greatest player, having led them to their only NBA championship in 2016.

Instead, he fittingly co-starred with Curry, who was born in the same Akron hospital three years later.

"Obviously I got the MVP; I played well the whole night. He hit the game-winner," Curry said. "All the history of our series and the Akron ties, and all that kind of going into how the night went, so it was pretty — can't really draw it up any other way."

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30 points, increasing what was a 28.8 average that was already best in All-Star Game history. James finished with 24 in his old home. Joel Embiid led Team Durant with 36 points.

Curry finished 16 of 27 beyond the arc — sometimes well, well behind it. He launched a few from the All-Star 2022 logo near midcourt, running backward without even waiting to watch one go in.

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The 3-point arc is slightly more than 23 feet away. Curry had made shots listed from 37, 33 and 34 feet during one stretch of the third quarter,

"This guy is from a different planet. He literally has an automatic sniper connected to his arm, and when he lets it go, not only himself, but everybody on the floor, in the stands, on TV, on their phones, whatever you are watching on, you think it's going in every time," James said. "Nine times out of 10 and sometimes 10 times out of 10, it does go in.

"To be out there and watch that kid from Akron as well shoot the ball the way he shot it, it was unbelievable," James said. "It was pretty cool."

Curry had been booed all weekend, smiling through the sounds during pregame introductions as Cleveland fans made clear they hadn't forgiven him for helping Golden State beat the Cavaliers three times in the NBA Finals from 2015-18.

But the fans were enjoying his show too much to keep going as the game went on, though the boos returned when he was presented the MVP award that in 2020 was renamed in honor of Kobe Bryant, who won a record-tying four of them.

The Kobe Bryant Trophy was redesigned this year and given to Curry in front of a crowd that included Bryant's wife, Vanessa.

Curry received 11 of the 12 votes for the award, with James earning the other through a fan vote.

Michael Jordan was the last player introduced for the halftime ceremony and James said his winning shot was inspired by the turnaround fadeaway that Jordan perfected during his Hall of Fame career. It earned \$450,000 for the Kent State I Promise Scholars Program, the charity James' team was playing for.

"He wanted the ball. We all knew that he was going to shoot it," Cleveland's Darius Garland said. "Fadeaway, you know? He wanted to win for the school. That's why he was going so hard in the fourth. That's why everybody was going hard in the fourth. Just seeing that go in, just seeing the crowd erupt in his hometown, it was cool to see."

It was a thrilling finish to an All-Star Game played again before a packed house after the 2021 game was contested in a mostly empty State Farm Arena in Atlanta, moved there because of the coronavirus pandemic after it was originally scheduled for Indianapolis.

The pregame introductions wrapped up with a thunderous roar for James, who responded with one of his own. His home fans cheered again when he did his signature pregame powder toss and he came out aggressively with nine points to help Team LeBron win the first quarter 47-45.

Then it became the Curry show.

He made six 3s for 18 points in the second quarter, though Team Durant won the period. He made seven more 3s and scored 21 in the third, when the teams played to a 45-all tie.

James defeated Curry when they were captains in 2018, the first year after the NBA did away with the traditional East against West format. Then James beat Antetokounmpo in the next two years.

This time, he drafted both of the two-time NBA MVPs, along with Nikola Jokic, the reigning MVP. His team won for the second straight year against the club captained by Kevin Durant, who couldn't play because of a sprained left knee ligament.

Chris Paul did play — briefly — despite a right thumb injury that TNT reported would keep him out at least six weeks. Paul played with a wrap covering his thumb during his two-minute stint.

The Cavaliers' two All-Stars did well, with Garland scoring 13 points and Jarrett Allen blocking Embiid's shot when the game was tied at 155. The duo played with James, Curry and Antetokounmpo during a pivotal fourth-quarter stretch.

Devin Booker scored 20 points, LaMelo Ball had 18 and Dejounte Murray 17 for Team Durant.

As Kuwait cracks down, a battle erupts over women's rights

By ISABEL DEBRE and MALAK HARB Associated Press

KUWAIT CITY (AP) — It all started over yoga.

When an instructor in Kuwait this month advertised a desert wellness yoga retreat, conservatives declared

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it an assault on Islam. Lawmakers and clerics thundered about the "danger" and depravity of women doing the lotus position and downward dog in public, ultimately persuading authorities to ban the trip.

The yoga ruckus represented just the latest flashpoint in a long-running culture war over women's behavior in the sheikhdom, where tribes and Islamists wield growing power over a divided society. Increasingly, conservative politicians push back against a burgeoning feminist movement and what they see as an unraveling of Kuwait's traditional values amid deep governmental dysfunction on major issues.

"Our state is backsliding and regressing at a rate that we haven't seen before," feminist activist Najeeba Hayat recently told The Associated Press from the grassy sit-in area outside Kuwait's parliament. Women were pouring into the park along the palm-studded strand, chanting into the chilly night air for freedoms they say authorities have steadily stifled.

For Kuwaitis, it's an unsettling trend in a country that once prided itself on its progressivism compared to its Gulf Arab neighbors.

In recent years, however, women have made strides across the conservative Arabian Peninsula. In long-insular Saudi Arabia, women have won greater freedoms under de-facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Saudi Arabia even hosted its first open-air yoga festival last month, something Kuwaitis noted with irony on social media.

"The hostile movement against women in Kuwait was always insidious and invisible but now it's risen to the surface," said Alanoud Alsharekh, a women's rights activist who founded Abolish 153, a group that aims to eliminate an article of the country's penal code that sets out lax punishments for the so-called honor killings of women. "It's spilled into our personal freedoms."

Just in the past few months, Kuwaiti authorities shut down a popular gym hosting belly dance classes. Clerics demanded police apprehend the organizers of a different women's retreat called "The Divine Feminine," citing blasphemy. Kuwait's top court will soon hear a case arguing the government should ban Netflix amid an uproar over the first Arabic-language film the platform produced.

Hamdan al-Azmi, a conservative Islamist, has led the tirade against yoga, accusing outsiders of trampling on Arab heritage and bemoaning the aerobic exercise as a cultural travesty.

"If defending the daughters of Kuwait is backward, I am honored to be called it," he said.

The string of religiously motivated decisions has touched off sustained outrage among Kuwaiti women at a time in which not a single one sits in the elected parliament and gruesome cases of so-called honor killings have gripped the public.

In one such case, a Kuwaiti woman named Farah Akbar was dragged from her car last spring and stabbed to death by a man released on bail against whom she had lodged multiple police complaints.

The outcry over Akbar's killing pushed parliament to draft a law that would, after years of campaigning, eliminate Article 153. The article says that a man who catches his wife committing adultery or his female relative engaged in any sort of "illicit" sex and kills her faces at most three years in prison. There also can be just a \$46 fine.

But when it came time to consider the article's abolition, Kuwait's all-male parliamentary committee on women's issues took an unprecedented step. It turned to the state's Islamic clerics for a fatwa, or non-binding religious ruling, about the article.

The clerics ruled last month that the law be upheld.

"Most of these members of parliament come from a system in which honor killings are normal," said Sundus Hussain, another founding member of the Abolish 153 group.

After Kuwait's 2020 elections, there was a marked increase in the influence of conservative Islamists and tribal members, Hussein added.

Before activists could absorb the blow, authorities called on clerics to answer a new query: Should women be allowed to join the army?

The Defense Ministry had declared they could enlist last fall, fulfilling a long-standing demand.

But clerics disagreed. Women, they decreed last month, may only join in non-combat roles if they wear an Islamic headscarf and get permission from a male guardian.

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The decision shocked and appalled Kuwaitis accustomed to government indifference to whether women cover their hair.

"Why would the government consult religious authorities? It's clearly one way in which the government is trying to appease conservatives and please parliament," said Dalal al-Fares, a gender studies expert at Kuwait University. "Clamping down on women's issues is the easiest way to say they're defending national honor."

Apart from the defense of what social conservatives consider women's honor, there is little on which Kuwait's emir-appointed Cabinet and elected parliament can agree. An anguished stalemate has paralyzed all efforts to fix a record budget deficit and pass badly needed economic reforms.

Nearly two years after parliament passed a domestic violence protection law, there are no government women's shelters or services for abuse victims. Violence against women has only increased during the pandemic lockdown.

"We need a complete overhaul to address the flaws of our legal system when it comes to the protection of women," said lawmaker Abdulaziz al-Saqabi, who's now drafting Kuwait's first gender-based violence law. "We are dealing with an irresponsible — and unstable — system that makes any reform almost impossible."

Some advocates attribute the conservative backlash to a sense of panic that society is changing. A year ago, activists launched a groundbreaking #MeToo movement to denounce harassment and violence against women. Hundreds of reports poured into the campaign's Instagram account with harrowing accusations of assault, creating a profound shift in Kuwaiti discourse.

Organizers in recent months have struggled to sustain the momentum as they themselves have faced rape and death threats.

"The toll it took was massive. We became immediate clickbait. We couldn't go out in public without being constantly stopped and constantly harassed," said Hayat, who helped create the movement last year.

Hayat has little faith in the government to change anything for Kuwait's women. But she said that's no reason to give up.

"If there's a protest, I'm going to show up. If there's someone who needs convincing, I'm going to try," she said, while women around her pumped their fists and held signs aloft.

Was Arbery killing a hate crime? Jury to hear dueling views

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Before Ahmaud Arbery was chased by three white men in pickup trucks and fatally shot on a residential street, the trio had expressed hostility toward Black people in text messages and social media posts riddled with racist slurs.

Does that history of bigoted remarks prove that Arbery was the victim of a hate crime?

A jury of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person will hear dueling views Monday from prosecutors and defense attorneys as they present their closing arguments in U.S. District Court, where the hate crimes trial over Arbery's death began a week ago.

It's been nearly two years since the 25-year-old Arbery fell dead from two shotgun blasts on Feb. 23, 2020, after a five-minute chase through the Satilla Shores subdivision just outside the port city of Brunswick. The slaying was captured in a graphic cellphone video that sparked outrage far beyond Georgia.

Basic facts of the case aren't disputed. Father and son Greg and Travis McMichael armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after he was spotted running past their home on a Sunday afternoon. A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded the video of Travis McMichael firing the fatal shots at point-blank range.

The McMichaels and Bryan were all convicted of murder last fall in a Georgia state court. The U.S. Justice Department charged them separately in federal court with hate crimes, alleging that all three men violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he's Black. They are also charged with attempted kidnapping, and the McMichaels face counts of using guns in the commission of a crime.

Regardless of the outcome of the hate crimes case, the McMichaels have been sentenced to life in prison

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without parole for their murder convictions. Bryan also received a life sentence, with parole possible only after he's served at least 30 years.

The federal hate crimes trial is all about whether racism motivated the pursuit and killing of Arbery. Legal experts have said that's tougher to prove than the crime of murder. The McMichaels and Bryan have all pleaded not guilty.

Defense attorneys have insisted that the trio pursued Arbery based on an earnest, though erroneous, suspicion that he had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Before the day of the shooting, security cameras had recorded Arbery several times inside a home under construction a few doors down from the McMichaels' house. Greg McMichael told police he recognized Arbery as he came running out of the same unfinished house the day of the shooting.

Still, those security videos showed Arbery taking nothing from the construction site. An officer told the McMichaels there was no evidence of him stealing. Bryan, who knew nothing of the security footage, told investigators he assumed Arbery had done something wrong when he ran past Bryan's house with the McMichaels in pursuit.

Prosecutors will likely argue that the three men suspected Arbery because he was Black — and that their own past words show this prejudice was what triggered the deadly chase.

FBI agents uncovered roughly two dozen racist text messages and social media posts from the McMichaels and Bryan in the years and months preceding the shooting.

In 2018, Travis McMichael commented on a Facebook video of a Black man playing a prank on a white person: "I'd kill that f---ing n---r." Greg McMichael had posted a Facebook meme saying white Irish "slaves" were treated worse than any race in U.S. history. And for several years on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Bryan wrote messages in which he mocked the holiday honoring the civil rights leader.

Some witnesses testified they heard the McMichaels' racist statements firsthand. A woman who served under Travis McMichael in the U.S. Coast Guard a decade ago said he made crude sexual jokes after learning she had dated a Black man and called her "n---r lover." Another woman testified Greg McMichael had ranted angrily in 2015 when she remarked on the death of civil rights activist Julian Bond, saying, "All those Blacks are nothing but trouble."

Defense attorneys didn't dispute any of those statements. They rested their case Friday after calling a single witness.

In July 2019, Greg McMichael called police to report that he and Travis McMichael had confronted a homeless man living under a nearby bridge whom they suspected of committing thefts in their neighborhood. He didn't mention the man's race. On Friday, neighbor Lindy Cofer testified that she spotted a white man camped out under the same bridge sometime in 2019. She didn't know if it was the same person the McMichaels had reported to police.

50 years after Nixon visit, US-China ties as fraught as ever

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — At the height of the Cold War, U.S. President Richard Nixon flew into communist China's center of power for a visit that, over time, would transform U.S.-China relations and China's position in the world in ways that were unimaginable at the time.

The relationship between China and the United States was always going to be a challenge, and after half a century of ups and downs, is more fraught than ever. The Cold War is long over, but on both sides there are fears a new one could be beginning. Despite repeated Chinese disavowals, America worries that the democratic-led world that triumphed over the Soviet Union could be challenged by the authoritarian model of a powerful and still-rising China.

"The U.S.-China relationship has always been contentious but one of necessity," said Oriana Skylar Mastro, a China expert at Stanford University. "Perhaps 50 years ago the reasons were mainly economic. Now they are mainly in the security realm. But the relationship has never — and will never — be easy."

Nixon landed in Beijing on a gray winter morning 50 years ago on Monday. Billboards carried slogans such

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as "Down with American Imperialism," part of the upheaval under the Cultural Revolution that banished intellectuals and others to the countryside and subjected many to public humiliation and brutal and even deadly attacks in the name of class struggle.

Nixon's 1972 trip, which included meetings with Chairman Mao Zedong and a visit to the Great Wall, led to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and the parallel severing of formal ties with Taiwan, which the U.S. had recognized as the government of China after the communists took power in Beijing in 1949.

Premier Zhou Enlai's translator wrote in a memoir that, to the best of his recollection, Nixon said, "This hand stretches out across the Pacific Ocean in friendship" as he shook hands with Zhou at the airport.

For both sides, it was a friendship born of circumstances, rather than natural allegiances.

China and the Soviet Union, formerly communist allies, had split and even clashed along their border in 1969, and Mao saw the United States as a potential counterbalance to any threat of a Soviet invasion.

Nixon, embroiled in the Watergate scandal at home, was seeking to isolate the Soviet Union and exit a prolonged and bloody Vietnam War that had divided American society. He hoped that China, an ally of communist North Vietnam in its battle with the U.S.-backed South, could play a role in resolving the conflict.

The U.S. president put himself "in the position of supplicant to Beijing," said June Teufel Dreyer, a Chinese politics specialist at the University of Miami. Chinese state media promoted the idea that a "prosperous China would be a peaceful China" and that the country was a huge market for American exports, she said.

It would be decades before that happened. First, the U.S. became a huge market for China, propelling the latter's meteoric rise from an impoverished nation to the world's second largest economy.

Nixon's visit was a "pivotal event that ushered in China's turn outward and subsequent rise globally," said the University of Chicago's Dali Yang, the author of numerous books on Chinese politics and economics.

Two years after Mao's death in 1976, new leader Deng Xiaoping ushered in an era of partial economic liberalization, creating a mix of state-led capitalism and single-party rule that has endured to this day.

China's wealth has enabled a major expansion of its military, which the U.S. and its allies see as a threat. The Communist Party says it seeks only to defend its territory. That includes, however, trying to control islands also claimed by Japan in the East China Sea and by Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea, home to crucial shipping lanes and natural resources.

The military has sent a growing number of warplanes on training missions toward Taiwan, a source of friction with the United States. China claims the self-governing island off its east coast as its territory. The U.S. supplies Taiwan with military equipment and warns China against any attempt to take it by force.

Still, Nixon's trip to China was touted afterward as the signature foreign policy achievement of an administration that ended in ignominy with Watergate.

Embarking on the process of bringing China back into the international fold was the right move, but the past half-century has yet to put relations on a stable track, said Rana Mitter, professor of Chinese history and modern politics at Oxford University.

"The U.S. and China have still failed to work out exactly how they will both fit into a world where they both have a role, but find it increasingly hard to accommodate each other," he said.

Chinese officials and scholars see the Nixon visit as a time when the two countries sought communication and mutual understanding despite their differences. Zhu Feng, the dean of the School of International Studies at Nanjing University, said the same approach is key to overcoming the current impasse.

"The commemoration of Nixon's visit tells us whether we can draw a kind of power from history," he said.

Though his trip to China gave the U.S. leverage in its Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union, America now faces a new geopolitical landscape — with echoes of the past.

The Soviet Union is gone, but the Russian and Chinese leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, are finding common cause as they push back against U.S. pressure over their authoritarian ways. The Vietnam War is over, but America once again finds its society divided, this time over the pandemic response and the last presidential election.

U.S. President Joe Biden has said he wants a more predictable relationship with China but major differences over trade and human rights make mutual understanding elusive. The prospect of long-term stability in ties raised by Nixon's visit seems to be ever farther out of reach.

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"China-U.S. relations are terrible," said Xiong Zhiyong, a professor of international relations at China Foreign Affairs University. "There are indeed people hoping to improve relations, but it is utterly difficult to achieve."

US says Russia closer to invading Ukraine, agrees to meeting

By LORI HINNANT, JIM HEINTZ and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia on Sunday rescinded earlier pledges to pull tens of thousands of its troops back from Ukraine's northern border, a move that U.S. leaders said put Russia another step closer to what they said was the planned invasion of Ukraine. Residents of Ukraine's capital filled a gold-domed cathedral to pray for peace.

Russia's action extends what it said were military exercises, originally set to end Sunday, that brought an estimated 30,000 Russian forces to Belarus, Ukraine's neighbor to the north. They are among at least 150,000 Russian troops now deployed outside Ukraine's borders, along with tanks, warplanes, artillery and other war materiel.

The continued deployment of the Russian forces in Belarus raised concern that Russia could send those troops to sweep down on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, a city of about 3 million people less than a three-hour drive away.

In what appeared to be a last-ditch diplomatic gambit brokered with the aid of French President Emmanuel Macron, the White House said U.S. President Joe Biden has agreed "in principle" to a meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin as long as he holds off on launching an assault that U.S. officials warn appears increasingly more likely.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the administration has been clear that "we are committed to pursuing diplomacy until the moment an invasion begins." U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov are set to meet on Thursday in Europe — as long as Russia does not send its troops into Ukraine beforehand.

"We are always ready for diplomacy. We are also ready to impose swift and severe consequences should Russia instead choose war," Psaki said in statement. "And currently, Russia appears to be continuing preparations for a full-scale assault on Ukraine very soon."

In Kyiv, life outwardly continued as usual for many on a mild winter Sunday, with brunches and church services, ahead of what Biden said late last week was an already decided-upon Russian attack.

Katerina Spanchak, who fled a region of eastern Ukraine when it was taken over by Russian-allied separatists, was among worshippers crowded into the capital's St. Michael's monastery, smoky with the candles burned by the faithful, to pray that Ukraine be spared.

"We all love life, and we are all united by our love of life," Spanchak said, pausing to compose herself. "We should appreciate it every day. That's why I think everything will be fine."

"Our joint prayers will help to elude this tragedy, which is advancing," said another worshipper, who identified himself only by his first name, Oleh.

A U.S. official said Sunday that Biden's assertion that Putin has made the decision to roll Russian forces into Ukraine was based on intelligence that Russian front-line commanders have been given orders to begin final preparations for an attack. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the sensitive intelligence.

The United States and many European countries have charged for weeks that Putin has built up the forces he needs to invade Ukraine — a westward-looking democracy that has sought to move out of Russia's orbit — and is now trying to create pretexts to invade.

Western nations have threatened massive sanctions if Putin does.

U.S. officials on Sunday defended their decision to hold off on their planned financial punishments of Russia ahead of any invasion, after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called passionately Saturday for the West to do more.

"If you pull the trigger on that deterrent, well then, it doesn't exist anymore as a deterrent," Pentagon

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spokesman John Kirby told Fox on Washington's sanctions threat.

Russia held nuclear drills Saturday as well as the conventional exercises in Belarus, and has ongoing naval drills off the coast in the Black Sea.

The announcement that Russia was reversing its pledge to withdraw its forces from Belarus came after two days of sustained shelling along a contact line between Ukraine's soldiers and Russian-allied separatists in eastern Ukraine, an area that Ukraine and the West worry could be the flashpoint in igniting conflict.

Biden convened the National Security Council at the White House on Russia's military buildup around Ukraine. White House officials released no immediate details of their roughly two hours of discussion.

"We're talking about the potential for war in Europe," U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris said earlier Sunday at a security conference in Munich, Germany, that saw urgent consultations among world leaders on the crisis. "It's been over 70 years, and through those 70 years ... there has been peace and security."

Zelenskyy on Sunday appealed on Twitter for a cease-fire. Russia has denied plans to invade, but the Kremlin did not respond to Zelenskyy's offer Saturday to meet with Putin.

After a call with Macron, Putin blamed Ukraine — incorrectly, according to observers there — for the escalation of shelling along the contact line and NATO for "pumping modern weapons and ammunition" into Ukraine.

Macron, a leader in European efforts to broker a peaceful resolution with Russia, also spoke separately to Zelenskyy, to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and to Biden.

Blinken intentionally raised the prospect of a Biden-Putin summit in interviews with U.S. television networks on Sunday, in a bid to keep diplomacy alive, a senior U.S. official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. reasoning.

Blinken said that Biden was "prepared to meet President Putin at any time in any format if that can help prevent a war" and the U.S. official said Macron had then conveyed the offer of talks to Putin — conditioned on Russia not invading — in his phone calls with the Russian leader.

Tensions mounted further, however. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow issued an advisory urging greater caution by Americans in Russia overall. "Have evacuation plans that do not rely on U.S. government assistance," it warned.

Immediate worries focused on eastern Ukraine, where Ukrainian forces have been fighting the pro-Russia rebels since 2014 in a conflict that has killed some 14,000 people.

In the eastern Ukraine regions of Lugansk and Donetsk, separatist leaders have ordered a full military mobilization and sent more civilians to Russia, which has issued about 700,000 passports to residents of the rebel-held territories. Claims that Russian citizens are being endangered might be used as justification for military action.

Officials in the separatist territories claimed Ukrainian forces launched several artillery attacks over the past day and that two civilians were killed during an unsuccessful assault on a village near the Russian border. Ukraine's military said two soldiers died in firing from the separatist side on Saturday.

"When tension is escalated to the maximum, as it is now, for example, on the line of contact, then any spark, any unplanned incident or any minor planned provocation can lead to irreparable consequences," Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said in an interview that aired Sunday on Russian state television.

On the front lines, Ukrainian soldiers said they were under orders not to return fire. Zahar Leshushun, peering into the distance with a periscope, had followed the news all day from a trench where he is posted near the town of Zolote.

"Right now, we don't respond to their fire because ..." the soldier said before the sound of an incoming shell interrupted him. "Oh! They are shooting at us now. They are aiming at the command post."

Analysis: China's bubble Olympics kept reality at a distance

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — They did it — that much seems obvious. But what, exactly, was the "it" that they did? China pulled off a logistically adept Olympics with very few mechanical glitches — no small affair in the

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pandemic era. It made that happen primarily by creating what it called, in inimitable Chinese government style, a “closed-loop system” — the now-renowned Olympic “bubble” designed to corral anyone affiliated with the Olympics and, just as important, keep them from infecting the rest of the country.

For these Games, the government made sure to put out the nice China. Inside the loop, all was amiable — fronted by young and enthusiastic volunteers, embodied by a cheerful fat panda mascot named Bing Dwen Dwen. The earnest men and women in hazmat suits were friendly, at least as far as one could tell underneath the masks and goggles and full-body plastic. Even the relatively few police encountered inside the bubble were, by Chinese law-enforcement standards, downright chatty.

And yet.

The closed-loop bubble removed a sizable portion of heart and soul from the 2022 Olympics — a global moment that in the best of circumstances is supposed to be overflowing with both. And here’s what it also did: created some convenient side effects that surely didn’t displease the Chinese authorities.

First, some background. For decades, the country’s Communist Party and government have honed a multipronged system of keeping visitors from seeing — and reporting on — what’s really going on across the astonishingly multifaceted nation that is China.

Since the bloody 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in particular, those who try to peer behind the curtain — be they journalists, activists or sometimes just curious tourists — are often blocked, slapped back or redirected to more innocuous locations and pursuits.

Today, international journalists living and working in China — if they’re not among those getting kicked out — have a challenging time piercing the official narrative and have to fashion innovative end runs to get at the more contentious topics.

For many years, “foreign affairs offices” in different Chinese cities, ostensibly designed to facilitate things for visitors, have in fact become official impediments in many cases. Many foreigners trying to travel solo to one of the places the central government considers restive — the western regions of Xinjiang and Tibet in particular — might well be thwarted.

And Chinese journalists? In a society where propaganda is positioned as patriotic rather than repugnant, they face perils and pressures that would be hard for anyone who grew up in a democracy to imagine.

So in a way, the Olympic bubble was the perfect microcosm of hide-all-the-blemishes business as usual, set against a globalized, mascot-saturated, winter-wonderland backdrop.

Regular international spectators weren’t permitted to come, which eliminated one random element. More saliently, thousands of visiting international Olympics journalists with prying eyes and rollicking story ideas were effectively prevented from any encounters with regular Chinese people other than a carefully vetted, inside-the-loop cadre of pre-approved representatives.

The reason, obviously, was COVID interdiction. But the outcomes are more than aligned with the goals and practices of Xi Jinping’s government.

This is not to imply that the bubble was created for anything other than COVID-19 interdiction. Certainly Tokyo had a system last year for its Summer Games that shared some characteristics with Beijing’s, though was much less hardcore, reflecting the differing types of governments that Japan and China have.

And as China readily points out, the bubble system worked. As of Saturday, the segregated system that effectively turned Beijing into two cities — one sequestered, one proceeding very much as normal — had produced only 463 positive results out of 1.85 million tests among thousands of visitors entering the bubble since Jan. 23.

“The success in insulating the event from the virus and keeping disruption to sports events to a minimum also reflected the effectiveness and flexibility of China’s overall zero-COVID policies,” the Global Times newspaper, which is pro-government even by Chinese standards, enthused.

So those “authoritarian Olympics” that human rights groups criticized and that some Western governments boycotted (even as they sent their athletes)? The bubble created to host them was, in some ways, not unlike the bubble town that the Marvel character Wanda Maximoff created in last year’s popular TV series “WandaVision.”

Like the fictional Westview, Bubble Beijing definitely had some things in common with reality, and sometimes you could glimpse the real world from inside. But it was shiny and closely calibrated and — unless you did some serious digging to find the seams — you couldn't really leave until the story played out.

Ultimately, the 2022 Winter Olympics enter the books with two dominant storylines. One is the sports story — a narrative dotted with the triumphs of Eileen Gu and Nathan Chen and Su Yiming, the sadness of Mikaela Shiffrin and the mess that is Russian figure skating.

The other, though, captured from inside that bubble, is the story of the Olympic host country. That one is a pandemic-era tale of apparent medical and logistical triumph on the surface, with a different reality floating below, sanitized for the government's protection and viewed, inevitably, through the COVID-flavored prism of our era — as if through a mask, goggles and a full-body plastic hazmat suit.

Beijing's Olympics close, ending safe but odd global moment

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — A pile of figure-skating rubble created by Russian misbehavior. A new Chinese champion — from California. An ace American skier who faltered and went home empty-handed. The end of the Olympic line for the world's most renowned snowboarder. All inside an anti-COVID "closed loop" enforced by China's authoritarian government.

The terrarium of a Winter Games that has been Beijing 2022 came to its end Sunday, capping an unprecedented Asian Olympic trifecta and sending the planet's most global sporting event off to the West for the foreseeable future, with no chance of returning to this corner of the world until at least 2030.

It was weird. It was messy and, at the same time, somehow sterile. It was controlled and calibrated in ways only Xi Jinping's China could pull off. And it was sequestered in a "bubble" that kept participants and the city around them — and, by extension, the sporadically watching world — at arm's length.

On Sunday night, Xi and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach stood together as Beijing handed off to Milan-Cortina, site of the 2026 Winter Games. "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" kicked off a notably Western-flavored show with Chinese characteristics as dancers with tiny, fiery snowflakes glided across the stadium in a ceremony that, like the opening, was headed by Chinese director Zhang Yimou.

Unlike the first pandemic Olympics in Tokyo last summer, which featured all but empty seats at the opening and closing, a modest but energetic crowd populated the seats of Beijing's "Bird's Nest" stadium. It felt somewhat incongruous — a show bursting with color and energy and enthusiasm and even joy, the very things that couldn't assert themselves inside China's COVID bubble.

"We welcome China as a winter sport country," Bach said, closing the Games. He called their organization "extraordinary" and credited the Chinese and their organizing committee for serving them up "in such an excellent way and a safe way."

By many mechanical measures, these Games were a success. They were, in fact, quite safe — albeit in the carefully modulated, dress-up-for-company way that authoritarian governments always do best. The local volunteers, as is usually the case, were delightful, helpful and engaging, and they received high-profile accolades at the closing.

There was snow — most of it fake, some of it real. The venues — many of them, like the Bird's Nest and the Aquatic Center, harvested from the 2008 edition of the Beijing Olympics — performed to expectations. One new locale, Big Air Shougang, carved from a repurposed steel mill, was an appealingly edgy mashup of winter wonderland and rust-belt industrial landscape.

TV ratings were down, but streaming viewership was up: By Saturday, NBC had streamed 3.5 billion minutes from Beijing, compared to 2.2 billion in South Korea in 2018.

There were no major unexpected logistical problems, only the ones created deliberately to stem the spread of COVID in the country where the coronavirus first emerged more than two years ago.

And stemmed it seemed to be. As of Saturday, the segregated system that effectively turned Beijing into two cities — one sequestered, one proceeding very much as normal — had produced only 463 positive tests among thousands of visitors entering the bubble since Jan. 23. Not surprisingly, the state-controlled

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media loved this.

"The success in insulating the event from the virus and keeping disruption to sports events to a minimum also reflected the effectiveness and flexibility of China's overall zero-COVID policies," the pro-government Global Times newspaper said, citing epidemiologists who say "the COVID-19 prevention experience accumulated from this Olympics can also inspire Chinese cities to adjust their policies."

Look deeper, though, and a different story emerges about these Games.

Internationally, many critiqued them as the "authoritarian Olympics" and denounced the IOC for holding them in concert with a government accused of gross human rights violations against ethnic Uyghurs and Tibetans in its far west and harsh policies against Hong Kong democracy activists off its southeastern coast. Several Western governments boycotted by not sending any official delegations, though they sent athletes.

For its part, China denied such allegations, as it typically does, and featured a Uyghur as part of its slate of Olympic torch-carriers for the opening ceremony Feb. 4.

And then, of course, there were the Russians. And doping. Again.

The 15-year-old Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva tested positive for using a banned heart medication. The result wasn't announced by anti-doping officials until after she'd won gold as part of the team competition, even though the sample was taken weeks earlier.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport cleared her to compete in the individual discipline, ruling that as a minor she had protected status. But Valieva, although heavily favored to win, fell several times during her free skate routine, landing her fourth place and prompting a cold reception from her embattled coach, Eteri Tutberidze.

"Rather than giving her comfort, rather than to try to help her, you could feel this chilling atmosphere, this distance," Bach said the next day, proclaiming his outrage.

Valieva's Russian teammates took gold and silver, but on a night of drama, even the winners were in tears. The affair produced one possible legacy for Beijing: Valieva's ordeal has inspired talk of raising the minimum age for Olympic skaters from 15 to 17 or 18.

American skier Mikaela Shiffrin also came to Beijing with high expectations, only to see them dashed when she failed to finish three races. She left without any medal at all. In an image to remember, the TV cameras captured Shiffrin sitting dejectedly on the snow, head in hands, for several minutes.

The 2022 Games were controversial from the moment the IOC awarded them to Beijing, the frequently snowless capital of a country without much of a winter sports tradition. Almaty, Kazakhstan, was the only other city in play after four other bids were withdrawn due to lack of local support or high cost.

Geopolitical tensions also shadowed these Games, with Russia's buildup of troops along its border with Ukraine spurring fears of war in Europe even as the "Olympic Truce" supposedly kicked in. In the closing, Bach said athletes "embraced each other even if your countries are divided by conflict," an apparent reference to a hug captured on camera between a Russian athlete and a Ukrainian one.

China swelled with pride, and its social media swelled with comments, as Eileen Gu, an America-born freestyle skier who chose to compete for China, her mother's native country, became an international superstar. Her three medals -- two gold, one silver -- set a new record for her sport, and adulation for Gu literally broke the Chinese internet at one point, briefly crashing the servers of Sina Weibo, the massive Twitter-like network.

And Chinese snowboarder Su Yiming, a former child actor, won over the home crowd with a dominant gold medal big air performance.

"The winter Olympics is a good platform to show the power of China," said Li Pengchong, a physician at Peking Union Medical College Hospital.

Other moments to remember from Beijing 2022:

— With a nearly perfect free skate and a record-setting short program, the 22-year-old figure skater Nathan Chen became the first American gold medalist in his sport since 2010.

— Snowboarding's best known rider, Shaun White, called it a career after finishing fourth in the halfpipe in his fifth Olympics, passing the torch to athletes like Su and the halfpipe gold medalist, Japan's Ayumu

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Hirano.

— American boarder and social media figure Chloe Kim won the gold in halfpipe for the second time, adding to her 2018 medal from Pyeongchang.

— Norway, a country whose total population of 5 million is less than one half of one percent of the host country's, led the medal count, as it often does. Russia was second, followed by Germany, Canada and the United States.

These third straight Games in Asia, after Pyeongchang in 2018 and the delayed Tokyo Summer Games six months ago, were also the second pandemic Games. And the 16,000 athletes and other international visitors who spent the entire time segregated from the host city behind tall chain-link fences couldn't help but see the countless signs trumpeting unremitting iterations of the Olympic slogan: "Together for a Shared Future."

But for much of these austere and distant Games, wintry not only in their weather but in their tenor itself, a post-pandemic shared future — the hug-and-harmony variety that the Olympics builds its entire multinational brand around — seemed all but out of reach.

At Olympics, cybersecurity worries linger in background

By KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Warnings to use disposable "burner" phones and laptops. Privacy-protecting software. Concerns about a security flaw in an official Games smartphone app.

Such precautions fueled unease about data privacy for competitors and attendees at the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Not everyone heeded them.

"Honestly, I've been coming to China for 12 years or whatever, and I'm not that important," Canadian snowboarder Mark McMorris said. "Maybe if I was a diplomat or something, then I'd switch out my phone."

Nefarious cyber activity is a flashpoint in the geopolitical rivalry between China and the West. Beijing has long been accused by the U.S. and technology watchdogs of widespread online snooping and data pilfering, allegations it denies.

Now that the Games are ending, and some 16,000 athletes, organizers, journalists and other visitors are heading home, concerns turn to what malware and other problems those who failed to heed the warnings might be carrying with them.

The good news: Cybersecurity firm Mandiant said there's been no sign of any "intrusion activity" tied to the Olympics by the Chinese or other governments.

But that shouldn't be taken as a sign that nothing happened, said Benjamin Read, Mandiant's director of cyber espionage analysis.

"Most compromises are detected weeks or months after they occur, so it's too early to say for sure that there were no incidents," he said.

It's also possible that the electronic surveillance was most important when visitors were in China, and wouldn't continue when those people went home, he said.

He advised anyone who travelled to China for the Winter Games to change their passwords when they get back and make sure that no unknown devices or services have access to their accounts.

"It's not always possible to know if a device has been compromised so it's best to take every precaution," he said.

Unfettered internet access is important for many amateur Olympic athletes who post photos and videos of their feats on Instagram and other social media sites. It can be critical for landing sponsors.

"I'm on my phone for sure. I think we're all on our phones," said Canadian snowboarder Laurie Blouin, who said she was "feeding the 'Grams."

McMorris said he was using his iPhone to stream TV shows, exchange chat messages and post on Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

And U.S.-born Chinese freestyle skiing sensation Eileen Gu has posted multiple times on Instagram since the Games began.

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When a user asked why she was able to use the app, which is blocked in China, Gu responded that "anyone can download a vpn," or virtual private network, software that scrambles communications so it can't be read by anyone except the recipient.

The posts, which later disappeared, sparked an online outcry over internet freedom, in part because VPNs aren't available in Chinese app stores after authorities cracked down on their use.

Some U.S. athletes said they were also using VPNs, which can be used to tunnel through China's so-called "Great Firewall" a censorship system which blocks websites, services and apps deemed inappropriate by authorities.

The U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee had told athletes that anything they do online while in China would be monitored. The Canadian Olympic Committee warned there was the potential for cybercrimes.

But while there weren't specific details about threats, experts said it most likely wasn't about getting a competitive edge at the games.

"The Chinese government is not interested in the average snowboarder," said Greg Austin, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"They are interested in collecting whatever data they have and putting it into a database on the chance that the snowboarder would become a politician or a leader in a position of influence," Austin said.

He added that it's not uncommon practice for intelligence services of any country.

Beijing was also likely monitoring for anything politically sensitive in Olympic visitors' communications, such as contact with dissidents, Austin said.

Journalists were arguably a juicier target than athletes, and many also brought burner devices.

The International Olympic Committee said cybersecurity is "an important aspect of hosting the Games" but that in order to maintain secure operations, it would not comment further.

At any rate, some participants who did take precautions were looking forward to resuming their daily diet of streaming and social media.

U.S. figure skater Mariah Bell was given a burner phone but had been staying off social media and Netflix, which she said was "both amazing and boring."

"I'm very excited to go home see my dog," she said, "see my family, go back to sitting on Instagram for hours."

Queen Elizabeth II tests positive for COVID; mild symptoms

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Queen Elizabeth II tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday and is experiencing mild, cold-like symptoms, Buckingham Palace said, adding that she still plans to carry on working. The diagnosis prompted concern and get-well wishes from across Britain's political spectrum for the famously stoic 95-year-old.

Britain's longest-reigning monarch and a fixture in the life of the nation, the queen reached the milestone of 70 years on the throne on Feb. 6, the anniversary of the 1952 death of her father, King George VI. She will turn 96 on April 21.

The palace said the queen, who has been fully vaccinated and had a booster shot, would continue with "light" duties at Windsor Castle over the coming week.

"She will continue to receive medical attention and will follow all the appropriate guidelines," the palace said in a statement.

People in the U.K. who test positive for COVID-19 are now required to self-isolate for at least five days, although the British government says it plans to lift that requirement for England this week.

Both the queen's eldest son Prince Charles, 73, and her 74-year-old daughter-in-law Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. Charles has since returned to work. There are also thought to be several recent virus cases among staff at Windsor Castle, where the queen is staying.

Paul Hunter, an infectious diseases expert at the University of East Anglia, said the queen would likely be given one of several antiviral drugs that have been approved in the U.K. to treat COVID-19.

"If you do get them early enough, it does reduce the risk of severe disease developing, so I would imagine

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any doctor for a patient in their 90s would be considering giving these antivirals," he said.

A host of senior British politicians sent get-well messages on Sunday. Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted: "I'm sure I speak for everyone in wishing Her Majesty The Queen a swift recovery from COVID and a rapid return to vibrant good health."

Health Secretary Sajid Javid wrote that he was "Wishing Her Majesty The Queen a quick recovery," while opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer wished the queen "good health and a speedy recovery. Get well soon, Ma'am."

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison also sent well-wishes. "We wish her a full recovery and there are few more resilient people than Her Majesty. She has demonstrated that over a long lifetime," Morrison said Monday, according to Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Elizabeth has been in robust health for most of her reign and has been photographed riding a horse as recently as 2020. In the past year she has been seen using a walking stick, and in October she spent a night in a London hospital for unspecified tests.

The queen's doctors ordered her to rest after that and she was forced to cancel appearances at several key events, including Remembrance Sunday services and the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland in November.

This month she returned to public duties and has held audiences both virtually and in person with diplomats, politicians and senior military officers. During one exchange caught on camera last week, she walked slowly with a stick and said "as you can see I can't move" in apparent reference to her leg.

The queen delivered two televised messages to the nation early in the pandemic in 2020, and has sought to lead by example. She let it be known she had been vaccinated, and last year sat alone during the funeral of her husband of 72 years, Prince Philip, because of coronavirus restrictions.

Joe Little, managing editor of Majesty magazine, said members of the royal family are probably more concerned than the queen about her situation.

"I would guess that she will be matter-of-fact about the diagnosis in a way perhaps that the people around her are less matter-of-fact," he said.

The queen has a busy schedule over the next few months of her Platinum Jubilee year, and is scheduled to attend in-person public engagements in the coming weeks, including a diplomatic reception at Windsor on March 2 and the Commonwealth Service at Westminster Abbey on March 14.

On March 29, she has a remembrance service at Westminster Abbey for Philip, who died in April 2021 at 99.

Public celebrations of the Platinum Jubilee are scheduled over a long weekend June 2-5, with festivities including a military parade, a day of horse racing and neighborhood parties.

The queen is the latest monarch from around the world to catch COVID-19. Queen Margrethe of Denmark, 82, and Spain's King Felipe VI, 54, both tested positive for the illness earlier in February and had mild symptoms.

Her diagnosis comes after a difficult week for Britain's royal family.

On Tuesday the queen's second son, Prince Andrew, settled a U.S. lawsuit brought by a woman who claimed he had sexually abused with her when she was 17 and traveling with the late financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Andrew strenuously denied the claim by Virginia Giuffre. He agreed in a settlement to make a substantial donation to his accuser's charity.

On Wednesday, London's Metropolitan Police launched an investigation into allegations that people associated with one of Prince Charles' charities offered to help a Saudi billionaire secure honors and citizenship in return for donations.

Human rights? China won that Winter Olympics battle. Almost.

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — When three-time Olympian Gus Kenworthy took the remarkable, perhaps even brave decision to speak out against "human rights atrocities" while still in China at the Winter Games, the self-proclaimed "loud and obnoxious" British skier also proved that other athletes, had they chosen,

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perhaps could have used their Olympic platform to pipe up, too.

Because Kenworthy wasn't hauled away and imprisoned, as Chinese critics of the ruling Communist Party routinely are. Doing so would have generated exactly the sort of global focus on the Chinese government's authoritarian methods that it sought to avoid while global sports' biggest show was in town.

And with the notable exception of Kenworthy, China largely accomplished that mission.

Olympians with any qualms about chasing medals in a country accused of genocide against its Muslim Uyghur population and of other abuses kept their views on those topics to themselves for the durations of their stay. And perhaps for good reason: They faced vague but, as it turned out, undeployed Chinese threats of punishment, constant surveillance and the sobering example of tennis star Peng Shuai's difficulties after she voiced allegations of forced sex against a Communist Party official.

"We have seen an effective silencing of 2,800 athletes, and that's scary," said Noah Hoffman, a former U.S. Olympic skier and board member of the Global Athlete advocacy group pushing for Olympic reform.

Kenworthy, speaking to The Associated Press before his 8th-place finish in the halfpipe final on the Games' penultimate day, laid out why.

"We're in China, so we play by China's rules. And China makes their rules as they go, and they certainly have the power to kind of do whatever they want: Hold an athlete, stop an athlete from leaving, stop an athlete from competing," he said.

"I've also been advised to sort of tread lightly while I am here and that's what I am trying to do."

Immediately after competing, however, the proudly gay athlete's gloves came off.

He prefaced criticism with praise for China's "incredible job with this Olympics" and carefully calibrated his words. But unlike other Olympians, he couldn't bite his tongue until he got home. Kenworthy aimed jabs not only at the host country's rights abuses and "poor stance on LGBTQ rights" but also at other athletes he said try "to appeal to the masses" and avoid ruffling feathers.

"I've already kind of accepted that that's not what I'm gonna do," he said. "I'm just gonna speak my truth."

In fairness, Olympians found themselves squeezed on all sides in Beijing. Campaigners abroad hoped they would spark global outrage over the imprisonment in re-education camps of an estimated 1 million people or more, most of them Uyghurs. China, backed to the hilt by the International Olympic Committee, didn't want critical voices to be heard. And their own voices told athletes to focus, focus, focus on the pursuit of Olympic success that they, their coaches and families sacrificed for.

The sweep and vagueness of a Chinese official's threat before the Games of "certain punishment" for "any behavior or speech that is against the Olympic spirit" appeared to have a particularly sobering effect on Beijing-bound teams. Campaigners who met with athletes in the United States in the weeks before their departure, lobbying them about Uyghurs and the crushing of dissent in Tibet and Hong Kong, noticed the chill.

"Prior to the statement, we had been engaging with quite a few athletes," said Pema Doma, campaigns director at Students for a Free Tibet. They "were expressing a lot of interest in learning more and being engaged in the human rights issue."

Afterward, "there was a very, very distinct difference" and "one athlete even said to an activist directly: 'I've been instructed not to take anything from you or speak to you,'" she said in a phone interview.

Other concerns also weighed on Olympians, way beyond the usual anxieties that often come with travel to a foreign land, away from home comforts.

Warnings of possible cyber-snooping by Chinese security services and team advisories that athletes leave electronic devices at home were alarming for a generation weaned on social media and constant connectivity with their worlds.

Also wearing were daily coronavirus tests that were mandatory — and invasive, taken with swabs to the back of the throat — for all Olympians, locked inside a tightly policed bubble of health restrictions to prevent infection spreads. The penalty for testing positive was possible quarantine and missed competition, a terrible blow for winter athletes who often toil outside of the limelight, except every four years at the Games.

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"Who knows where those tests go, who handles the results," Kenworthy said. "It's definitely in the back of the mind."

"And there's like all the cybersecurity stuff. It is concerning," he told The AP.

Often, athletes simply blanked when asked about human rights, saying they weren't qualified to speak on the issue or were focused on competition, and hunkered down.

On Twitter, Dutch speedskater Sanne in 't Hof blocked, unblocked and then blocked again a Uyghur living in the Netherlands who posted critical comments of Olympians in what he called "genocide" Games. Mirehmet Ablet shared a screengrab with The AP showing that the skater had barred him from accessing her account, where she tweeted that she "enjoyed every second!" of her first Olympics. Ablet's brother was arrested in 2017 in the Uyghur homeland of Xinjiang in far western China, and Ablet doesn't know where he's now held.

Other athletes also were effusive in praising their China experience. "Nothing short of amazing," said U.S. speedskating bronze-medal winner Brittany Bowe.

Hoffman, who competed for the U.S. at the 2014 and 2018 Games, said internal politics within teams may also have dissuaded athletes from speaking critically. Coaches can bench athletes who bring unwanted attention and "there's pressure from your teammates to not cause a distraction," he said in a phone interview. Athletes with self-confidence dented by sub-par performances may also have felt that they'd lost any platform.

"There's lots of really subtle pressure," Hoffman said.

He expects some athletes won't be critical once home, so as to not disrespect the cheerful and helpful Games workers.

But he's hopeful others will speak up on their return and that "we do get a chorus."

Feeling unmuzzled, some already are.

Back in Sweden with his two gold medals in speedskating, Nils van der Poel told the Aftonbladet newspaper that although he had "a very nice experience behind the scenes," hosting the Games in China was "terrible." He drew parallels with the 1936 Summer Olympics in Nazi Germany and Russia hosting the Sochi Olympics before seizing control of the Crimean peninsula in 2014.

"It is extremely irresponsible," van der Poel said, "to give it to a country that violates human rights as clearly as the Chinese regime does."

Cindric wins Daytona 500 to celebrate Penske's 85th birthday

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Roger Penske had one rule at the Daytona 500 for his drivers: Do Not Wreck Each Other.

His orders were followed Sunday night when Austin Cindric worked with teammate Ryan Blaney over the closing laps to win the Daytona 500 as a celebration of Penske's 85th birthday.

It was just one year ago that Penske drivers Cindric, Joey Logano and Brad Keselowski all crashed while racing for the win on the final lap at Daytona International Speedway. It took time for tempers to thaw as Penske made his expectations clear to his drivers.

"We had talked for weeks after last year, when we were one-two and ended up in the fence," Penske said. "I said, 'Look, the best man wins at the end. I think we've got to work together.'"

"They played ball, and Austin won."

Cindric was the leader at the start of the two-lap overtime shootout with Blaney beside him. He was driving the No. 2 Ford, the flagship car at Team Penske that was vacated at the end of last season when Keselowski left the organization, and now Keselowski was behind him determined not to get beaten by his replacement.

But Cindric switched lanes as soon as he'd cleared Blaney to drop in front of his teammate so the duo could hook together for two final trips around the track. Blaney made one desperate attempt up high to get around Cindric, but Cindric threw a huge block that forced Blaney into the outside wall.

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Bubba Wallace then surged even with Cindric in the bottom lane, forcing Cindric to forget about Blaney behind him and focus on beating Wallace to the finish line.

"Oh, my God. I've got so many people to thank," a stunned Cindric said after climbing from his car and saluting the capacity crowd of some 120,000 spectators. "First and foremost Roger Penske, happy birthday!"

Then Cindric remembered Blaney, who gave him a winning push but finished fourth.

"Appreciate Ryan being a great teammate," Cindric said. "Obviously, he wants to win this one."

Blaney was clear on the Penske expectations — "I wanted to try to win the race for Roger Penske. Whether that was me or another car, that's what I was doing," — and didn't have much to say after the race about Cindric's block.

"I don't know. Congrats to him, I guess," Blaney said. "You've got to throw a block in that situation."

It was the first career Cup victory for the 23-year-old Cindric, who was promoted from the Xfinity Series to replace Keselowski and run for NASCAR's rookie of the year honors.

The win was the third Daytona 500 victory for Penske, who also picked up the trophy in 2008 with Ryan Newman and 2015 with Logano. Ford Motor Co. has won the Daytona 500 17 times, including two in a row. Wallace finished second for the second time in his career in the Daytona 500.

"What could have been, right?" Wallace said. "Just dejected."

A trio of Ford drivers rounded out the top five with Chase Briscoe third, followed by Blaney and Aric Almirola.

Kyle Busch was sixth to join Wallace as the only Toyota drivers in the top 10. Michael McDowell was seventh, followed by David Ragan and Keselowski, and finally Chase Elliott in the only Chevrolet to finish inside the top 10.

Cindric, meanwhile, gave his family another one of the crown jewel trophies in motorsports. He's the son of Tim Cindric, the president of Penske's racing organization, and the maternal grandson of the late Jim Trueman, who fielded Bobby Rahal's winning car in the 1986 Indianapolis 500. Trueman died of cancer 10 days after the win at age 51.

Tim Cindric watched the finish from a suite high above the speedway alongside Penske and other team executives. Penske said his longtime executive finally showed some emotion during overtime.

"I always kid him, I say, 'You've got to be a little more excited.' Well, he was excited today, really," Penske said. "He even got out of his cool, calm way. I think he said, 'I'm going to really celebrate; my boy won the Daytona 500.'"

During the victory lane celebration, the father said his son's victory was still sinking in.

"We've had the chance in our family to experience nine Indy 500s, and a lot of other things," Tim Cindric said. "But, obviously, nothing tops when your kids accomplish their goals. To me, that's the biggest thing, watching your kid accomplish their goal along with all these people that believed in him."

Cindric is considered the first rookie to win the Daytona 500, although Trevor Bayne won in 2011 but was not eligible to run for rookie of the year in the Cup Series. Cindric made his Daytona 500 debut in last year's race, which was decided by a last-lap collision that collected Cindric and his Penske teammates. All the Penske cars ended last year's race in a ball of fire.

"I just wanted one of them to win. When they were coming to the line, I was afraid we were going to end up like last year," Tim Cindric said. "I just wanted one of our guys to bring it home."

Canada's protests settle down, but could echo in politics

By ROB GILLIES and TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — The streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet now. The Ottawa protesters who vowed never to give up are largely gone, chased away by police in riot gear. The relentless blare of truckers' horns has gone silent.

But the trucker protest, which grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital city for weeks, could echo for years in Canadian politics and perhaps south of the border.

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The protest, which was first aimed at a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers but also encompassed fury over the range of COVID-19 restrictions and hatred of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, reflected the spread of disinformation in Canada and simmering populist and right-wing anger.

"I think we've started something here," said Mark Sutor, a 33-year-old protester from Hamilton, Ontario, speaking as police retook control of the streets around Parliament. Protesters had essentially occupied those streets for more than three weeks, embarrassing Trudeau and energizing Canada's far right. Sutor believes the protests will divide the country, something he welcomes.

"This is going to be a very big division in our country," he said. "I don't believe this is the end."

While most analysts doubt the protests will mark a historic watershed in Canadian politics, it has shaken both of Canada's two major parties.

"The protest has given both the Liberals and the Conservatives a black eye," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. Trudeau's Liberals look bad for allowing protesters to foment weeks of chaos in the capital city, he said, while the Conservatives look bad for championing protesters, many of them from the farthest fringes of the right.

The conservatives "have to be careful not to alienate more moderate voters, who are generally not sympathetic to the protesters or right-wing populism more generally," said Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal.

The self-styled Freedom Convoy shook Canada's reputation for civility, inspired convoys in France, New Zealand and the Netherlands and interrupted trade, causing economic damage on both sides of the border. Hundreds of trucks eventually occupied the streets around Parliament, a display that was part protest and part carnival.

Authorities moved quickly to reopen the border posts, but police in Ottawa did little but issue warnings until the past couple days, even as hundreds and sometimes thousands of protesters clogged the streets of the city and besieged Parliament Hill.

Truckers ignored warnings that they were risking arrest and could have their rigs seized and bank accounts frozen under the new emergency powers invoked by Trudeau. The truckers, parked on the streets in and around Parliament, blared their horns in defiance of a court injunction against honking, issued after residents said the constant noise was making the neighborhood unlivable.

"It's high time that these illegal and dangerous activities stop," Trudeau declared in Parliament a few days ago, speaking just a few hundred meters from the protests.

On Friday, authorities launched the largest police operation in Canadian history, arresting a string of Ottawa protesters and increasing that pressure on Saturday until the streets in front of Parliament were clear. Eventually, police arrested at least 191 people and towed away 79 vehicles. Many protesters retreated as the pressure increased.

The Ottawa protests — the movement's last major stronghold — appeared to be largely over by Sunday. Fencing and police checkpoints remained.

"The number of unlawful protesters has dramatically declined in the last 24 hours," Ottawa interim Police Chief Steve Bell said.

Authorities also said 206 bank accounts had been frozen under the power granted by federal emergencies act.

Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said progress has been made but the end of the blockades might not be over. He said that targeted measures in the emergencies act allowed police to designate a wide swath of Ottawa's downtown core to become a no-go zone and that tool alone has been extremely effective.

"For the first time in three weeks the streets are calm, they are quiet and they are clear. That all followed the invocation of the emergencies act," Mendicino said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We will not use it for a single minute longer than we have to."

Mendicino said the financial accounts of those who refused to leave will remain frozen while the act is in force but added that it is up to police to decide whose accounts get frozen. The powers are already in effect but Parliament is expected to ratify the action Monday.

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As it did in the United States, COVID-19 quickly became a political issue in Canada.

Coronavirus health restrictions became a political cudgel for Canada's far right, which accused Trudeau of authoritarianism. But while the restrictions clearly benefitted the far-right People's Party of Canada, things are more complicated in the Conservative Party.

Only recently have some Conservative leaders fully embraced the pushback against vaccine mandates and coronavirus restrictions.

Even so, the protests may open the door to the sort of populism that former President Donald Trump used to vault himself into the White House.

Pierre Poilievre, who is running to become the next leader of the Conservative party, has cheered on the protesters, gambling that voters will back him. But it remains unclear whether that will get him to the top of the party, or whether it would help or hurt him if there is a showdown between him and Trudeau or the next Liberal party leader.

"Poilievre is clearly playing by the populist playbook right now," said Béland. "If he becomes Conservative leader, the party might effectively shift towards Trump-style populism. However, it's unclear whether enough Canadians support this vision to make it appealing beyond the party's base."

The protests have been cheered on in the U.S. by Fox News personalities and conservatives like Trump. Millions of dollars in donations have flowed across the border to the protesters.

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. Prominent Republican politicians have praised the protesters.

But experts say the U.S. support of the Canadian protesters is really aimed at energizing conservative politics in the U.S., where midterm elections are looming.

Meanwhile, though the situation in Ottawa appeared to be ending, there were new signs the protests had not died out entirely.

The Canadian border agency warned late Saturday afternoon that operations at a key truck crossing from western Canada into the United States had been slowed by protesters, advising travelers to find a different route.

Huge opal sells for nearly \$144,000 at Alaska auction

Associated Press undefined

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — A gemstone, billed as one of the largest gem-quality opals in existence, was sold for \$143,750 at auction in Alaska on Sunday.

The opal, dubbed the "Americus Australis," weighs more than 11,800 carats, according to the auction house Alaska Premier Auctions & Appraisals. It also has a long history.

Most recently, it was kept in a linen closet in a home in Big Lake, north of Anchorage, by Fred von Brandt, who mines for gold in Alaska and whose family has deep roots in the gem and rock business.

The opal is larger than a brick and is broken into two pieces, which von Brandt said was a practice used decades ago to prove gem quality.

Von Brandt said the stone has been in his family since the late 1950s, when his grandfather bought it from an Australian opal dealer named John Altmann.

Von Brandt said the opal for decades was in the care of his father, Guy von Brandt, who decided it had been "locked up long enough, that it's time to put it back out in the world and see what interest it can generate."

"He entrusted me to figure out which direction we wanted to go to part with the stone," von Brandt told The Associated Press.

The family, with roots in California, exhibited the stone at gem shows for years, until the early 1980s, he said. His father then branched out into furniture and displayed it at his shop. Guy von Brandt eventually moved to Oregon and kept the stone "kind of tucked away" for many years, von Brandt said.

Von Brandt said he brought it with him to Alaska over a year ago as he weighed the best approach to

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a possible sale. He said he went with Alaska Premier Auctions & Appraisals because he thought it would get more attention from the newer company than a larger auction house. The sale is set for Sunday.

Nick Cline, a partner and appraisal specialist with Alaska Premier Auctions & Appraisals, said the family has documentation surrounding the provenance of the opal. As part of his research, he contacted Fiona Altmann, granddaughter of John Altmann and general manager of Altmann + Cherny in Sydney, Australia.

Altmann said her grandfather, in his business dealings, made regular trips to Europe and the U.S.

Altmann said when Cline emailed her, she was skeptical; the name of the stone, in particular, threw her. But she said she started digging and discovered "something with my grandfather's handwriting with the picture of the opal with the word 'Americus Australis.'"

"I with 100% certainty know that their provenance information is 100% accurate" because it lines up with information she has, she said.

The auction house said the stone was discovered in the same field in Australia as the opal known as the "Olympic Australis," which weighs 17,000 carats and is on permanent display in Altmann's shop. The Olympic had been among the stones that John Altmann and partner Rudi Cherny acquired in 1956, according to Altmann's company.

The auction company sought a minimum bid of \$125,000 during Sunday's auction. Cline said it was a "calculated risk," with the company going with what it sees as a conservative approach in hopes of garnering the most attention.

"We were honored to conduct the auction of this unique, one-of-a-kind specimen," Cline said after the auction.

The sale includes a smaller piece of the opal that von Brandt said his father cut off to be worn or displayed.

US virus cases, hospitalizations continue steady decline

By LEAH WILLINGHAM and JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

Average daily COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are continuing to fall in the U.S., an indicator that the omicron variant's hold is weakening across the country.

Total confirmed cases reported Saturday barely exceeded 100,000, a sharp downturn from around 800,850 five weeks ago on Jan. 16, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

In New York, the number of cases went down by more than 50% over the last two weeks.

"I think what's influencing the decline, of course, is that omicron is starting to run out of people to infect," said Dr. Thomas Russo, professor and infectious disease chief at the University of Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

COVID-19 hospitalizations are down from a national seven-day average of 146,534 on Jan. 20 to 80,185 the week ending in Feb 13, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID data tracker.

Public health experts say they are feeling hopeful that more declines are ahead and that the country is shifting from being in a pandemic to an 'endemic' that is more consistent and predictable. However, many expressed concern that vaccine uptick in the U.S. has still been below expectations, concerns that are exacerbated by the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

Dr. William Schaffner of Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine said Sunday that the downturn in case numbers and hospitalizations is encouraging. He agreed that it likely has a lot to do with herd immunity.

"There are two sides to omicron's coin," he said. "The bad thing is that it can spread to a lot of people and make them mildly ill. The good thing is it can spread to a lot of people and make them mildly ill, because in doing so, it has created a lot of natural immunity."

However, Schaffner said it's much too early to "raise the banner of mission accomplished." As a public health expert, he said he'll be more comfortable if the decline sustains itself for another month or two.

"If I have a concern, it's that taking off the interventions, the restrictions, may be happening with a bit more enthusiasm and speed than makes me comfortable," he said. "My own little adage is, better to wear the mask for a month too long, than to take the mask off a month too soon and all of a sudden get another surge."

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Officials in many states are cutting back on restrictions, saying they are moving away from treating the coronavirus pandemic as a public health crisis and instead shifting to policy focused on prevention.

During a Friday news conference, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox announced that the state would be transitioning into what he called a "steady state" model starting in April in which Utah will close mass testing sites, report COVID-19 case counts on a more infrequent basis and advise residents to make personal choices to manage the risk of contracting the virus.

"Now, let me be clear, this is not the end of COVID, but it is the end — or rather the beginning — of treating COVID as we do other seasonal respiratory viruses," the Republican said.

Also on Friday, Boston lifted the city's proof of vaccine policy, which required patrons and staff of indoor spaces to show proof of vaccination.

"This news highlights the progress we've made in our fight against Covid-19 thanks to vaccines & boosters," Boston Mayor Michelle Wu said via Twitter.

Dr. Amy Gordon Bono, a Nashville primary care physician, said now is not the time to lessen vaccination efforts, but to double down on them. In the spring of 2021 when vaccines were becoming more readily available, the U.S. was "eager to declare COVID independence," she said. Then came the delta and omicron surges.

Bono, who attended medical school at Tulane University in New Orleans, said the U.S. should approach COVID like hurricane season.

"You have to learn to live with COVID and you have to learn from it," she said.

One challenge is that each region has a unique landscape, she said. In the American South, for example, many restrictions have been lifted for a while or never existed in the first place. Yet it's also a region with relatively lower vaccination rates.

"We've suffered so much and if there's a way to help appease future suffering, it's having a more vaccinated community," she said.

In Buffalo, Russo said he sees two possible future outcomes. In one, the U.S. experiences a fairly quiet spring and summer while immunity is still strong. He said in that scenario, it's likely immunity will wane and there will be a bump of new cases in the cooler months during flu season, but hopefully not a severe surge.

In the second — the one concerning public health experts — a new variant evolves and evades the immunity wall that was built up from both omicron infections and vaccinations.

"Whether such a variant can evolve is the big question, right?" he said. "That is the concern that we'll have to see through. Omicron was the first version of that, and there is this sort of adage that 'well, over time, viruses evolve to be less virulent,' but that's not really true. Viruses evolve to be able to infect us."

Pompeii: Rebirth of Italy's dead city that nearly died again

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

POMPEII, Italy (AP) — In a few horrible hours, Pompeii was turned from a vibrant city into an ash-embalmed wasteland, smothered by a furious volcanic eruption in A.D. 79.

Then in this century, the excavated Roman city appeared alarmingly close to a second death, assailed by decades of neglect, mismanagement and scant systematic maintenance of the heavily visited ruins. The 2010 collapse of a hall where gladiators trained nearly cost Pompeii its coveted UNESCO World Heritage Site designation.

But these days, Pompeii is experiencing the makings of a rebirth.

Excavations undertaken as part of engineering stabilization strategies to prevent new collapses are yielding a raft of revelations about the everyday lives of Pompeii's residents, as the lens of social class analysis is increasingly applied to new discoveries.

Under the archaeological park's new director, innovative technology is helping restore some of Pompeii's nearly obliterated glories and limit the effects of a new threat: climate change.

Gabriel Zuchtriegel, an archaeologist who was appointed director general 10 months ago, likens Pompeii's rapid deterioration, starting in the 1970s, to "an airplane going down to the ground and really risking

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breaking" apart.

The Great Pompeii Project, an infusion of about 105 million euros (\$120 million) in European Union funds — on condition it be spent promptly and effectively by 2016 — helped spare the ruins from further degradation.

"It was all spent and spent well," Zuchtriegel said in an interview on a terrace with Pompeii's open-air Great Theater as a backdrop.

But with future conservation problems inevitable for building remains first excavated 250 years ago, new technology is crucial in this "battle against time," the 41-year-old told The Associated Press.

Climate extremes, including increasingly intense rainfall and spells of baking heat, could threaten Pompeii.

"Some conditions are changing and we can already measure this," said Zuchtriegel.

Relying on human eyes to discern signs of climate-caused deterioration on mosaic floors and frescoed walls in about 10,000 excavated rooms of villas, workshops and humble homes would be impossible. So artificial intelligence and drones will provide data and images in real time.

Experts will be alerted to "take a closer look and eventually intervene before things happen, before we get back to this situation where buildings are collapsing," Zuchtriegel said.

Since last year, AI and robots are tackling what otherwise would be impossible tasks — reassembling frescoes that have crumbled into the tiniest of fragments. Among the goals is reconstructing the frescoed ceiling of the House of the Painters at Work, shattered by Allied bombing during World War II.

Robots will also help repair fresco damage in the Schola Armaturarum — the gladiators' barracks — once symbolizing Pompeii's modern-day deterioration and now celebrated as evidence of its revival. The weight of tons of unexcavated sections of the city pressing against excavated ruins, combined with rainfall accumulation and poor drainage, prompted the structure's collapse.

Seventeen of Pompeii's 66 hectares (42 of 163 acres) remain unexcavated, buried deep under lava stone. A long-running debate revolves on whether they should stay there.

At the start of the 19th century, the approach was "let's ... excavate all of Pompeii," Zuchtriegel said.

But in the decades before the Great Pompeii Project, "there was something like a moratorium — because we have so many problems we won't excavate any more," Zuchtriegel said. "And it was almost like, psychologically speaking, a depression."

His predecessor, Massimo Osanna, took a different approach: targeted digs during stabilization measures aimed at preventing further collapses.

"But it was a different kind of excavation. It was part of a larger approach where we have the combination of protection, research and accessibility," Zuchtriegel said.

After the gladiator hall's collapse, engineers and landscapers created gradual slopes out of the land fronting excavated ruins with netting, keeping the newly-shaped "hillsides" from crumbling.

Near the end of Via del Vesuvio, one of Pompeii's stone-paved streets, work in 2018 revealed an upscale domus, or home, with a bedroom wall decorated with a small, sensual fresco depicting the Roman god Jupiter disguised as a swan and impregnating Leda, the mythical queen of Sparta and mother of Helen of Troy.

But if visitors stand on tiptoe to look past the marvelous fresco over the home's jagged walls, they'll see how the back rooms remain embedded under the newly "stabilized" unexcavated edge of Pompeii.

Nearby is the most crowd-pleasing discovery to emerge from the shoring-up project — a corner "thermopolium" with a countertop setup similar to current salad-and-soup bar arrangements.

This fast-food locale is the only one discovered with frescoes in vivid hues of mustard-yellow and the omnipresent Pompeii red decorating the counter's base — apparently advertising the chef's specialties and including a bawdy graffito. Judging by the organic remains found in containers, the menu featured concoctions with ingredients like fish, snails and goat meat.

Quick street meals were likely a mainstay of the vast majority of Pompeiians not affluent enough to have kitchens.

Archaeologists have been increasingly using social-class and gender analyses to help interpret the past.

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When they explored an ancient villa on Pompeii's outskirts, a 16-square-meter (172-square-foot) room emerged. It had doubled as the villa's storeroom and the sleeping quarters for a family of enslaved people. Crammed into the room were three beds, fashioned from cord and wood. Judging by the dimensions, a shorter bed was for a child.

When the discovery was announced last year, Zuchriegel described it as a "window on the precarious reality of people who rarely appeared in historical sources" about Pompeii.

This winter, an afternoon guided tour is offered at sites not otherwise open to the public. One such offering is the House of the Little Pig. On a wall of a tiny kitchen is a whimsical painted design of a pig's head with a prominent snout.

The park's ambitions stretch further: Nearby Naples and its sprawling suburbs ringing Vesuvius suffer from organized crime and high youth unemployment, which drives many young people to emigrate.

So the archaeological park is bringing together students from the area's more elite institutions and from working class neighborhoods who attend trade schools to perform a classical Greek play at the Great Theater.

"We ... can try to contribute to a change," Zuchriegel said.

There are also plans to create public strolling grounds in an unexcavated section of ancient Pompeii which, until recently, had been used as an illegal dump and even a marijuana farm.

Being the 1st: What it's like to make Supreme Court history

By JESSICA GRESKO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sandra Day O'Connor was nervous when she joined the Supreme Court in 1981 as the nation's first female justice.

"It's all right to be the first to do something, but I didn't want to be the last woman on the Supreme Court," O'Connor said in 2012. "If I took the job and did a lousy job it would take a long time to get another one, so it made me very nervous about it."

Now, President Joe Biden is preparing to put another woman in the role of a historic first on the court. The person he wants to be first Black female justice will become an instant celebrity — and face a unique set of pressures.

Just being the new justice on the nine-member court can be an adjustment. Justice Amy Coney Barrett recently described learning the job as "like learning to ride a bike with everybody watching you." The court's newest justice — the fifth woman in the court's history — said in an appearance this month that "being a public figure is a lot to get used to."

That will only be magnified for Biden's nominee, who will immediately join the ranks of court firsts.

They include Roger B. Taney, the court's first Catholic, in 1836. Louis Brandeis was the court's first Jewish member, in 1916. Thurgood Marshall was the court's first Black justice, in 1967. Justice Sonia Sotomayor became its first Latina justice in 2009.

Sotomayor acknowledged in a 2018 public appearance that she felt the weight of being the only woman of color on the court, calling it a "really big burden" and "a great responsibility."

"I think there are, for women in general, the need for role models," she said, citing O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the court's second female justice, as having inspired her. "But for women of color, people in top positions are not as frequent and certainly not as numerous."

Women, and in particular Black women, often feel pressure to be the most qualified in the room to overcome the outsize criticism and questions surrounding their fitness they can attract.

"They have to be so perfect as to shield themselves from the criticism," said Maya Sen, a political scientist at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government who studies the issues of gender and race and the law.

Sotomayor almost decided not to go through with her own nomination to the court. Deeply hurt by articles after her nomination that suggested she was not smart enough and not very nice in the courtroom, she thought about pulling out of the process. It was at that point, however, that a friend with an 8-year-old daughter told her: "This is not about you, dummy. ... This is about my daughter, who needs to

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see somebody like herself be in a position of power." Sotomayor stayed in.

Already, Democrats have built up expectations around the yet-to-be-named nominee.

Biden has said he will nominate "someone with extraordinary qualifications, character, experience and integrity." White House press secretary Jen Psaki says she will have "impeccable experience." Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal, among the Democrats who met with Biden about the nomination earlier this month, said he expected the nominee will "really help unite the country."

Some Republicans, including former Vice President Mike Pence, have criticized Biden's pledge to name a Black woman to the court. Texas Sen. Ted Cruz called it "offensive," though he pledged on "Fox News Sunday" to "consider that nominee on the record" and said the Senate would focus on "substance and what kind of justice she would make."

Senate Democrats expect to be able to confirm Biden's nominee on their own, but they and the president would like to see bipartisan support. The three top contenders for the job are Ketanji Brown Jackson, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit; Leandra Kruger, a member of the California Supreme Court; and J. Michelle Childs, a federal judge in South Carolina. Biden has said he will announce his selection by the end of the month.

Marshall was already a legendary civil rights figure that by the time he joined the court, which was just the latest in a series of historic accomplishments. Mark Tushnet, a former Marshall clerk who compiled a book of Marshall's speeches and writings, said he cannot recall the justice ever expressly talking about being the first Black person on the court.

Marshall has schools and courthouse buildings named after him. In Sotomayor's case, a public housing development she lived in growing up was renamed in her honor. Marshall and Brandeis are among the justices the U.S. Postal Service has honored with stamps.

As for mail generally, Biden's future justice can expect to get a lot — not only congratulations but also speaking requests. Sotomayor got bins and bins of mail. O'Connor got truckloads. The vast majority of writers were supportive, but a few men angry at O'Connor's appointment sent naked pictures of themselves, author Evan Thomas wrote in his biography of her, "First."

O'Connor largely shrugged off the crude protest. One of her sons, Jay O'Connor, said his mother's answer to any doubters was to throw herself into her work and ensure she was incredibly prepared.

Jay O'Connor said even decades after she was nominated, women in particular would come up to his mother in public and tell her they remembered where they were when they heard the news that President Ronald Reagan had picked her. They wanted her to know, he said, how deeply meaningful that announcement was to them.

Survivor and body found on burning ferry off Greek island

By DEMETRIS NELLAS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greek emergency workers rescued a Belarussian truck driver Sunday from a burning ferry off the island of Corfu and found the body of a Greek truck driver as they combed the wreckage for missing passengers. The discoveries left 10 people still unaccounted for.

The survivor, 21, was able to make his way up to the left rear deck on his own, and told rescue workers he heard other voices below.

"The fact that this man succeeded, despite adverse conditions, to exit into the deck and alert the coast guard ... gives us hope that there may be other (survivors)," coast guard spokesman Nikos Alexiou told state broadcaster ERT.

The victim was identified as a 58-year-old Greek truck driver by his family.

The Italian-owned Euroferry Olympia, which was carrying more than 290 passengers and crew as well as 153 trucks and 32 cars, caught fire Friday, three hours after it left the northwestern Greek port of Igoumenitsa bound for Brindisi in Italy. The company that operates the ferry said the fire started in a hold where vehicles were parked.

The Greek coast guard and other boats evacuated about 280 people from the ferry to the nearby island

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of Corfu.

The ferry has been towed to the port of Kassiope, in northeastern Corfu. Firefighters were still battling the blaze in spots Sunday and a thick smoke still blanketed the ship.

Alexiou said his understanding was that the truck driver hadn't heard any voices just before making his way onto the deck but added "the situation is evolving." The survivor was taken to a hospital for a medical exam.

The extreme heat in some parts of the ship has impeded the Greek fire service's Disaster Management Unit and a team of private rescuers from searching the whole ship. The ferry is slightly listing from the tons of water poured into it to douse the fire but authorities say it's not in danger of capsizing.

Two passengers were rescued Saturday. One wasn't on the ship's manifest and was presumably a migrant. The other person, a 65-year-old Bulgarian truck driver, had respiratory problems and is on a ventilator in a Corfu hospital's intensive care unit.

A Greek prosecutor on Corfu has ordered an investigation into the cause of the fire. The ship's captain and two engineers were arrested Friday but were released the same day, authorities said.

Passengers described the initial evacuation as dramatic.

"We heard the alarm. We thought it was some kind of drill. But we saw through the portholes that people were running," truck driver Dimitris Karaolanidis told The Associated Press. "You can't think something at the time (other than) your family ... When I hit the deck, I saw smoke and children. Fortunately, they (the crew) acted quickly."

Djokovic says he's at his 'peak' returning to tour in Dubai

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic said on Sunday that despite weeks away from competition and emotional distress over his recent detention and deportation, he feels he's at his "peak" as he returns to tour.

The world's top male tennis player sounded an upbeat note in a press conference a day before the start of the Dubai Duty Free Tennis championship, Djokovic's first tournament since being ejected from Australia and missing the year's first Grand Slam event over his vaccination status.

"It wasn't really difficult for me to pick up a racket and go out and practice the sport and just play," he told reporters. "I'm as well prepared as I possibly can be."

Djokovic's presence brings an unusual amount of scrutiny to the annual tournament near Dubai International Airport and authorities also apparently took extraordinary steps of their own.

Organizers blocked most photographers and videographers from Djokovic's news conference without explanation. Earlier, security guards were out in force at Djokovic's practice, questioning reporters who tried to grab a glimpse of him serving and swinging on the court. These restrictions were not in place, the guards acknowledged, for any other players. Organizers were not immediately available for comment.

The saga of Djokovic's canceled travel visa on the eve of the Australian Open drew intense interest around the world, shining a light on how public officials approach pandemic restrictions and exemptions. The dramatic legal dispute also took a personal toll.

"There were lots of emotions after I came back from Australia," he said. "It was strange. I was disappointed, I was sad about the way it all has played out and the way I left the country."

Djokovic's fierce commitment to stay unvaccinated against the coronavirus for the time being means he could be barred from competing in a series of upcoming Grand Slam tournaments, including the U.S. Open and French Open, where he is pursuing a record 21st Grand Slam title.

The 34-year-old has made it clear that this is a cost he's willing to bear.

"Whatever tournament I'll be able to play I'll be trying to get to that country and play that tournament," he said, acknowledging his freedom of movement and access to tournaments will depend on local virus restrictions. "I really can't choose. It's really about where I can go and play."

Dubai authorities do not require visitors to be vaccinated against COVID-19 to enter.

After hours spent ripping backhands on the baseline in Dubai, Djokovic added he was excited about returning to the tournament he has won five times.

"Having previous positive experiences on the court and titles obviously connects me to this place even more," he said, noting that players had so far seemed warm and welcoming unlike in Australia. "We'll play this tournament and see how it goes further down the line."

Some school systems pause diversity programs amid pushback

By CAROLYN THOMPSON and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Conservative takeovers of local school boards have already altered lessons on race and social injustice in many classrooms. Now some districts are finding their broader efforts on diversity, equity and inclusion are also being challenged.

As her Colorado school district's equity director, Alexis Knox-Miller thought the work she and a volunteer team were doing was on solid ground, especially with an audit in hand that detailed where the district was falling short in making sure all students had the same opportunities.

But in December, Knox-Miller reluctantly disbanded the equity leadership team after more than a year of meetings. New conservative members had won a majority on the school board after voicing doubts about the work, and she worried the efforts might not lead anywhere.

The new board says it will take up the issue in the spring.

"Around the time that the equity audit was being released, I realized that the tide had changed around diversity, equity and inclusion efforts," Knox-Miller said. "People were conflating the definition of equity with critical race theory, and the absurd accusations that we were teaching critical race theory in classrooms to kindergartners began."

Since issues of diversity, equity and inclusion can thread their way through every part of a school system — including recruitment, services and equipment — the debate carries implications for hiring and spending.

In some districts, proposals aimed at making schools more welcoming places for students from diverse backgrounds have been reversed as a result of turnover on school boards, while work elsewhere faces a chill from acrimonious debate around topics that have been mislabeled as critical race theory.

School administrators say critical race theory, a scholarly theory that centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation's institutions, is not taught in K-12 schools. But that has done little to sway opponents who assert that school systems are mispending money, perpetuating divisions and shaming white children by pursuing initiatives they view as critical race theory in disguise.

In a fraught political climate that already had escalated fights about pandemic mask and vaccine requirements, divisions are taking a toll, said Dan Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association.

"Even in districts that aren't threatened as much, they're thinking twice about what they say and what they do and how they go about doing it because it is having a chilling effect on the whole equity, diversity and inclusion movement," Domenech said.

Colorado Springs School District 11, a large and diverse system of 26,000 students where Knox-Miller works, was the first in its area to adopt a formal equity policy, unanimously approving it May 27, 2020, two days after the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota sparked national reflection on race and social justice issues in and out of schools.

The policy acknowledged gaps in achievement and opportunities among marginalized student groups and recognized "the impact of systemic inequities on teaching and learning."

Part of Knox-Miller's work involved commissioning an audit by the American Institutes for Research. It found that schools with high concentrations of special education students, English language learners, students living in poverty and students of color were scoring measurably below other schools.

Critics questioned the findings and the way they were presented, at a series of public meetings called "equity cafes" that some said limited full discussions. Conservative candidates set their sights on the school board, with three winning seats in the November election.

Knox-Miller saw no choice but to stand down.

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Board President Parth Melpakam said by email that the new board had yet to discuss the issue but plans to at a work session in the spring.

"The D11 BOE remains committed to assuring educational equity by providing the support and resources every child needs to develop their full academic potential," he said.

In Pennridge, Pennsylvania, the school district's diversity, equity and inclusion initiative was put on hold last year after it became a flashpoint in debates that touched also on COVID-19 safety protocols, including mask mandates.

Democrat Adrienne King, who helped design the plan, ran for a seat on the school board and lost in November. Five Republicans won after running against the initiative, which they had called divisive. The program's future remains unclear while a new committee considers it.

The district's diversity, equity and inclusion guidebook, no longer visible on the district's website, proposed ways to recruit diverse job candidates and improve training for teachers, and encouraged lessons that invite students to reflect on their own culture and history.

The initiative could have helped prevent unnecessarily painful experiences, King said, like when a white second grader, without meaning to hurt anyone's feelings, called King's daughter, who is Black, a slave after learning about Frederick Douglass.

"In a second grade mind, it was just, 'Oh, I learned this new fact. You're Black, Frederick Douglass was Black. You must be a slave,'" she said.

Neither the board's president nor school administrators responded to requests for comment.

The Arlington, Virginia-based group Parents Defending Education is critical of diversity, equity and inclusion programming, citing on its website a goal of "fighting indoctrination in the classroom." It tracks examples of what it views as inappropriate activities, such as an educator training session in Missouri that included discussion of microaggressions and implicit bias.

"What they have become are Trojan horses for all of these divisive programs that push really illiberal ideas like segregated groups based on race, privilege walks, privilege bingo," said Asra Nomani, the organization's vice president for strategy and investigations.

In Southlake, Texas, the newly elected conservative majority on the Carroll Independent School District's board killed a proposed cultural competency action plan in December and disbanded the suburban Dallas district's diversity council as part of a legal settlement.

The plan had been in the works since a 2018 video showed students in the mostly white district chanting a racial slur at a party after the school's homecoming celebration. A second video of students using the slur emerged in 2019.

"We don't have a racism problem in Southlake. If children behave improperly, then they should be disciplined," Tim O'Hare, founder of a political action committee formed to fund conservative candidates and defeat the plan, told The Texan.

Still, many other initiatives continue as planned.

An equity program that schools in Clayton County, Georgia, undertook more than a year ago was designed to keep politics and emotions out of it, Superintendent Morcease Beasley said. A task force has undertaken a "deep dive" into the district's programming that will use data to drive policy changes.

"Equity is not about emotions. Equity is about what the data tells us and ensuring that we allow the data to inform our decisions," he said. "That's what equity is about. Where are the needs? Who needs the resources? What do they need?"

Rents reach 'insane' levels across US with no end in sight

By R.J. RICO Associated Press

Krystal Guerra's Miami apartment has a tiny kitchen, cracked tiles, warped cabinets, no dishwasher and hardly any storage space.

But Guerra was fine with the apartment's shortcomings. It was all part of being a 32-year-old graduate student in South Florida, she reasoned, and she was happy to live there for a few more years as she

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finished her marketing degree.

That was until a new owner bought the property and told her he was raising the rent from \$1,550 to \$1,950, a 26% increase that Guerra said meant her rent would account for the majority of her take-home pay from the University of Miami.

"I thought that was insane," said Guerra, who decided to move out. "Am I supposed to stop paying for everything else I have going on in my life just so I can pay rent? That's unsustainable."

Guerra is hardly alone. Rents have exploded across the country, causing many to dig deep into their savings, downsize to subpar units or fall behind on payments and risk eviction now that a federal moratorium has ended.

In the 50 largest U.S. metro areas, median rent rose an astounding 19.3% from December 2020 to December 2021, according to a Realtor.com analysis of properties with two or fewer bedrooms. And nowhere was the jump bigger than in the Miami metro area, where the median rent exploded to \$2,850, 49.8% higher than the previous year.

Other cities across Florida — Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville — and the Sun Belt destinations of San Diego, Las Vegas, Austin, Texas, and Memphis, Tennessee, all saw spikes of more than 25% during that time period.

Rising rents are an increasing driver of high inflation that has become one of the nation's top economic problems. Labor Department data, which covers existing rents as well as new listings, shows much smaller increases, but these are also picking up. Rental costs rose 0.5% in January from December, the Labor Department said last week. That may seem small, but it was the biggest increase in 20 years, and will likely accelerate.

Economists worry about the impact of rent increases on inflation because the big jumps in new leases feed into the U.S. consumer price index, which is used to measure inflation.

Inflation jumped 7.5% in January from a year earlier, the biggest increase in four decades. While many economists expect that to decrease as pandemic-disrupted supply chains unravel, rising rents could keep inflation high through the end of the year since housing costs make up one-third of the consumer price index.

Things have gotten so bad in Boston, which has nearly overtaken San Francisco as the nation's second-most expensive rental market, that one resident went viral for jokingly putting an igloo on the market for \$2,700 a month. "Heat/ hot water not included," Jonathan Berk tweeted.

Experts say many factors are responsible for astronomical rents, including a nationwide housing shortage, extremely low rental vacancies and unrelenting demand as young adults continue to enter the crowded market.

Whitney Airgood-Obrycki, lead author of a recent report from Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, said there was a lot of "pent-up demand" after the initial months of the pandemic, when many young people moved back home with their parents. Starting last year, as the economy opened up and young people moved out, "rents really took off," she said.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, rental vacancy rates during the fourth quarter of 2021 fell to 5.6%, the lowest since 1984.

"Without a lot of rental vacancy that landlords are accustomed to having, that gives them some pricing power because they're not sitting on empty units that they need to fill," said Danielle Hale, Realtor.com's chief economist.

Meanwhile, the number of homes for sale have been at a record low, contributing to ballooning home prices that have caused many higher-income households to remain renters, further upping demand.

Construction crews are also trying to bounce back from material and labor shortages that at the start of the pandemic made a preexisting shortage of new homes even worse, leaving an estimated shortfall of 5.8 million single-family homes, a 51% leap from the end of 2019, Realtor.com said.

And potentially compounding all of this is the increasing presence of investors.

A record 18.2% of U.S. home purchases in the third quarter of 2021 were made by businesses or institu-

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tions, according to Redfin, as investors targeted Atlanta, Phoenix, Miami, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida — popular destinations for people relocating from pricier cities.

Hale said the increasing presence of investors is a factor in rent hikes, but only because they have pricing power due to low vacancies. "I don't think that's the only driver," she said.

Most investors aren't tied down by rent control. Only two states, California and Oregon, have statewide rent control laws, while three others — New York, New Jersey and Maryland — have laws allowing local governments to pass rent control ordinances, according to the National Multifamily Housing Council.

And laws in some states like Arizona actually restrict local jurisdictions from limiting what landlords can charge tenants.

In Tucson, Arizona, the mayor's office said it has been deluged with calls from residents worried about rent hikes after a California developer recently bought an apartment complex that catered to older people and raised rents by more than 50%, forcing out many on fixed incomes.

The rent on a one-bedroom apartment in the complex went from \$579 to \$880 a month, an increase legal under Arizona state law.

Arizona Sen. Kyrsten Sinema decried the increases during a recent Senate Banking Committee hearing, saying Arizona's rapidly growing housing costs have been a "major concern" of hers for years.

Nationally, Hale, the Realtor.com economist, expects rents to continue to rise this year, but at a slower pace, thanks to increased construction.

"Improving supply growth should help create more balance in the market," said Hale, who forecasts rents to rise 7.1% in 2022.

In Miami, Guerra has started packing her belongings ahead of her March move-out date. She spent weeks frantically looking for places in her budget but said she couldn't find anything that wasn't "either incredibly small, incredibly broken down or an hour away from work and everyone I know."

Her plan now is to put her things in storage and move in with her boyfriend, even though the timing isn't ideal.

"We didn't want to have the decision of moving in together forced upon us," Guerra said. "We wanted it to be something we agreed to, but it's happening before we wanted it to happen."

UK: People with COVID in England won't need to self-isolate

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — People with COVID-19 won't be legally required to self-isolate in England starting in the coming week, the U.K. government has announced, as part of a plan for "living with COVID" that is also likely to see testing for the coronavirus scaled back.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said ending all of the legal restrictions brought in to curb the spread of the virus will let people in the U.K. "protect ourselves without restricting our freedoms." He is expected to lay out details of the plan in Parliament on Monday.

"I'm not saying that we should throw caution to the winds, but now is the moment for everybody to get their confidence back," Johnson told the BBC in an interview broadcast Sunday.

"We've reached a stage where we think you can shift the balance away from state mandation, away from banning certain courses of action, compelling certain courses of action, in favor of encouraging personal responsibility."

But some of the government's scientific advisers said it was a risky move that could bring a surge in infections and weaken the country's defenses against more virulent future strains.

Wes Streeting, health spokesman for the main opposition Labour Party, accused Johnson of "declaring victory before the war is over."

A reminder that the coronavirus remains widespread came with the news that Queen Elizabeth II tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday. Buckingham Palace said the 95-year-old monarch was experiencing mild, cold-like symptoms.

Johnson's Conservative government lifted most virus restrictions in January, scrapping vaccine passports

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for venues and ending mask mandates in most settings apart from hospitals in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which set their own public health rules, also have opened up, although more slowly.

A combination of high vaccination rates in the U.K. and the milder omicron variant means easing restrictions didn't lead to a surge in hospitalizations and deaths. Both are falling, though the U.K. still has Europe's highest coronavirus toll after Russia, with more than 160,000 recorded deaths.

In Britain, 85% of people age 12 and up have had two vaccine doses and almost two-thirds have had a third booster shot.

Now the Conservative government says it will remove "all remaining domestic COVID regulations that restrict public freedoms" as part of a "move away from government intervention to personal responsibility."

The legal requirement to isolate for at least five days after a positive COVID-19 test will be replaced with advisory measures, and the coronavirus will be treated more like the flu as it becomes endemic.

The new plan foresees vaccines and treatments keeping the virus in check, though the government said "surveillance systems and contingency measures will be retained" if needed.

"COVID will not suddenly disappear, and we need to learn to live with this virus and continue to protect ourselves without restricting our freedoms," Johnson said.

The announcement will please many Conservative Party lawmakers, who argue that the restrictions were inefficient and disproportionate. It could also shore up Johnson's position among party lawmakers, who have been mulling an attempt to oust him over scandals including lockdown-breaching government parties during the pandemic.

But scientists stressed that much remains unknown about the virus, and future variants that may be more severe than the currently dominant omicron strain.

The New and Emerging Virus Threats Advisory Group, which advises the government, said last week that the idea viruses become progressively milder "is a common misconception." It said the milder illness associated with omicron "is likely a chance event" and future variants could be more severe or evade current vaccines.

Epidemic modelers who advise the government also warned that "a sudden change, such as an end to testing and isolation, has the scope to lead to a return to rapid epidemic growth" if people throw caution to the wind.

Scientists also cautioned against scrapping free rapid coronavirus tests, which have been distributed by the millions during the pandemic. Health officials say the mass testing has played an important role in slowing the spread of the virus.

Scientists are also concerned the government might end the Infection Survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics, which is considered invaluable because it tests people whether or not they have symptoms.

"This is not the time to take risks," said Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, an umbrella group for state-funded health authorities in Britain. "We need to operate in an evidence-based and incremental way."

Ethiopia starts partial power generation from Blue Nile dam

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopia has started generating electricity from the controversial mega-dam that is being built on the Blue Nile.

The milestone was reached on Sunday morning when one of the 13 turbines of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam started power generation in an event officiated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

"From now on, there will be nothing that will stop Ethiopia," Abiy said.

The dam will be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam upon completion.

"We just started generating power, but that doesn't mean the project is completed," said Kifle Horo, the dam's project manager. "It will take from two and half to three years to complete it."

The dam, which will have a total power generating capacity of 6,500 megawatts, has been a source of tensions between Ethiopia and the other riparian states, Sudan and Egypt. Ethiopia has already conducted

two fillings of the dam, but the speed at which it will be filled and the amount of water that will be released during drought seasons remains unsolved.

Egypt fears a quick filling of the dam will reduce its share of Nile waters and seeks a binding legal agreement in case of a dispute.

Egypt's Foreign Ministry said in a terse statement Sunday that Ethiopia's move is another "breach" of the agreement of principles that the three countries signed in 2015. It didn't elaborate.

Abiy, however, said the dam would benefit Egypt and Sudan as well.

"We want to export our pollution-free electricity to Europe through Sudan and Egypt, so the way forward is cooperation among us. Ethiopia doesn't want and intend to harm anyone else," he said.

Ethiopia contends the \$4.2 billion dam is essential for its development and will enable it to distribute power to its population of more than 110 million.

Several rounds of talks have been held in attempts to solve the stalemate.

The dam's construction started in 2011 and the completion date was missed years ago due to the embezzlement of funds and design flaws.

Olympics Live: Flame extinguished to end Beijing Games

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

The Olympic flame has been extinguished in Beijing, marking the end of the most locked-down games in history.

It was the second pandemic Olympics in the more than two years since the coronavirus first emerged in China.

The movements of athletes, media and workers were heavily restricted and everyone wore masks and took daily COVID tests. There were only 463 positive COVID tests reported among thousands of people who came to Beijing for the Games.

Internationally, many denounced the IOC for holding the Olympics in concert with a Chinese government accused of human rights violations. Several Western governments boycotted by not sending any official delegations, though they sent athletes. China denied such allegations, as it typically does.

Attention now turns to 2024 in Paris, where officials hope for a COVID-free and scandal-free Summer Games.

International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach has officially closed the Beijing Olympics at the Bird's Nest stadium.

Bach praised China and thanked the people of the country for staging the Games in a safe way.

It was the most locked-down Olympics ever, with participants restricted to a COVID-safe bubble where they took daily tests, wore masks and observed strict protocols.

He also thanked the volunteers who helped make sure the Games ran smoothly.

He said it "breaks our hearts" that some athletes could not attend because of the pandemic, but said they still belong to the Olympic community.

The president of the International Olympic Committee and the mayor of Beijing have handed over the Olympic flag to the mayors of Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy, which will host the 2026 Winter Games.

This is the first time two cities have officially hosted the Olympics together. Cortina hosted the games in 1956. This will be the third Winter Games in Italy – Turin hosted in 2006.

After three straight Olympics held in Asia – Pyeongchang, Tokyo and now Beijing – the Games head to the West for the foreseeable future, with no chance of returning until at least 2030.

The next Olympics will be the Summer Games in Paris in 2024.

The winners of the men's and women's 30-kilometer mass start cross-country ski races have received

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their medals at the closing ceremony for the Beijing Olympics.

Alexander Bolshunov of the Russian Olympic Committee earned his third gold medal of the Beijing Olympics on Saturday. The race was supposed to be 50 kilometers, but it was delayed by an hour and shortened to 30 kilometers because of frigid temperatures and strong wind.

Russian teammate Ivan Yakimushkin won silver and Simen Hegstad Krueger of Norway took bronze.

In the women's race on Sunday, Norwegian great Therese Johaug won her third gold medal of the Beijing Olympics. Jessie Diggins took silver for the best result by an American in an individual cross-country skiing event since 1976. Kerttu Niskanen of Finland won bronze.

The women also had to battle fierce winds and frigid temperatures.

Athletes who are still in Beijing after competing at the Winter Games are parading into the stadium for the closing ceremony as "Ode to Joy" plays.

The athletes had to undergo strict COVID protocols, including testing to get into the country, daily testing after they arrived and wearing masks except when they were competing. They had to remain within the Olympic bubble the entire time they were in China.

Not many tested positive, but those who did were taken to isolation hotels where they raised concerns about difficult living conditions and a lack of information.

The closing ceremony for the Beijing Games has begun, signaling the end to the second Olympics of the pandemic era.

There's a modest but enthusiastic crowd of invited guests shaking hand clappers and doing the wave at the Bird's Nest stadium.

Despite COVID concerns ahead of the Games, a strict system that basically turned the Olympics into a giant bubble kept coronavirus cases to a minimum. There have only been 463 positive tests among thousands of visitors inside the bubble since Jan. 23.

There was plenty of other drama among the athletes. A doping scandal involving a 15-year-old figure skater overshadowed the women's competition. U.S. skiing star Mikaela Shiffrin faltered and went home empty-ended. And American-born star Eileen Gu won three medals – for China.

Internationally, many critiqued them as the "authoritarian Olympics" and denounced the IOC for holding them in concert with a government accused of human rights violations. Several Western governments boycotted by not sending any official delegations, though they sent athletes. China denied such allegations, as it typically does.

South Korean Olympic officials say they still want to include North Korea in helping host the 2024 Winter Youth Olympics and the IOC is also interested in the project.

Korean Sport & Olympic Committee president Lee Kee Heung says the organization will offer North Korea the opportunity to hold the event together.

South Korea is hosting the next winter edition of the Youth Olympics in two years' time in Gangwon province. It will use some of the same venues as the 2018 Olympics, named for the town of Pyeongchang.

The 2018 Winter Games were held during a thaw in relations between the Korean neighbors, whose athletes entered the opening ceremony together and fielded a combined women's hockey team.

Diplomatic relations are currently tense and a North Korean missile test last month raised concern in Seoul and Washington, D.C.

Gangwon organizers have been in Beijing and Korean Olympic official Lee says: "The IOC has keen interest in this idea" of cooperating on hosting in 2024.

Hannes Bjorninen scored the go-ahead goal 31 seconds into the third period and Finland claimed its first Olympic men's hockey gold medal with a 2-1 win over the Russian Olympic Committee on the final day of the Beijing Games.

Ville Pokka also scored and Harri Sateri stopped 16 shots as Finland rallied from a 1-0 first-period defi-

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cit. The Finns' best finishes in 17 previous Olympic appearances were silver medals at the 1988 Calgary Games and 2006 Torino Games.

Mikhail Grigorenko scored for the favored Russian team, the defending champions, in the second consecutive tournament without NHL players. The Russians won 4-3 over Germany in overtime in the gold-medal final at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

Ivan Fedotov stopped 29 shots for the Russian Olympic Committee.

Finland completed the tournament with a 7-0 record.

Taiwan's premier wants a Taiwanese Olympic speedskater to be punished for wearing what appeared to be a suit from rival China's team during training.

Symbols of the two sides are especially sensitive at a time when China's ruling Communist Party, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory, is trying to intimidate the island democracy by flying fighter jets and bombers nearby.

Huang Yu-ting, one of four Taiwanese athletes at the Winter Games, posted a video on her social media page Jan. 23 showing her training in what appeared to be a Chinese suit, the Central News Agency reported. It said Huang apologized and removed the video.

Premier Su Tseng-chang asked the Ministry of Education and the Sports Administration to investigate so Huang would "receive an adequate punishment," CNA reported, citing a Cabinet spokesperson, Lo Ping-cheng.

Taiwan's Sports Administration said Huang would face no penalty but should be "more aware of the sensitivity of cross-Taiwan Strait politics," according to CNA.

Cross-country skier Therese Johaug of Norway won the women's 30-kilometer mass start, her third gold at the Beijing Olympics.

Fighting fierce winds and brutal temperatures, she went out front early in the race and held on, finishing in 1 hour, 24 minutes and 54 seconds. Johaug also won the skiathlon and 10-kilometer classic race.

American Jessie Diggins kept a steady pace behind the Norwegian as gusts whipped across the tracks, battering the skiers. She crossed the finish line 1 minute and 43.3 seconds behind Johaug to win silver. She had already become the first American woman to win an individual cross-country medal when she took bronze in the sprint earlier in the Beijing Games.

Finland's Kerttu Niskanen won bronze 2 minutes and 33.3 second back.

Strong wind gusts sent snow squalls across the frozen tracks as the women skied four laps on a 7.5-kilometer (4.6-mile) course with buffs pulled up over their hats, tape across their faces and extra layers under their racing suits.

Francesco Friedrich and Germany have finished off an unforgettable show in sliding at the Beijing Olympics.

Friedrich won his second Olympic gold medal in Beijing and fourth of his career by driving to the win Sunday in the four-man event, the final sliding race of these games.

There were 10 sliding events in Beijing. Germany won gold in nine of them and took 16 medals overall. The rest of the world combined had 14 medals in sliding.

Johannes Lochner won silver for Germany on Sunday and Justin Kripps of Canada got the bronze. Hunter Church was 10th for the U.S. and Frank DelDuca tied for 13th.

Eve Muirhead led Britain to the Olympic women's curling gold medal — the first for the sport's homeland since 2002 — with a record-setting 10-3 victory over Japan.

One day after the British men took silver, losing to Sweden in the final, the women picked up two points in the first end and controlled the scoreboard from there. They essentially clinched it in the seventh after Japanese skip Satsuki Fujisawa failed to keep her last stone in the scoring area.

That left just one red Japanese rock and three yellow British ones in the house. Muirhead easily picked off the Japan's lone stone and scored four to take an 8-2 lead, bringing the biggest cheer yet from the

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British fans in the crowd.

Japan could only manage one point in the eighth. When Muirhead tallied two in the ninth, Fujisawa slid over to bump fists and concede. Another roar arose from the crowd, which included the men's silver medalists.

It was the most lopsided women's final in Olympic history.

It was the second straight medal for the Japanese team of Fujisawa, Chinami Yoshida, Yumi Suzuki and Yurika Yoshida, who took bronze in Pyeongchang. The Swedish women won bronze on Saturday night, beating Switzerland.

Mikaela Shiffrin and the American mixed ski team missed out on a medal by 0.42 seconds, losing in the bronze matchup in the final Alpine ski event of the Beijing Olympics.

The top-ranked Austrians won gold in the Winter Games' second iteration of the mixed team parallel event, holding off Germany in the final.

The U.S. primarily used Shiffrin on the slower of the parallel courses, and she lost three of her four heats, including in the bronze matchup against Norway. Teammate River Radamus delivered the win the U.S. needed in the last heat to force a 2-2 tie, but he wasn't fast enough to tilt the tiebreaker — combined times of the fastest man and woman — to the Americans' favor.

Austria also tied in the final against the Germans, but Stefan Brennsteiner and Katharina Liensberger took their heats in a faster combined time than Lena Duerr and Alexander Schmid. Austria took silver in the event's debut at Pyeongchang four years ago.

Shiffrin, a two-time gold medalist, went 0 for 5 in her bid for an individual medal in Beijing. She only reached the finish line at two individual events, coming in ninth in the super-G and 18th in the downhill.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Feb. 21, the 52nd day of 2022. There are 313 days left in the year. This is Presidents Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 21, 1975, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former White House aides H.R. Halderman and John D. Ehrlichman were sentenced to 2 1/2 to 8 years in prison for their roles in the Watergate cover-up (each ended up serving 1 1/2 years).

On this date:

In 1437, James I, King of Scots, was assassinated; his 6-year-old son succeeded him as James II.

In 1885, the Washington Monument was dedicated.

In 1911, composer Gustav Mahler, despite a fever, conducted the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in what turned out to be his final concert (he died the following May).

In 1964, the first shipment of U.S. wheat purchased by the Soviet Union arrived in the port of Odessa.

In 1965, minister and civil rights activist Malcolm X, 39, was shot to death inside Harlem's Audubon Ballroom in New York. (Three men identified as members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of murder and imprisoned; all were eventually paroled. The convictions of two of the men were dismissed in November 2021; prosecutors said new evidence had undermined the case against them.)

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon began his historic visit to China as he and his wife, Pat, arrived in Beijing.

In 1973, Israeli fighter planes shot down Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114 over the Sinai Desert, killing all but five of the 113 people on board.

In 1992, Kristi Yamaguchi (yah-mah-GOO'-chee) of the United States won the gold medal in ladies' figure skating at the Albertville Olympics; Midori Ito (mee-doh-ree ee-toh) of Japan won the silver, Nancy Kerrigan of the U.S. the bronze.

In 1995, Chicago adventurer Steve Fossett became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean

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by balloon, landing in Leader, Saskatchewan, Canada.

In 2018, the Rev. Billy Graham, a confidant of presidents and the most widely heard Christian evangelist in history, died at his North Carolina home; he was 99.

In 2019, teachers in Oakland, California, went on strike in the latest in a wave of teacher activism that had included walkouts in Denver, Los Angeles and West Virginia.

In 2020, a temporary truce between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan took effect, setting the stage for the two sides to sign a peace deal the following week.

Ten years ago: The 17-nation eurozone approved a \$170 billion bailout for Greece, which received the news with a mixture of relief and foreboding.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump condemned recent threats against Jewish community centers in the U.S. as "painful reminders" of lingering prejudice and evil; the president also denounced "bigotry, intolerance and hatred in all of its very ugly forms" during his first visit to the new Smithsonian Black history museum. Conservative writer Milo Yiannopoulos (MY'-loh yuh-NAH'-poh-lihs) resigned as an editor for Breitbart News, apologizing for comments he'd made in video clips in which he appeared to defend sexual relationships between men and boys as young as 13.

One year ago: Hospitals across the southern United States grappled with ruptured water pipes and patient transfers as the region carried on with efforts to recover from the winter weather that paralyzed parts of the nation. Police in Liberty, New York, said an expectant father was killed when a device he was building for a gender reveal party exploded. Novak Djokovic beat Daniil Medvedev in three sets to win his ninth Australian Open championship and 18th Grand Slam title.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Bob Rafelson is 89. Actor Gary Lockwood is 85. Actor-director Richard Beymer is 83. Actor Peter McEnery is 82. Film/music company executive David Geffen is 79. Actor Tyne Daly is 76. Actor Anthony Daniels is 76. Tricia Nixon Cox is 76. Former Sen. Olympia J. Snowe, R-Maine, is 75. Rock musician Jerry Harrison (The Heads) is 73. Actor Christine Ebersole is 69. Actor William Petersen is 69. Actor Kelsey Grammer is 67. Singer/guitarist Larry Campbell is 67. Country singer Mary Chapin Carpenter is 64. Actor Kim Coates is 64. Actor Jack Coleman is 64. Actor Christopher Atkins is 61. Actor William Baldwin is 59. Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., is 58. Rock musician Michael Ward is 55. Actor Aunjanue Ellis is 53. Blues musician Corey Harris is 53. Country singer Eric Heatherly is 52. Rock musician Eric Wilson is 52. Rock musician Tad Kinchla (Blues Traveler) is 49. Singer Rhiannon Giddens (Carolina Chocolate Drops) is 45. Actor Tituss Burgess is 43. Actor Jennifer Love Hewitt is 43. Comedian-actor Jordan Peele is 43. Actor Brendan Sexton III is 42. Singer Charlotte Church is 36. Actor Ashley Greene is 35. Actor Elliot Page is 35. Actor Corbin Bleu is 33. Actor Hayley Orrantia is 28. Actor Sophie Turner is 26.