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No Aberdeen Paper this morning. It was reported that the truck is in the ditch near Huron.

Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Dec. 15

NO SCHOOL

Senior Menu: Sloppy Joe on wheat bun, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit sauce.

Postponed: NEC Wrestling Tournament at Webster, 4 p.m.

Postponed: JHGBB at Tiospa Zina (7th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade)

Postponed: Boys Basketball hosts Sisseton, 6 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 16

Senior Menu: Hot turkey combo, mashed potatoes with gravy, 7 layer salad, fruit.

School Breakfast: Cereal

School Lunch: Pizza, cooked carrots.

Postponed: Government Field Trip.

Saturday, Dec. 17

Emmanuel Lutheran worship at Rosewood Court, 10 a.m.

Wrestling Tournament at Sioux Valley, 10 a.m.

Basketball at Jamestown College (Boys play Enderlin at 1:15 pm.; Girls play Kenmare at 2:40 p.m.)

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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

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Moving Snow

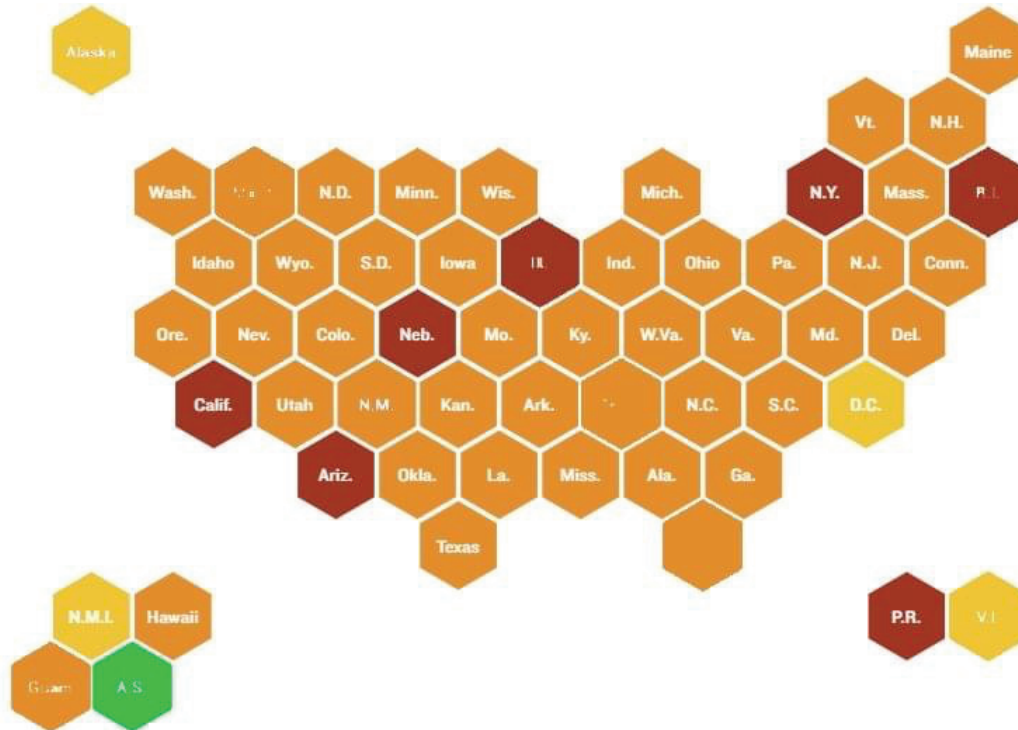
The city crew was out early this morning removing the snow from the downtown district. Terry Herron is seen here driving the road grader. (Photo

by Paul Kosel)

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COVID heat map



by Marie Miller

I don't really like coming around here anymore because it's always bad news lately. This situation has really gone to hell in less than two weeks. Overall US cases are up, and the map is darkening.

The only bright spot is New Mexico, which moved from red to orange and is still dropping slowly. Almost everyone else is going the wrong direction.

Four states moved from orange to red: California, Nebraska, Illinois, and New Jersey. Further, three more are headed that direction: Oklahoma, Indiana, and Rhode Island. Going from yellow to orange were Louisiana, Mississippi, Vermont, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. And moving from green to yellow were the Northern Marianas and the US Virgin Islands.

Since I posted the last heat map, just under two weeks ago, we've gone from 4 red, 40 orange, 9 yellow, and 3 green to 7 red, 44 orange, 4 yellow, and 1 green. This is not a sign of good things happening. Nationwide numbers are up 55% in the past week.

I don't really expect anyone's going to have an easy time staying in green, but it would be nice to see more of us hovering there. I will note that everyone in yellow is either decreasing or holding steady. The overall trend, however, is one of increases, some huge. I track 56 states and territories, and I have just 6 of those decreasing and another couple increasing only by tiny percentages. Everyone else is in trouble with 7 states and territories increasing at more than 100% in the past 7 days and another 19 increasing at over 50%.

I see this trend accelerating, so I expect we're going to continue to get worse for a while, at least into the new year. Maybe once holiday travel effects taper off, we'll have peaked; but I'm afraid we might not get to a much better place until spring approaches. Hang in there.

The original template for this heat map is from NPR; I have modified it to show changes since NPR's last update. Red designates "unchecked spread," orange is "escalating spread," yellow is "potential spread," and green is "close to containment." (For the record, NMI is the Northern Mariana Islands, AS is American Samoa, and VI is the US Virgin Islands, all US territories.)

SDDOT Cautions Motorists about Using Secondary Highways During Winter Storm

PIERRE, S.D. – Due to the continued impact of the strong winter storm system moving through the state, additional closures on Interstate 90 and Interstate 29 were implemented on Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

“Accumulating snow and strong winds caused the SDDOT to close sections on both I-29 and I-90,” said Craig Smith, SDDOT Director of Operations. “Motorists need to understand that while we cannot physically close secondary highways, in many cases these roads are in worse condition than the Interstates.”

SD511 shows No Travel Advisories posted on almost all secondary highways throughout central and western South Dakota.

Several highways are listed as “Road Impassable” on SD511 such as portions of S.D. Highways 44, 63, 53, 49, and U.S. Highways 18 and 83. When a road is listed as “Road Impassable”, travel on the road segment is physically impossible typically due to widespread deep snow and drifts.

As the system continues to advance through the state, road conditions on secondary highways in eastern counties are expected to worsen.

“We’ve had countless vehicles become stuck and stranded on secondary state highways in the motorist’s attempt to avoid an Interstate closures,” said Smith. “Stranded vehicles create personal risk for the motorist and extreme hazards for snowplow operators. Ultimately, as DOT personnel assist with removing stranded vehicles, plow operations are delayed.”

At this point, as this complex storm system continues to cause freezing rain, snow, and sustained high wind, the SDDOT asks that motorists please avoid travel.

Safety on the roadways, for plow operators and the traveling public, is the number one priority for both DOT and DPS. Please use available resources for travel planning over the next few days.

For the latest on road and weather conditions, please visit <https://sd511.org> or dial 511.

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The snow texture was perfect for making snow people. Pictured above are Ryan Hanson, Abby Fjeldheim, Laker Hanson, Rowan Hanson and Tevan Hanson with their finished snow people. It took all of them to lift and roll the balls of snow as featured in the left photo. (Photos by Chelsea Hanson)

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December 5 - 11, 2022

Another week has come and gone out here in Washington, which means we are one week closer to Christmas and the end of the 117th Congress. The Senate still needs to fund the government by Dec. 16th and pass the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) before the end of the year. This past week, we voted on several nominees on the floor, met with many foreign dignitaries and said goodbye to some important members of our office. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakota groups I visited with: Dave Bordewyk and Justin Smith from the South Dakota Newspaper Association.

Other meetings this past week: Peter Beyer and Thomas Silberhorn, members of the German Bundestag; Arati Prabhakar, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and Science Advisor to the President; a delegation from Canada's Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade; Eric Pan, CEO of the Investment Company Institute; Ken Seitz, CEO of Nutrien; Tom Fanning, CEO of Southern Company; Jane Fraser, CEO of Citi Bank; and Turkish Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA).

We also had our weekly Senate Bible Study (Our verse of the week was Ephesians 4:26-27) and our Senate Prayer Breakfast (Senator Maggie Hassan from New Hampshire was our speaker). Additionally, I was asked to give the invocation at a dinner honoring retiring Republican Senators.

Met with South Dakotans from: Brookings and Sioux Falls.

Topics discussed: The B-21 Raider stealth bomber, the importance of local news in our communities, the NDAA and government funding.

Votes taken: 11 – all of these were to confirm the nomination of judges to several district and circuit courts across the country.

Classified briefings: I had a bi-weekly cyber education and briefing seminar; and a briefing on the situation in Ukraine.

Staff happenings: As the end of the fall semester nears, we're saying goodbye to our fall interns. Madison in Sioux Falls and Justin in D.C. both finished their internships this past week, and Christine in D.C. will finish this week. We have truly appreciated all of their hard work and will miss seeing them in the office.

In addition, Thursday was the last day for our Air Force Fellow, Major Ben Shafer. Ben is a South Dakota native and spent the past year in our D.C. office working on defense policy. He returns to Sioux Falls this week to begin his new position as Deputy Base Civil Engineer with the 114th Fighter Wing of the South Dakota Air National Guard. He's been a great asset to our team!

Steps taken this week: 53,570 steps or 24.85 miles

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Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

How South Dakotans are making child care affordable and available

Creative local efforts abound as new statewide collaborative launches

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 14, 2022 2:45 PM

South Dakota has a tight labor market. It's even tighter as parents struggle to find available and affordable child care.

To bolster recruitment and retention among parents, some employers and organizations are taking matters into their own hands.

One major employer in Rapid City has a day care center in-house, and a contract with a local nonprofit to operate it. Another Black Hills employer issues \$5,000 checks annually to help pay the child care costs of workers. And an East River economic development corporation is leading a drive to start a day care center in a county that lacks one.

Those are a few of the many ways people in South Dakota are trying to close the gap between South Dakota's overwhelmed child care infrastructure and the growing demand for child care services. The latest statewide effort to address the issue is the South Dakota Business Child Care Collaborative, which is hosting its first meetings this month.

The collaborative's mission is to gather child care providers, businesses, nonprofits, foundations, local governments and state government to partner on solutions.

One member of the collaborative says those solutions will have to go beyond support for private day care providers, some of which are unable to pay enough to attract workers, even while charging more than some parents can afford.

"I think that's why all these businesses are starting to meet and talk about child care, because there aren't any good answers now about how to fix the business model," said Shelly Rose, human resources and community relations manager for the Coeur Wharf mine in the Black Hills. "The most successful models involve another organization — either faith or business or government-based. There's some other piece that helps support child care."

Some solutions can already be found across the state, from Madison to Rapid City.

Child care: an economic development issue

Lake County doesn't have a day care center. That's with a population around 11,000 — about 6,000 alone in Madison.



Employees and their children pose for a photo in front of a Pioneer Bank & Trust branch (Courtesy of Pioneer Bank & Trust)

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Relying solely on in-home day cares, which are decreasing statewide, limits growth in industries with work hours outside normal business hours. A day care center with multiple workers to help cover parents' 12-hour shifts is necessary for growth in industries such as health care and entertainment.

That makes child care an economic issue, said Brooke Rollag, with Lake Area Improvement Corporation, an economic development agency in Madison.

Several businesses are expanding in the eastern South Dakota city, with some planning to add 100 to 200 jobs in the next couple of years.

The organization is spearheading an effort to create a day care center in the city. As the economic development agency in Madison, the improvement corporation represents and gathers several businesses in the area to accomplish shared needs in the community.

The organization hasn't identified a building for the center yet, but Rollag has a plan in place to quickly partner with a child care provider after the organization buys or leases the space. Even then, it'll be another 18 to 24 months until the day care center is running.

"We're working closely with the school system and the city and county on this too," Rollag said. "I think it's a private-public partnership — it can't be one entity that can take on the child care crisis alone."

Rollag hopes that by partnering with organizations and local governments, the community will recognize the need for child care from "diapers to diplomas."

"The lack of child care is costing us money every month that goes by," Rollag said.

Child care stipends help employee retention, recruitment

Pioneer Bank & Trust in the Black Hills offers each of its employees \$5,000 to pay for licensed child care.

With 27 employees taking advantage of the stipend, that cost can be \$135,000 annually — about the same as four or five entry level employee salaries.

But the success in retaining 27 staff because of the program outweighs the cost, said Lyndsay Schreiber, director of human resources at the bank.

"The cost of turnover and the timeframe it takes to replace people these days is insane," Schreiber said. "Just in job postings alone last month we spent \$3,800 for a few postings. That's not including the employee time it takes to interview people and the preliminary work before proposing a job offer."

The company pays up to \$5,000 a year directly to the employee's child care provider. The program has been in place since January 2020.

For many employees, the \$5,000 covers a significant portion of the annual cost of child care — which can include after-school care, preschool or child care for infants.

The program was put in place after Schreiber spent a year researching ways to retain employees and parents.

Pioneer Bank isn't the only company to offer such a stipend. First Interstate Bank in Sioux Falls offers a similar program with a pre-tax children's account. The bank contributes \$1,500 annually for each child up to \$4,500 a year. Parents can contribute to the account as well until it maxes out at \$5,000.

Making donations, building fences

It's the small things that can make a difference, according to Shelly Rose at Coeur Wharf, the only remaining large-scale gold mine in the Black Hills and South Dakota.

There is only one licensed day care in the Lead-Deadwood area, where the mine is based. An estimated



Children of Pioneer Bank and Trust employees eat lunch at a community-focused event, Beautify Spearfish garbage clean up, that the bank participates in each year. (Courtesy of Pioneer Bank & Trust)

20% of the mine's employees have children ages 0 through 5, with some relying on the day care for child care.

While it may not be much, the mining operation helps the day care in "sustainable projects," Rose said, such as building a fence for the day care's playground or handing out dozens of holiday food baskets to supply the day care's 60 families with meals.

The business employs 260 people, rotating on five-day shifts at the mine. Given that schedule, any miners with children need someone watching their children. Relying solely on the licensed day care isn't enough for Coeur Wharf workers, but it's still important to support the business for the wellbeing of the community, Rose said.

Ideally, the organization would like to find a way to provide child care for industries on a "24/7/365" basis. "The casinos up here are all on that same 24/7/365 schedule," Rose said, referencing businesses in nearby Deadwood. "The industries up here need overnight care that's just not here."

Swapping office space for child care space



Coeur Wharf employees deliver holiday food baskets to families of a licensed day care in the Lead-Deadwood area. (Courtesy of Coeur Wharf)

As businesses move from in-office work to hybrid or remote models, office buildings across the country are left empty or half-filled. Several businesses are reevaluating their office space and use, with some considering on-site child care, said Kayla Klein, executive director at Early Learners South Dakota.

Such a benefit can be helpful for worker retention, Klein said.

But businesses are often scared away from the idea by the price tag and the risk involved with operating a child care center. Sanford Health and Citibank both formerly had on-site daycares in Sioux Falls. Monument Health in Rapid City still operates one, and First Bank & Trust's daycare in Brookings has been operating for over a decade now.

To avoid the risk of operating a child care business itself, Black Hills Energy in Rapid City partnered with the local YMCA to contract out child care for its new headquarters, which opened in 2017.

Black Hills Energy provides the space, assists with building costs and subsidizes child care fees so employees pay a "significantly reduced rate" for child care, said Lynn Kendall, community affairs manager for Black Hills Energy. Typically, monthly child care costs at a YMCA facility range from \$740 to \$800.

In turn, the YMCA pays child care workers and covers its own insurance for the operation.

The YMCA has a citywide waitlist of 321 with four locations. The Black Hills Energy site has a waitlist of 21, which strictly serves Black Hills Energy families.

"We know we have to work together to manage the workforce problem," said Keiz Larson, YMCA executive director. "My biggest concern is the knowledge that parent fees do not cover the cost of child care for children younger than 5."

Providers don't typically start making a profit on child care until children are preschool age or in after-school care.

Larson said Black Hills Energy officials are interested in expanding their on-site day care to further meet the needs of their employees and families. But YMCA can't expand any of its sites until it has enough staff — two classrooms are closed because the organization can't hire qualified workers at an affordable rate.

Scholarships support children, strengthen classrooms

The John T. Vucurevich Foundation is a philanthropic organization based in Rapid City that gives scholarships for preschool children who are waitlisted or don't qualify for the Head Start program, but whose

parents can't afford the full cost of preschool tuition.

The Starting Strong program began in 2007. A majority of the program's cost, which serves 100 children, is covered by the foundation. The city of Rapid City contributes just shy of \$50,000 a year to the fund as well, along with contributions from the Gwendolyn Stearns Foundation.

The program works with child care providers who meet Starting Strong standards, which support the scholarship students and the teacher, said Jessica Gromer, program officer for the foundation.

"It's not just the child affected," Gromer said. "Parents are learning alongside their child on how to teach when they come home from school. The benefit extends beyond preschool time. ... And most of the Starting Strong classrooms only have two to seven scholarship children in the classroom. We're reaching triple, if not four times, as many children that are awarded scholarships."

While the program only covers preschool, several families who qualify for the scholarship also qualify for government subsidies and child assistance programs to aid in child care costs outside of preschool.

Gromer said that if more businesses and organizations support changes to the industry, the foundation would be open to other initiatives to address child care problems, such as supplementing worker wages.

"Child care as an industry prior to the pandemic had a cracked foundation. The pandemic has not only crushed the foundation, but the house is completely moved off that foundation now," Gromer said. "Do we go back to that cracked foundation, or do we build a new foundation that communities can stand on?"

State efforts aim to improve child care system

Millions of dollars have already been spent on the problem by the government in recent years.

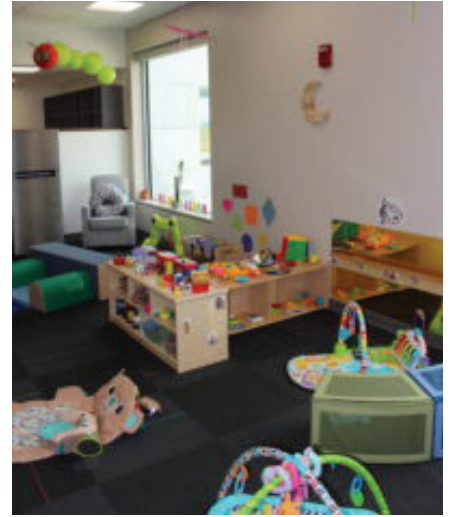
Over \$62 million in stabilization grants were awarded to more than 600 child care providers across the state through the American Rescue Plan Act, part of \$100 million allocated to the state from the federal government for child care needs in 2020.

The remaining \$38 million in funding has not reached South Dakota providers yet. The money is handled by the South Dakota Department of Social Services (DSS), which held listening sessions throughout August to brainstorm ideas on how to use the funds and improve the state's child care system.

Now, the DSS is reviewing the information and will use the feedback to "guide the priorities of the work as we advance," according to DSS Secretary Laurie Gill.

Gov. Kristi Noem also plans to address the child care crisis during her second term. She also held listening sessions during her reelection campaign last summer.

"Gov. Noem did commit in her gubernatorial debate to work on a solution to support child care providers in accessing health care benefits," spokesman Ian Fury said in an emailed statement. "More information on that proposal will be unveiled at a later time."



The child development center at Horizon Point, a partnership between Black Hills Energy and YMCA in Rapid City. (Courtesy of Black Hills Energy)



MAKENZIE HUBER

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

Child care is a major workforce concern.

Why wasn't it in Gov. Noem's budget address?

Paid family leave is a 'worthy start,' child care advocates say. But there's more to be done.

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER AND JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 14, 2022 2:44 PM

Child care is one of South Dakota's most pressing workforce issues, with cities, businesses and organizations searching for solutions to keep child care accessible and affordable across the state.

Gov. Kristi Noem addressed it as such on the campaign trail, but it did not appear in her Dec. 6 budget address to the Legislature, in which she outlined proposals she'd like to see lawmakers consider during the annual legislative session in Pierre starting next month.

Noem proposed South Dakota's largest-ever budget and what she has described as the state's biggest-ever tax cut, along with improved pay and benefits for state employees, money for new and improved prisons, and free college tuition for National Guard soldiers as some of the biggest headlines.

She also proposed extending paid family leave to cover 100% of pay for state employees — up from 60% — and establishing \$20 million in one-time incentives to help private businesses offer family leave plans, spread out over four years.

While it doesn't address the child care issue directly — such as the declining number of in-home day care providers, long wait lists, labor shortages and the struggle to break even for many child care providers — it is a "worthy start," said Michelle Erpenbach, president of children's education and child care advocacy organization Sioux Falls Thrive.

"Offering paid family leave to state employees does a couple things: it provides critical time for families to bond with new children, whether newborns or newly adopted," Erpenbach said in an emailed statement. "It sets a standard for private employers. Essentially, if the state can provide this for its employees then we should all be able to support young families in this important way."

Kayla Klein, executive director of Early Learners South Dakota, said she would like to see child care providers prioritized as businesses participating in the family leader initiative program, since the industry is critical to the state economy and would help address recruitment and retention within the industry.

The budget speech failed to address the "workforce behind the workforce" and just how "desperate" employers and parents are to find child care, Erpenbach added.

South Dakota has one of the highest percentages of working parents in the country. In Sioux Falls, that rate is 84%, which is 19 percentage points above the national average.

"As a community and a state, we need to collaborate around creative solutions that provide appropriate education and compensation — including full job benefits — for child care, early childhood education and after-school care providers," Erpenbach said. "... Without affordable, accessible care for children of all ages, our economic vitality is at stake."

Noem also didn't mention the work already done by her office and state legislators to alleviate costs for child care providers across the state.

Over \$62 million in stabilization grants were awarded to more than 600 child care providers across the state through the American Rescue Plan Act, part of \$100 million allocated to the state from the federal government for child care needs in 2020. The remaining \$38 million in funding has not reached South Dakota providers yet.

That money was already handled by the Legislature last session, so there wasn't a reason to touch on it in Noem's address. The South Dakota Department of Social Services is planning how to use the \$38 million in remaining funds to improve the state's child care system based on feedback provided in public listening sessions over the summer.

Klein said she's excited to see what comes from that funding and in the upcoming legislative session.

"Even though the ARPA discretionary dollars were not specifically mentioned in the budget address, we

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know that there are some wonderful plans for those dollars to help strengthen and expand the field," Klein said. "We're looking forward to the roll out of those dollars."

Klein added that in her discussions with DSS, the top priorities on how to use those funds will be geared toward the workforce, affordability and accessibility of child care, and easing the process of providers becoming registered and licensed in the state.

Noem also committed to helping child care providers access health care benefits during her reelection campaign, which advocates believe will be a step forward in addressing the industry's labor shortage. That initiative will have to be tackled during the legislative session.

Noem announced in her budget address that she plans to talk about other family related issues at her State of the State address in January, including funding for adoption, pregnancy and postpartum care for Medicaid patients and funding scholarships for foster care.



MAKENZIE HUBER  

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.



JOHN HULT  

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux falls Argus Leader.

Voters embraced affordable housing initiatives. Advocates say Congress should do the same.

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - DECEMBER 14, 2022 4:19 PM

Voters in Colorado approved a statewide affordable housing initiative in November; while voters in nine cities across the country OK'd measures to finance the construction of affordable housing, preserve existing rental properties and support renters. But as housing costs soar, analysts and advocates say more needs to be done and argue that federal action is needed.

Robert Silverman, a professor at the department of urban and regional planning at the University at Buffalo, said the affordable housing crisis we're seeing today has been many years in the making.

"It's a structural problem with the housing market, where housing prices keep going up, costs of construction have increased, and incomes haven't necessarily kept up with that part of the market," he said. "It's been something that's been brewing for a couple of decades now. And the policy response, although there has been some, hasn't been large enough to really wrap its arms around the entire problem."

Higher building costs, a shrinking supply of low-cost rental units and more people with higher incomes choosing to rent rather than buy are driving the increase in higher-priced rentals and corresponding decline in low-cost units, according to a 2020 report from the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University.

Over the past five years, rent increased on average 5.8% year-over-year but saw the steepest increase — 14% — from 2021 to 2022, according to Credit Karma's analysis of rental data. Meanwhile, the Census Bureau's five-year survey shows that 40% of renters put 30% of their income toward housing. Higher home prices — the median sales price for a home in the third quarter was 10.6% higher than a year ago — and high interest rates are also combining to keep people from buying a home.

In response, voters across the country showed their concern about the lack of affordable housing by saying yes to millions of dollars in housing bonds and grants to address the issue. Among the measures passed:

- Colorado voters passed Prop 123, which will allow 0.1% of the state income tax rate to go toward a number of grants and programs to increase affordable housing, assist unhoused people or prevent eviction, and provide rental assistance, among other provisions.

- In Buncombe County, North Carolina, voters agreed to a \$40 million bond for affordable housing. While voters in Charlotte approved a \$50 million bond package for the city's housing trust fund to provide financing for affordable housing projects. Charlotte needs 32,000 affordable housing units, according to the city government's website.

- Palm Beach, Florida, voters approved a \$200 million bond to build 20,000 new units of both discounted and market-rate units by 2032.

- A \$50 million affordable housing bond intended to create 2,000 units was approved in Kansas City



In November, Colorado voters passed Prop 123, which will allow 0.1% of the state income tax rate to be used to increase the affordable housing stock among other provisions to help the unhoused. This man, who was living in an encampment in Boulder last year, said he had been on a housing wait list for a long time. (Derek Miles for Colorado Newsline)

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Missouri. It will focus on housing that would cost between \$550 and \$750 in rent each month.

• Columbus, Ohio, voters OK'd \$200 million to go toward the building of more affordable rentals, efforts to house and assist the homeless and the preservation of existing affordable housing, as well as funds to make homeownership more affordable in the area.

"These bond issues are one way to address [affordable housing], but they're also a political indication of the degree to which voters recognize there's a problem that has to be solved," said David Dworkin, president and CEO of the National Housing Conference. "When we look at the broad range of proposals that have been approved, I think we also can see a signal that people get it. There's a problem. And we're going to have to pay to help fix it and it's not going to fix itself now."

Carlie Boos, executive director of the Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio, said that inflation has created an "immediate need" for the affordable housing bonds. People are overcrowding their apartments to cover rent and the length of stay in homeless shelters is getting longer as families have nowhere to go, Boos said.

"The way that inflation is pinching everybody's budget is making construction and building for housing demand harder and harder to do. So there's an immediate need," she said.

IMPACT Community Action, an anti-poverty organization based in Columbus, told an ABC affiliate that there were 2,000 evictions filed in September for Franklin County. The annual point-in-time count for Columbus and Franklin County's unhoused population in January, 2022, was 1,912 people, with 342 people completely without shelter. Community Shelter Board, the nonprofit that organized the count, cautioned that the numbers did not paint a full picture because the Omicron surge made counting more difficult.

The preservation of affordability in housing is also key to tackling the crisis, Boos said.

"We know that there's maintenance issues and rehabilitation issues and there's properties that are affordable naturally, but it's because they're substandard naturally," she said. "We don't want people to have substandard housing because it's the only thing they can afford."

But Columbus residents won't feel the effects of the bond measure overnight, she said, which is why she said state leaders should use pandemic relief funds from the American Recovery Plan Act to support the housing infrastructure in Ohio.

The Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio has called on Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine and the Ohio General Assembly to support spending \$308 million in American Recovery Plan Act funds to build more affordable housing and improve current housing, among other housing efforts.

Moving into homelessness

Andy Paul, one of the founders for Asheville for All, a group that advocates for "housing abundance" in Asheville, the county seat of Buncombe County, said the affordable housing problems facing the city are similar to many areas of the country. Paul said that tourism and retirees have created more housing demand, and that Asheville's expected population growth necessitates building more homes. He said he hopes that affordable housing bonds can help meet some of that need in the coming years. Buncombe County's residents are expected to increase by 80,000 people by 2045, according to two firms, the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization and Woode & Poole Economics.

The annual count of unhoused people in Buncombe County in 2022 was 637 people, a rise of 21% over last year's count. The majority of unhoused people — 57.8% — became homeless while living in Asheville.

"We don't blame people for wanting to move here. The solution is to just solve the problem. But that does create pressure," Paul said. "And it means people can bid up land value. They can bid up home prices. And so it absolutely causes displacement of people that maybe grew up in Asheville."

Peter LiFari, executive director at Maiker Housing Partners, a public housing authority in Adams County, Colorado, said that Congress often treats housing an "afterthought," by keeping funding for housing affordability low. According to a 2021 report co-authored by LiFari and Evelyn Lim, from Common Sense Institute, an organization that provides research on Colorado's economy, the state has to provide 54,190 new housing units each year over a five-year period to make up for lack of building during the Great Recession and to address future housing needs.

LiFari said he is "bullish on" Prop 123, which moves money from a general fund to a fund dedicated to affordable housing and allows local governments the right to opt in. But he added there will be challenges. If not enough governments enroll, there is some possibility that state lawmakers could direct the funds elsewhere. Local governments have until Nov. 1, 2023, to opt in so that their projects can benefit from the fund. By December 2026, the state's housing division will begin to analyze whether local governments have met their growth targets.

How the federal government could help

Dworkin, with the National Housing Conference, says that there is much more governments can do to address the affordable housing crisis. Localities could reduce regulatory barriers, like zoning restrictions, that make it harder to build high-density housing. But he added that Congress also needs to act.

He pointed to a Nov. 28 letter from a bipartisan group of more than 50 members of Congress to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy that stressed the need to once again boost the Low Income Housing Tax Credit. The credits, which the federal government issues to states, are then awarded to developers of affordable rental housing to be used for financing. In 2018, Congress boosted the tax credits by 12.5% but that increase expired in 2021.

The letter also advocated for lowering the test of funding a development with 50% private activity bonds to 25%, which would allow states to fund more projects. Both strategies would make it easier to increase the affordable housing stock.

Members of Congress have been focused on coming to an agreement on various tax issues before the end of the year, including bringing back certain business tax breaks and expanding the child tax credit, but it's unclear if the issue will be settled by the time the new Congress begins.

Silverman, with the University at Buffalo, said the Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as the Section 8 program, also could be much larger to meet more people's affordable housing needs.

"Half of the households that are eligible for vouchers aren't even on the waiting list. And so there's a lot of demand for housing subsidies for renters nationally out there and just expanding those programs would do a lot to meet some of the affordable housing needs that are already out there," he said.

HUD programs addressing affordable housing issues have only had incremental increases over the years that just don't keep up housing demand, he said.

The Biden administration announced a Housing Supply Action Plan in May, including a call for Congress to provide billions in HUD grants to increase affordable housing units, pressing states and localities to use American Rescue Plan Funds to build more housing, and leaving federal properties to affordable housing developers for reuse. In November, several White House officials, including Domestic Policy Advisor Susan Rice, National Economic Council Director Brian Deese, and American Rescue Plan Coordinator Gene Sperling had a meeting with advocates and experts in housing policy to talk about rental affordability and tenants rights.

Dworkin, who attended the meeting, said, "I think the White House is very focused on identifying bipartisan opportunities to make progress on this issue."

LiFari said policymakers at all levels of government need to prioritize this issue immediately.

"The housing shortage now, the homelessness crisis, is acute. It's horrible. It's a humanitarian crisis," he said.

Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.

U.S. House and Senate GOP at odds over massive government spending deal

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 14, 2022 3:21 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress is trying to wrap up its remaining must-pass bills before leaving for the holidays — but a split between Senate Republican and House GOP leaders could hamstring the all-important task of funding government operations and averting a partial shutdown.

Senate Republicans are working with Democrats in both chambers to negotiate a major omnibus package that would pay the government's bills through the remainder of the fiscal year, and potentially include other priorities, like legislation to protect the electoral count process in presidential elections. The framework was announced on Tuesday night.

But House Republican leaders are sitting this one out, saying they vehemently oppose wrapping up one of Congress' core responsibilities and prefer to act on spending when they take control of that chamber in January.

With such a narrow Democratic majority now in the U.S. House, nearly every one of that chamber's 218 Democrats would need to vote for the omnibus package, if all GOP lawmakers vote in opposition. Failure of the omnibus deal could lead to a partial government shutdown just before the holidays.

"We can't afford to continue to spend the way the Democrats have," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said during a press conference Wednesday.

McCarthy, a California Republican who is struggling to get the votes from party conservatives needed to become speaker next year when the GOP regains control of the House, called for Congress to pass a short-term spending bill into early next year. The current short-term patch expires Friday.

He, however, declined to say how a House Republican majority would approach negotiations in 2023, or change spending levels.

"Like every single household, we'd take how much money we're able to afford and we'd proportion it out, and let all the members have that debate in an open process," McCarthy said when asked whether he'd push to cut domestic spending or eliminate aid to Ukraine requested by the Biden administration.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, took the opposite stance Wednesday morning in a floor speech, saying he was happy to hear key "negotiators have reached a bipartisan, bicameral framework for a full-year government funding bill."

"I'm glad that our Democratic colleagues finally accepted reality and conceded to the Republican position that we need to prioritize our national security," McConnell said. "Republicans were simply not going to lavish extra liberal spending on the commander-in-chief's own party as a reward for adequately funding our national defense."



House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-California, holds his weekly news conference at the U.S. Capitol on June 13, 2019, in Washington, DC. (Photo by

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

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Defense, nondefense spending could rise

Few details of the framework of the omnibus package had been released as of Wednesday. But McConnell indicated in recent days that the defense spending level would be equal to the \$857.9 billion included in the National Defense Authorization Act, while the domestic spending level wouldn't exceed the \$915 billion in President Joe Biden's budget request.

Those figures, if they are the final numbers, would increase spending on defense programs from \$782 billion and nondefense accounts from \$730 billion compared to the current government funding law, which Congress approved in March.

But McConnell cautioned Wednesday that "it will take seriousness and good faith on both sides to produce actual legislation that follows the framework" while reiterating that Senate Republicans don't plan to stick around Capitol Hill past Dec. 22.

"If a truly bipartisan full-year bill without poison pills is ready for final Senate passage by late next week, then I'll support it," McConnell said. "Otherwise, we'll be passing a short-term continuing resolution into the new year."

Work not done on time

Congress is supposed to pass the dozen annual bills that provide government spending by the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1, but lawmakers haven't completed all of their work on time since 1996.

To bridge the gap, Congress regularly passes short-term spending bills that continue current spending levels and policies to give more time to work out bipartisan agreements.

This year, Congress passed the stopgap spending bill that expires Friday. Lawmakers are on track to pass a second short-term spending bill this week that would extend that patch through Dec. 23 so that Congress could pass all 12 government funding bills through the omnibus package.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, urged lawmakers to quickly approve that short-term bill when the chamber votes later this week, saying "the responsible and prudent thing to do right now is pass a one-week CR quickly, without the unwelcome brouhaha that has provoked shutdowns in the past."

Schumer said both sides should then work toward an agreement on all 12 government spending bills, noting that such a package would be "a balanced approach because it will contain wins that both sides want to see, like the Electoral Count Act and funding for our friends in Ukraine."

The framework that could lead to Congress approving full-year government funding bills got the sign-off of Vermont Democratic Sen. Pat Leahy, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee; Alabama Republican Sen. Richard Shelby, ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee; and Connecticut Democratic Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

Missing from the framework agreement was Texas Rep. Kay Granger, the top Republican on the House Appropriations Committee.

Granger said following the House Republican press conference Wednesday that GOP lawmakers would "have to look at the whole thing" before deciding how to approach defense and domestic spending, if they get it held over until next year.

'Big problems'

Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt — the top Republican on the spending panel for the departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor — cautioned against holding over the spending process until next year.

"I don't think any new Congress should be forced into trying to do the last Congress' work — and even more so if you're changing control," Blunt said. "I just think it's asking for big problems."

Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, chairman of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, said negotiators can reach agreement ahead of McConnell's Dec. 22 deadline if they have cooperation from Republicans.

On House Republicans' plan to oppose an omnibus spending package, Tester said, "If these guys want

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to run the country into the ground, they can do it. But it's not the responsible thing to do."

Shelby said Senate Republicans are negotiating with Democrats "because some of the House Republicans have not shown as much interest in getting an omnibus."

Shelby noted that McCarthy is "focused on" amassing the votes needed to be elected speaker during the next Congress when the GOP regains control of the House.

"I think he's got a lot of power," Shelby said. "But I think at the same time, it'd be up to the House to vote for the omnibus, and I think they will."



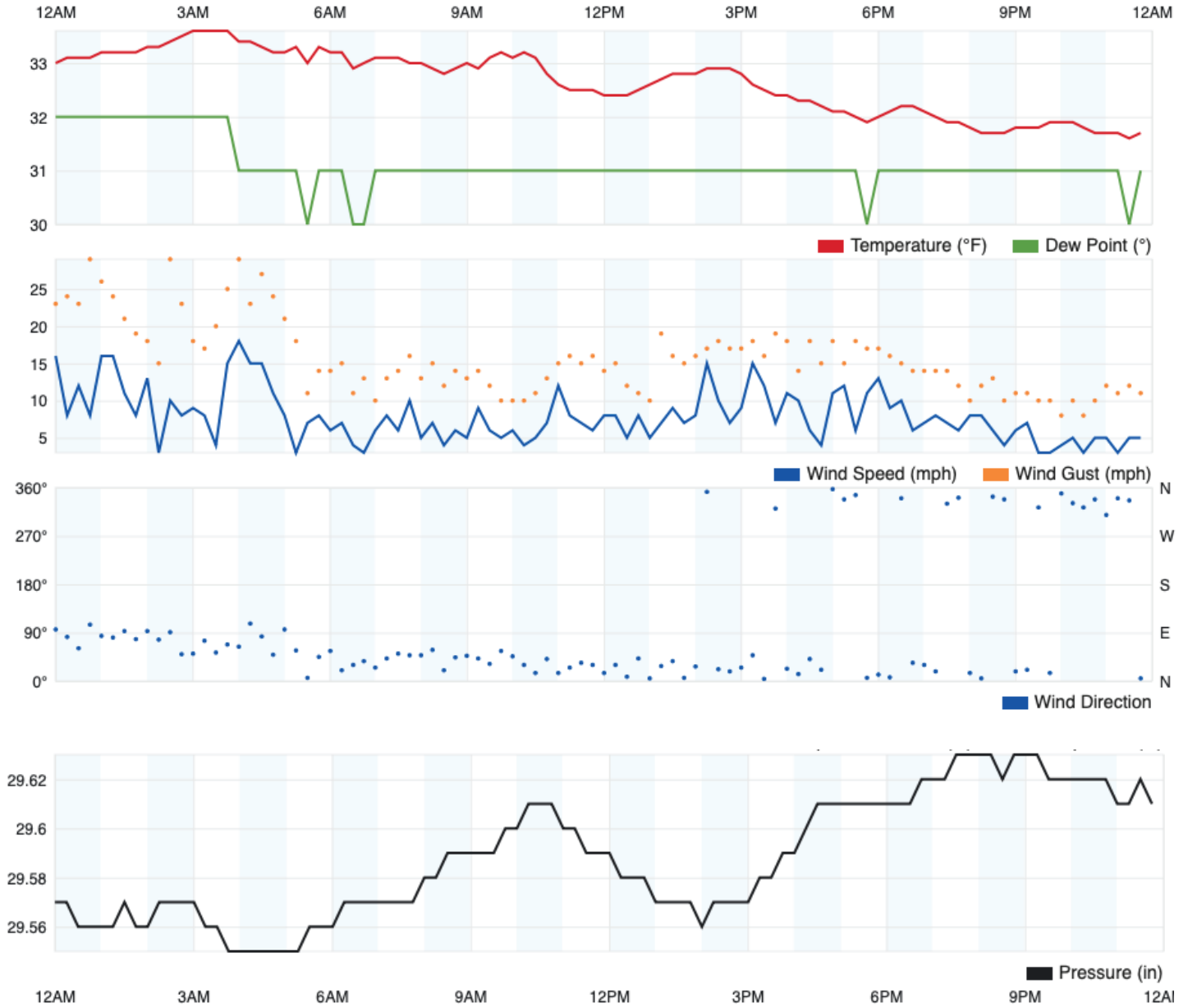
JENNIFER SHUTT

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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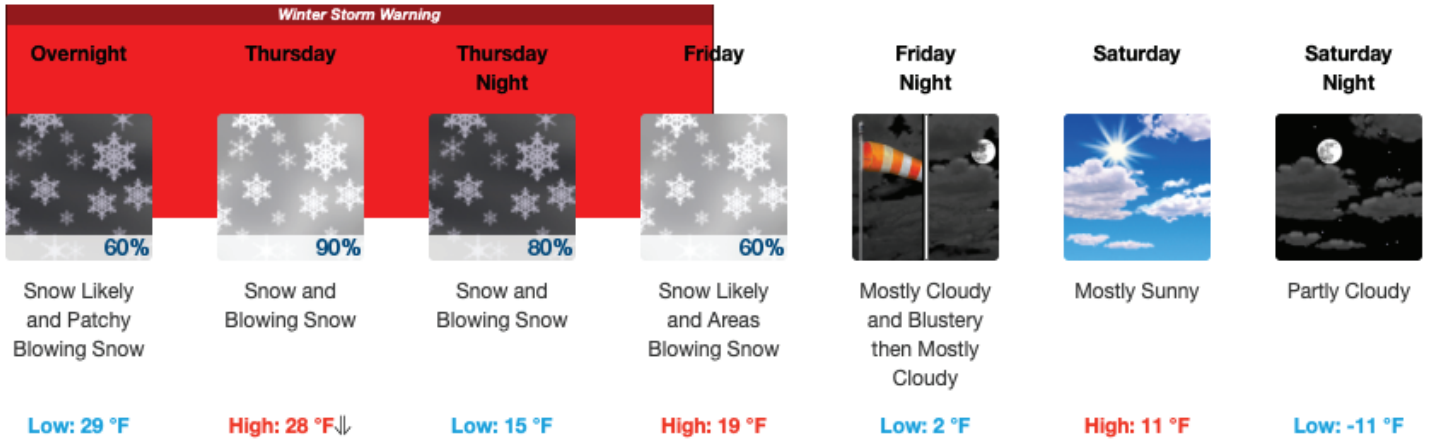
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Winter Storm Impacts Through the Week

December 15, 2022
4:31 AM

Key Messages

- Travel difficulties will continue into Friday.
- Increasing winds, combined with additional falling snow, will be the main driver of impacts today due to reduced visibilities and potential tree and power line damage where a coating of ice and/or wet snow exists.
- Light snow and windy conditions will persist on Friday.

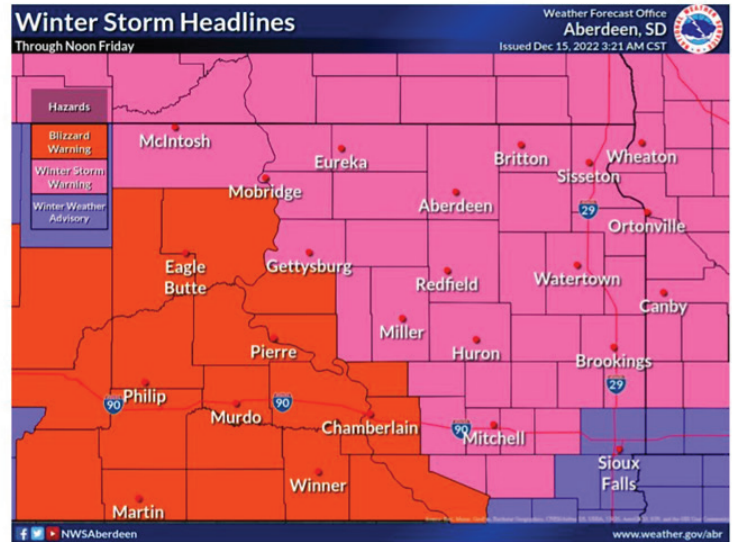
NEW

Important Updates

- The Winter Storm Warning has been extended until noon Friday. A Blizzard Warning is in effect across Dewey, Stanley, Jones, Hughes, Sully, Lyman, and Buffalo Counties until noon Friday as well.

Next Scheduled Briefing

- Thursday afternoon



Valid as of 3 PM Dec 14, 2022



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

The Winter Storm Warning has been extended until noon Friday and a Blizzard Warning is in effect for Dewey, Stanley, Jones, Hughes, Sully, Lyman and Buffalo counties also until noon Friday. Several areas still have no travel advisories. Please be careful if you must be on the roads today. Check sd511.org for road condition updates.

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Additional Snowfall Accumulations

December 15, 2022

4:31 AM

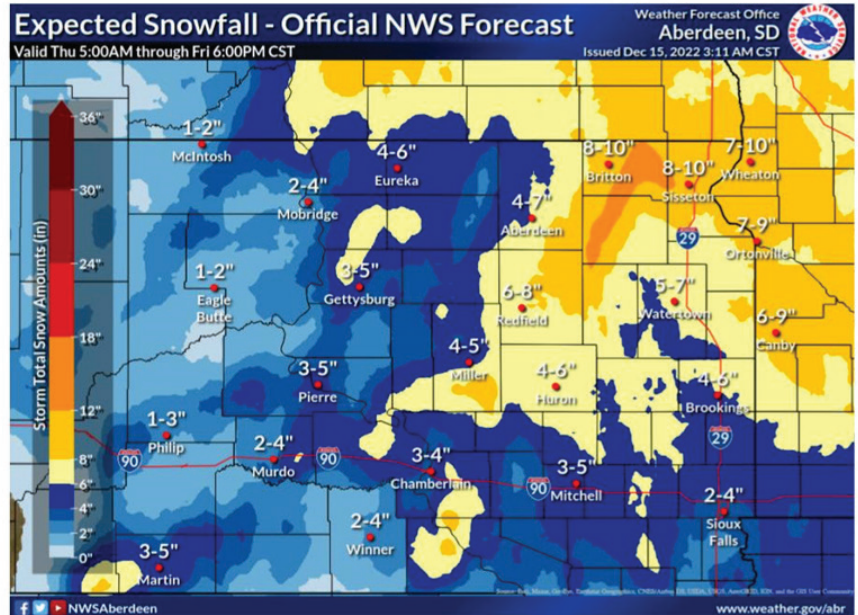
Today and Tonight, with light amounts lingering into Friday

Timing/Trends

- **Today and tonight:** Additional significant snow accumulations, mainly along and east of the James River Valley.
- **Friday:** Light snow possible during the day, ending Friday evening.

Impacts

- Reduced visibility due to falling snow and strong winds.
- Snow covered and slippery roads are expected through at least Friday.



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Still more snow is expected today with highest additional accumulations in far northeast SD. This is expected to be lighter, fluffier snow. Gusts of close to 45 mph will blow snow around and reduce visibilities at times. Travel impacts are expected to continue through at least Friday.

Winter Storm Warning

Brown-

Including the city of Aberdeen
258 AM CST Thu Dec 15 2022

...WINTER STORM WARNING NOW IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST FRIDAY...

- * WHAT...Heavy snow. Additional snow accumulations of 4 to 7 inches. Winds gusting as high as 50 mph.
- * WHERE...Brown County.
- * WHEN...Until noon CST Friday.
- * IMPACTS...Travel could be very difficult. Widespread blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.


PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

If you must travel, keep an extra flashlight, food, and water in your vehicle in case of an emergency.

The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

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Wind Gust and Direction Forecast


December 14, 2022
4:28 PM

Key Points

- **Central SD:**
 - ◆ Northwest wind gusts of 35 to 50 mph are expected this afternoon through Friday.
- **Eastern SD:**
 - ◆ Northwest wind gusts of 30 to 45 mph on Thursday and Friday.
- **Tree and power line damage possible.**

	Maximum Wind Gust Forecast																		
	12/14 Wed			12/15 Thu						12/16 Fri									
	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am
Aberdeen	24	24	25	30	40	44	45	46	44	40	38	37	35	35	35	31	26	25	24
Britton	21	21	23	24	35	40	41	43	39	36	32	32	32	32	32	32	29	26	24
Eagle Butte	41	40	41	43	46	47	47	49	47	45	43	41	43	41	40	38	36	29	26
Eureka	29	29	32	37	41	45	46	47	45	43	40	39	38	37	38	36	32	29	24
Gettysburg	37	37	40	43	45	47	47	48	46	44	41	39	39	40	40	37	33	31	25
Kennebec	41	40	41	45	47	48	48	47	45	41	41	40	38	38	39	37	33	30	28
McIntosh	39	37	38	40	43	45	47	48	47	45	40	41	43	41	41	39	37	29	24
Milbank	12	12	17	22	31	36	37	37	37	33	33	31	32	31	31	30	28	25	24
Miller	28	30	32	38	41	44	46	46	44	41	38	37	36	36	35	32	28	25	25
Mobridge	38	35	36	38	39	41	44	44	43	41	39	39	37	36	36	35	33	28	21
Murdo	41	40	43	45	47	47	47	47	45	43	40	39	40	39	40	38	33	28	25
Pierre	39	36	40	41	43	43	43	44	43	41	38	37	36	36	36	35	32	26	23
Redfield	22	24	26	33	40	44	45	45	44	39	38	37	35	35	35	32	26	25	24
Sisseton	17	17	20	24	33	38	40	40	38	36	32	33	35	33	33	33	30	28	28
Watertown	10	13	17	23	33	40	41	39	37	35	32	32	33	33	33	32	29	26	25
Webster	17	21	22	28	37	43	43	43	40	37	36	36	35	36	36	35	32	29	28
Wheaton	18	16	17	21	28	32	33	33	30	30	30	29	29	28	28	28	25	24	23

**Table values in mph
**Created: 2 pm CST Wed 12/14/2022
***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Winds will increase overnight and continue to be gusty through Friday. This could cause blowing snow issues.

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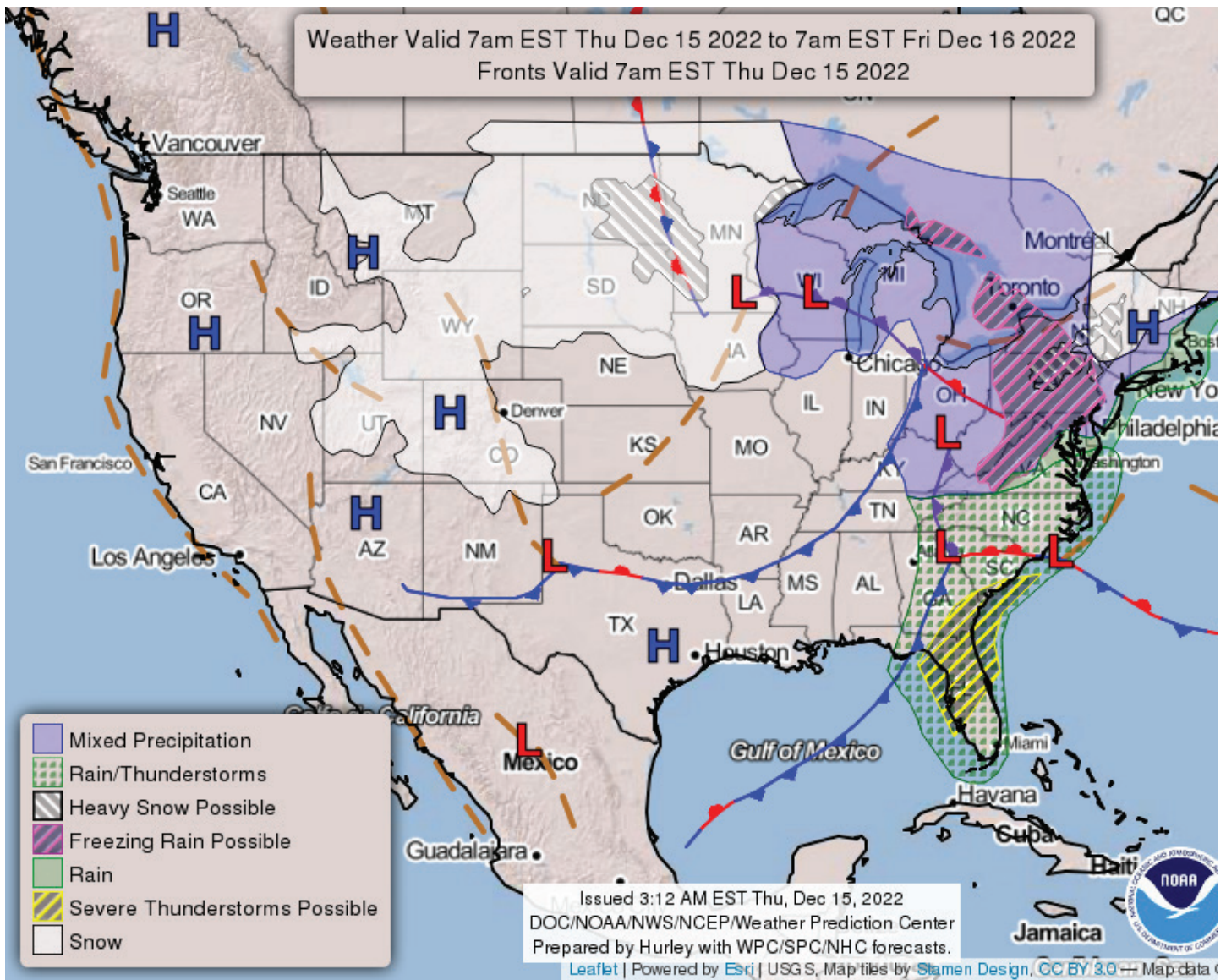
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 2:47 AM
Low Temp: 32 °F at 11:12 PM
Wind: 29 mph at 12:41 AM
Precip: : 2" of Snow

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1939
Record Low: -24 in 1917
Average High: 29°F
Average Low: 8°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.29
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.00
Average Precip to date: 21.50
Precip Year to Date: 18.50
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:29 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:04:30 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 15, 1983: A storm system impacted the region on the 14-15th with five inches of snow and high winds to produce blocked roads and numerous school closings on the 15th throughout most of the eastern third of South Dakota. No travel was advised from late afternoon on the 14th due to low visibility and blocked roads in Roberts and Brookings Counties. The conditions contributed to several traffic accidents. Meanwhile, snow also spread across Minnesota on December 13th and diminished late on the 15th. Snow accumulations ranged from 1 to 2 inches in west central Minnesota to higher amounts over 10 inches to the east. Winds increased and temperatures began to fall on December 14th as an arctic cold front pushed through the state. The strongest winds occurred during the night of December 14th and into the morning of December 15th. Near-blizzard conditions developed in the southwest and west-central sections of Minnesota where the visibility was reported to be near zero with winds of 20 to 30 mph. The wind chill index dropped to 30 below to 60 below zero. Blowing and drifting snow conditions occurred to some degree throughout all of Minnesota. Snow drifts caused many roads to close. Drifting snow continued during the evening of December 15th as the winds and snowfall gradually diminished. This event, associated with an arctic cold front, was the beginning of what would become, and remains, the coldest stretch of December days on record across most of the area. For the next nine days, beginning on December 16th, Aberdeen did not warm above -6 degrees, enduring temperatures as low as -34 F and high temperatures as low as -15 F. Other stations around the region had very similar cold temperatures during the December 16th through December 24th period, with temperatures warming into single digits above zero on Christmas Day.

1992: Cyclone John hit the sparsely populated northwest coast of Australia with winds gusting to 185 mph. John was the strongest cyclone to hit Australia in over 100 years.

1839 - The first of triple storms hit Massachusetts Bay. The storm produced whole gales, and more than 20 inches of snow in interior New England. There was great loss of life at Gloucester MA. (David Ludlum)

1901 - An intense cold front swept across the eastern U.S. The cold front produced heavy rain in Louisiana, and heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. (David Ludlum)

1945 - A record December snowstorm buried Buffalo, NY, under 36.6 inches of snow, with unofficial totals south of the city ranging up to 70 inches. Travel was brought to a halt by the storm. (14th-17th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm hit the Great Lakes Region, intensifying explosively as it crossed northern Illinois. High winds and heavy snow created blizzard conditions in southeastern Wisconsin. Winds gusted to 73 mph, and snowfall totals ranged up to 17 inches at LaFarge. The barometric pressure at Chicago IL dropped three quarters of an inch in six hours to 28.96 inches, a record low reading for December. Up to a foot of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and winds in the Chicago area gusted to 75 mph. O'Hare Airport in Chicago was closed for several hours, for only the fourth time in twenty years. High winds derailed train cars at Avon IN. Light winds and partly sunny skies were reported near the center of the storm, a feature typical of tropical storms. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - High pressure in the Pacific Northwest and low pressure in the southwestern U.S. combined to produced high winds from Utah to California. Winds gusting to 70 mph in the San Francisco area left nearly 300,000 residents without electricity. Winds in Utah gusted to 105 mph at Centerville. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A couple of low pressure systems spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S. Up to two feet of snow was reported along Lake Erie in northeastern Ohio, and up to ten inches was reported in Connecticut. Heavy snow squalls developed over Michigan for the third day in a row. Three Oaks MI reported 25 inches of snow in two days. Twenty-six cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 10 degrees below zero at Wichita KS was a December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Freezing rain and ice pellets fell throughout portions of the southeast U.S. The accumulation of ice caused about 683,000 utilities customers to lose power from northern Georgia northward through the western Carolinas. The power outages were the result of ice accretions of up to three-quarter inch in thickness. The ice storm was blamed for at least four deaths (Associated Press).

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

PLANNING AHEAD

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the teacher of the fifth-grade class was reviewing the details of the birth of Jesus. With carefully chosen words, she talked about the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Then she said with sadness, "And when they arrived, there was no room for them in the inn. Wasn't that terrible?"

George, after thinking for a moment about the vacations his family had taken and the careful, detailed plans they made said without thinking, "Why didn't Joseph make a reservation?"

There will be many around us during this holiday season who will make no room – no reservation – for Jesus to be with them this year. We often remind each other that "He's the reason for the Season" but do not take time to explain to others what that "reason" is. We are quick to condemn those who want to take "Christ out of Christmas" but do not take time to plant the message of Christ in their minds and hearts at Christmas. We place the manger scene under the tree, cover it with presents and then wrap it back up and forget about His birth and its significance for another year.

Hanging next to Jesus on a cross was a thief who was dying for crimes he committed. In his final moments, he turned to Him and said, "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus said, "I certainly will! Today you will be with me in paradise." The best day to make your reservation to be with Him is this day if you have not done so. Don't delay!

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, declares with certainty: "Today is the day of salvation." May we take advantage of this day and not risk the uncertainties of life! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:1-7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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2022-23 Community Events

- 07/21/2022: Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/22/2022: Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/24/2022: Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
07/27/2022: 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
No Date Set: 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)
09/11/2022: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3-5pm
09/11/2022: Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10 a.m.
09/02-04: Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/01/2022: Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/07/2022: Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
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
11/13/2022: Snow Queen Contest
11/19/2022: 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
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

02-12-21-27-33

(two, twelve, twenty-one, twenty-seven, thirty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$239,000

Lotto America

18-21-22-30-32, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 4

(eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-two, thirty, thirty-two; Star Ball: three; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$30,990,000

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: 429,000,000

Powerball

36-51-59-66-68, Powerball: 25, Power Play: 10

(thirty-six, fifty-one, fifty-nine, sixty-six, sixty-eight; Powerball: twenty-five; Power Play: ten)

Estimated jackpot: \$149,000,000

3 dead in Louisiana as US storm spawns Southern tornadoes

By JAKE BLEIBERG and KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

KEITHVILLE, La. (AP) — A vast and volatile storm system ripping across the U.S. killed at least three people in Louisiana, spinning up tornadoes that battered the state from north to south, including the New Orleans area where memories of 2021's Hurricane Ida and a tornado in March linger.

Elsewhere, the huge system hurled blizzard-like conditions at the Great Plains.

Several injuries were reported around Louisiana by authorities, and more than 40,000 power outages statewide as of Wednesday night.

The punishing storms barreled eastward Wednesday after killing a mother and son in the northwestern part of the state a day earlier. The system spun off a suspected tornado that killed a woman Wednesday in southeast Louisiana's St. Charles Parish and another that pummeled parts of New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes — including areas badly damaged by a March tornado.

A tornado struck New Iberia, Louisiana, slightly injuring five people and smashing out windows of a multistory building at Iberia Medical Center, the hospital said. As night drew on, tornado threats eased in Mississippi, although some counties in Florida and Alabama remained under a severe weather threat.

New Orleans emergency director Collin Arnold said business and residences in the city suffered significant wind damage, largely on the Mississippi River's west bank. One home collapsed. Four people were injured there, he said, adding, "The last word we had is that they were stable."

Similar damage was reported nearby.

"Several homes and businesses have suffered catastrophic damage," the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office said in a statement from that large suburb west of New Orleans. Among the heavily damaged buildings was the sheriff's office's training academy building.

In St. Bernard Parish — where the March twister caused devastation — Sheriff Jimmy Pohlman said the latest tornado damage covered a roughly 2-mile (3.2-kilometer) stretch. Parish President Guy McInnis said the damage was less than in the March tornado though numerous roofs were blown away or damaged.

Authorities in St. Charles Parish, west of New Orleans, said a woman was found dead there after a suspected tornado on Wednesday struck the community of Killona along the Mississippi River, damaging homes. Eight people were taken to hospitals with injuries, they said.

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"She was outside the residence, so we don't know exactly what happened," St. Charles Parish Sheriff Greg Champagne said of the woman killed. "There was debris everywhere. She could have been struck. We don't know for sure. But this was a horrific and a very violent tornado."

About 280 miles (450 kilometers) away in northern Louisiana, it took hours for authorities to find the bodies of a mother and child missing after a tornado swept away their mobile home Tuesday in Keithville, south of Shreveport.

"You go to search a house and the house isn't even there, so where do you search?" Gov. John Bel Edwards told reporters, noting the challenge faced by emergency responders as he toured a mile-long (1.6-kilometer) path of destruction in rural Keithville. He had issued an emergency declaration earlier in the day.

The Caddo Parish Coroner's Office said the body of 8-year-old Nikolus Little was found late Tuesday night in some woods and the body of his mother, Yoshiko A. Smith, 30, under storm debris early Wednesday.

Caddo Parish Sheriff's Sgt. Casey Jones said the boy's father had gone for groceries before the storm. "He just went to go shopping for his family, came home and the house was gone," said Jones.

The storms battered Louisiana from north to south. In Union Parish, near the Arkansas line, Farmerville Mayor John Crow said a tornado Tuesday night badly damaged an apartment complex where 50 families lived, wiping out a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes. "It happened quick," Crow said Wednesday, adding about 30 homes also were damaged along nearby Lake D'Arbonne.

A suspected tornado reported Wednesday in New Iberia in southwest Louisiana damaged several buildings of the New Iberia Medical Center, hospital officials said, with five people reporting minor injuries.

In neighboring Mississippi's Rankin County, a suspected tornado destroyed four large chicken houses, one containing 5,000 roosters, Sheriff Bryan Bailey said. Mobile homes at a park in Sharkey County, Mississippi, were reduced to shredded debris.

The storm began its cross-country journey by dumping heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada. Damage followed Tuesday when thunderstorms from the storm swept through Texas. At least five people were injured in the Dallas suburb of Grapevine, police spokesperson Amanda McNew said.

Forecasters now expect the vast system to hobble the upper Midwest with ice, rain and snow for days, and also move into the central Appalachians and Northeast. The National Weather Service issued a winter storm watch from Wednesday night through Friday afternoon, depending on the timing of the storm. Residents from West Virginia to Vermont were told to watch for a possible significant mix of snow, ice and sleet.

"This system is notable for the fact that it's going impact areas all the way from California to eventually the Northeast," said meteorologist Frank Pereira with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

In the Black Hills of western South Dakota, snow piled up to nearly 2 feet (60 centimeters) in some spots. "They shovel for hours on end," said Vicki Weekly, who manages a historic hotel in the tourist and gambling city of Deadwood, where some visitors still ventured out to the casinos.

A roughly 320-mile (520-kilometer) span of Interstate 90 in South Dakota was closed Wednesday, and state officials warned drivers there to stay off most highways.

In northern Minnesota, wet, heavy snow left tree limbs sagging and made driving treacherous Wednesday. Weather Service meteorologist Ketzell Levens in Duluth said 6 to 8 inches (15-20 centimeters) of snow had accumulated in some areas.

McGill reported from New Orleans. Associated Press writers Stephen Groves in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Jamie Stengle in Dallas; Ken Miller in Oklahoma City; Jill Bleed in Little Rock, Arkansas; Julie Walker in New York; Sam Metz in Salt Lake City; Trisha Ahmed in Minneapolis; Jesse Bedayn in Denver; Margery Beck in Omaha, Nebraska; and Robert Jablon in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Crazy Horse 93, Takini 13

Omaha Nation, Neb. 86, Dupree 50

Lakota Nation Invitational=

Custer 67, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 44

Lakota Tech 73, St. Francis Indian 30

Lower Brule 65, McLaughlin 37

Pine Ridge 66, Tiospa Zina Tribal 53

Rapid City Christian 77, Crow Creek 33

Red Cloud 66, Wall 40

Todd County 55, Little Wound 45

White River 82, Marty Indian 52

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Omaha Nation, Neb. 77, Crazy Horse 25

Red Cloud 72, McLaughlin 36

Santee, Neb. 59, Wakpala 33

Tiospa Zina Tribal 54, Oelrichs 16

Tiospaye Topa 58, Takini 35

Lakota Nation Invitational=

Custer 65, Pine Ridge 21

Lakota Tech 81, Marty Indian 26

Little Wound 54, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 34

Rapid City Christian 73, St. Francis Indian 25

White River 53, Lower Brule 36

Oceti Sakowin Brakcet=

Wall 69, Todd County 50

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

Mostafa's 25 lead Coastal Carolina past South Dakota 87-86

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Essam Mostafa scored 25 points as Coastal Carolina beat South Dakota 87-86 on Wednesday night.

Mostafa also added 11 rebounds for the Chanticleers (6-4). Jomaru Brown was 5 of 15 shooting, including 1 for 5 from distance, and went 8 for 8 from the line to add 19 points. Linton Brown was 5 of 9 shooting (4 for 5 from distance) to finish with 14 points.

A.J. Plitzuweit led the way for the Coyotes (5-7) with 19 points and five assists. Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 18 points for South Dakota. Tasos Kamateros also put up 17 points and six assists.

South Dakota lawmakers push review of program for disabled

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers on Wednesday readied to order an outside review of a state program meant to assist families caring for those with disabilities after it faced criticism this year from the people it is meant to serve.

Lawmakers on the Appropriations Committee, in the group's final meeting before the next legislative session starts in January, said they would request approval to hire a consultant to review the program

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under the Department of Human Services, called Family Support 360. The program provides funding and resources for families that have disabled members.

State lawmakers say the program has the potential to support these families while also saving the state millions of dollars by keeping people out of state-run institutions. But it has faced complaints that it has shortcomings and is not helping the families in need.

"Our family members need these supports to be able to live a good life," said Brenda Smith, who helps support her adult son Derek.

Smith and others who have family members with disabilities have told the Legislature that they are forced to fill gaps in care themselves due to limitations on the program from the Department of Human Services. They say that the program has a complicated application process, lacks clear communication on what supports are available and that companion care, which provides in-home aides, is limited to only 20 hours a week.

The Department of Human Services has said in multiple legislative hearings that it is working on improvements to the program. It did not immediately respond to a request for comment on state lawmakers' push to order an outside review.

"We're trying to take away the stress that these families have. There are so many hoops they are going through," said state Sen. Jack Kolbeck, a Republican who has pushed the Legislature to look into the program.

Kolbeck's plan for an outside review will need continued support once the new Legislature takes office in January, as well as final approval from the Legislature's executive board, a committee of top-ranking lawmakers.

Kolbeck said North Dakota recently underwent a similar review of its program, and he hoped the process could give South Dakota's department ways to improve the program.

In North Dakota, the U.S. Department of Justice in 2020 looked into complaints that alleged the state unnecessarily institutionalizes individuals with disabilities in nursing facilities, instead of providing them with the services they need to live in their communities. It entered a settlement agreement with the state to expand services to individuals with physical disabilities in, or at risk of entering, a nursing facility to allow them to live in their homes.

A U.S. Supreme Court ruling requires states to ensure that people with disabilities receive services in settings appropriate to their needs.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. December 12, 2022.

Editorial: Industrial Hemp Takes Root In South Dakota

Although it was a bit late to the game, South Dakota appears to be making up for lost time when it comes to the development of industrial hemp.

At a meeting in Yankton last week, proponents of industrial hemp in this state offered a bright assessment of the industry's brisk growth.

"In only the second year of production, (South Dakota is) already at 2,540 acres of hemp in 2022," Wakonda farmer John Peterson told the Press & Dakotan. "We finished ahead of Texas and just behind Montana with 2,998 acres."

The production of industrial hemp was finally approved nationwide by the 2018 Farm Bill, but during the 2019 legislative session, South Dakota failed to give a green light to hemp production, leaving us as just one of three states that had not legalized hemp production, according to The Associated Press. At the time, one Wyoming official reportedly declared that South Dakota's failure to move forward with industrial hemp was good news for his state's own hemp industry.

But the next year, Gov. Kristi Noem, who had vetoed industrial hemp legislation in 2019, switched gears on the issue, declaring "things have changed."

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Now, South Dakota is the No. 2 state in the country in hemp production, which suggests a solid recovery from that slow start.

Of course, 2,500 acres must be kept in perspective. That number is dwarfed by the 6 million acres of corn and 5.5 million acres of soybeans planted in this state in 2021. Granted, corn and beans are different kinds of crops, but the comparison does give you a snapshot of the economic state (and impact) of things.

Nevertheless, hemp is taking root.

An important next step is setting up more processing plants across the state. Peterson is set to open such a plant near Wakonda next spring, while Ken Meyer of the South Dakota Industrial Hemp Association (SDIHA) plans to open a plant at Winfred near Madison. (There may also be interest stirring in a plant located in the Tyndall area.) These plants could handle up to 12,000 acres of production, and SDIHA officials hope to see the state expand to 10,000 acres next year — a 400% growth.

Hemp can have an important role in the economic future of this state. Industrial hemp can be used to make a vast variety of products ranging from clothing and textiles to biodegradable plastics, biofuel, food items and animal feed. It is also among the fastest growing crops, and according to the SDIHA, it is drought resistant, which would come in handy in a state like South Dakota that borders on semi-arid areas.

This is a situation in which success may well breed success: With increased acres being planted and with more processing plants coming online, even more acres may gradually be converted to hemp production, expanding the economic footprint of this versatile, valuable crop. While it will likely never rival corn or soybeans as a cash crop, it could become a valuable supplement and, thus, an important financial player in this state.

Veteran QB Lindsey Scott of UIW leads FCS All-America team

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Incarnate Word quarterback Lindsey Scott, who started his college football career at LSU in 2016, leads The Associated Press FCS All-America team presented by Regions Bank and released Tuesday.

Scott has thrown for 4,404 yards and a Championship Subdivision record 59 touchdowns. The Division I record is 60 set by LSU's Joe Burrow in the 2019 season.

Scott and UIW face North Dakota State on Friday in an FCS semifinal game. Scott made stops at junior college and Missouri before landing at UIW.

Four of Scott's teammates were selected to the third team, including receivers Taylor Grimes and Darion Chafin, offensive lineman Caleb Johnson and linebacker Kelechi Anyalebechi.

North Dakota State and South Dakota State lead the way with three players each on the first team, all on the lines.

North Dakota State's Cody Mauch is the only lineman among 30 finalists for this year's Walter Payton Award, which goes to the best offensive player in FCS. Nash Jensen of North Dakota also made the first team. South Dakota State offensive linemen Garret Greenfield and Mason McCormick were also selected to the first team.

On defense, Spencer Waege of North Dakota State and Caleb Sanders of South Dakota State hold down the line.

Top-ranked South Dakota State faces Montana State on Saturday in the second FCS semifinal.

FIRST TEAM

Offense

Quarterback — Lindsey Scott, seventh-year, Incarnate Word.

Running backs — Jaleel McLaughlin, fifth-year, Youngstown State; Geno Hess, fifth-year, Southeast Missouri State.

Offensive linemen — Cody Mauch, sixth-year, North Dakota State; Garret Greenfield, fifth-year, South Dakota State; Mason McCormick, fifth-year, South Dakota State; Colby Sorsdal, fifth-year, William & Mary; Nash Jensen, sixth-year, North Dakota State.

Tight end — Ryan Miller, fifth-year, Furman.

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Wide receivers — Hayden Hatten, fourth-year, Idaho; Fotis Kokosioulis, fifth-year, Fordham; Xavier Gipson, fourth-year, Stephen F. Austin.

All-purpose player — Dylan Laube, fifth-year, New Hampshire.

Kicker — Skyler Davis, fifth-year, Elon.

Defense

Linemen — David Walker, third-year, Central Arkansas; Spencer Waege, sixth-year, North Dakota State; Jay Person, fifth-year, Chattanooga; Caleb Sanders, fifth-year, South Dakota State.

Linebackers — Zeke Vandenburg, sixth-year, Illinois State; John Pius, third-year, William & Mary; Johnny Buchanan, fifth-year, Delaware.

Defensive backs — Marte Mapu, sixth-year, Sacramento State; Alijah Huzzie, fourth-year, East Tennessee State; Marcus Hillman, fifth-year, Elon; Robby Hauck, fifth-year, Montana; Khalil Baker, third-year, North Carolina Central.

Punter — Jake Gerardi, third-year, Southern Utah.

SECOND TEAM

Offense

Quarterback — Tim DeMorat, fifth-year, Fordham.

Running backs — Jaden Shirden, fourth-year, Monmouth; Ulonzo Gilliam, sixth-year, UC Davis.

Offensive linemen — McClendon Curtis, sixth-year, Chattanooga; Mark Evans II, fifth-year, Arkansas-Pine Bluff; Ryan Coll, , Richmond; Nick Amoah, , UC Davis; Brandon Weldon, sixth-year, Sacramento State.

Tight end — Martin Marshel, fourth-year, Sacramento State.

Wide receivers — Andrei Iosivas, fifth-year, Princeton; Joey Hobert, third-year, Utah Tech; Xavier Smith, fifth-year, Florida A&M.

All-purpose player — Hunter Luepke, fifth-year, North Dakota State.

Kicker — Matthew Cook, fourth-year, Northern Iowa.

Defense

Linemen — Ty French, third-year, Gardner-Webb; Malik Hamm, fifth-year, Lafayette; Devonnsa Maxwell, sixth-year, Chattanooga; Josiah Silver, second-year, New Hampshire.

Linebackers — Joe Andreessen, fifth-year, Bryant; BJ Davis, fourth-year, South Carolina State; Aubrey Miller Jr., fifth-year, Jackson State.

Defensive backs — Justin Ford, fifth-year, Montana; Kameron Brown, fourth-year, Chattanooga; Maxwell Anderson, fourth-year, Weber State; Eddie Heckard, sixth-year, Weber State; Luke Glenna, fifth-year, St. Thomas.

Punter — Patrick Rohrbach, first-year, Montana.

THIRD TEAM

Offense

Quarterback — Michael Hiers, fifth-year, Samford.

Running backs — ShunDerrick Powell, second-year, North Alabama; Cameron Skattebo, third-year, Sacramento State.

Offensive linemen — Jackson Slater, second-year, Sacramento State; Luke Newman, third-year, Holy Cross; Anderson Tomlin, fifth-year, Furman; Caleb Johnson, fifth-year, Incarnate Word; Tyler Brown, fourth-year, Jackson State.

Tight end — Tucker Kraft, fourth-year, South Dakota State.

Wide receivers — Taylor Grimes, fourth-year, Incarnate Word; Darion Chafin, fifth-year, Incarnate Word; Joshua Tomas, fifth-year, Georgetown.

All-purpose player — Devron Harper, fifth-year, Mercer.

Kicker — Richard McCollum, fifth-year, Western Carolina.

Defense

Linemen — Jake Heimlicher, fifth-year, Penn; Dylan Ruiz, second-year, New Hampshire; Truman Jones, fifth-year, Harvard; Brody Grebe, second-year, Montana State.

Linebackers — John Ford II, sixth-year, Tennessee-Martin; Kelechi Anyalebechi, fifth-year, Incarnate

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Word; Stone Snyder, fourth-year, VMI.

Defensive backs — Kedrick Whitehead, fifth-year, Delaware; Michael Tutsie, sixth-year, North Dakota State; Rassic Littlejohn, fourth-year, Stetson; Benny Sapp III, fifth-year, Northern Iowa; Demetries Ford, fourth-year, Austin Peay.

Punter — Grant Burkett, fourth-year, Missouri State.

White House reveals winter COVID-19 plans, more free tests

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is again making some free COVID-19 tests available to all American households as it unveils its contingency plans for potential coronavirus surges this winter.

After a three-month hiatus, the administration is making four rapid virus tests available to all U.S. households through covidtests.gov starting Thursday, a senior administration official said. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the program. COVID-19 cases have shown a marked increase after the Thanksgiving holiday, and further increases are projected from indoor gathering and travel around Christmas and New Year's.

The administration is putting personnel and equipment on standby should they be needed to help overwhelmed hospitals and nursing homes, as was necessary in earlier waves of the virus. So far, there have been no requests for assistance, but surge teams, ventilators and personal protective equipment are ready, the official said.

The Biden administration is also urging states and local governments to do more to encourage people to get the updated bivalent COVID-19 vaccines, which scientists say are more effective at protecting against serious illness and death from the currently circulating variants. The administration is reiterating best practices to nursing homes and long-term care facilities for virus prevention and treatment and is urging administrators as well as governments to encourage vulnerable populations to get the new shots.

The planning comes as the administration has struggled to persuade most Americans to get the updated boosters as cases and deaths have declined from pandemic highs and most people have embraced a return to most of their pre-pandemic activities.

The official said funding for the new tests has been reallocated from other virus programs while the White House struggles to get congressional buy-in for additional COVID-19 emergency funding. The official declined to detail how much is being spent on the new tests or from which programs they were diverted.

Harry, Meghan vent grievances in final Netflix episodes

By SYLVIA HUI and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, vented their grievances against the British monarchy on Thursday in the second half of their Netflix documentary series, with Harry describing the royal press machine — including leaking and planting stories in newspapers — as a “dirty game.”

Harry, 38, also said there was a “wedge” created between himself and his older brother and heir to the throne, Prince William, around the time Harry and Meghan decided to step away from royal duties and move away from the U.K. to start a new life.

He cited the example of a joint statement palace officials issued on behalf of him and William to “squash” a story about William bullying the couple out of the family. He said it was issued without his consent.

“I couldn’t believe it. No one had asked me permission to put my name to a statement like that,” Harry told the Netflix series. “They were happy to lie to protect my brother and yet for three years, they were never willing to tell the truth to protect us.”

Elsewhere in the series, Meghan and Harry both reiterated their complaints that British royal officials did not help them by rejecting inaccurate, negative reports about them.

“What clicked in my head was, ‘It’s never going to stop,’” Meghan said. “Every rumor, every negative thing, every lie and everything I knew wasn’t true, and that the palace knew wasn’t true and internally they knew wasn’t true, was being allowed to fester.”

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Harry added: "There was no other option at this point. I said that we need to get out of here."

Meghan's lawyer, Jenny Afia, claimed in the series that she has seen evidence of "negative briefing from the palace" against the couple "to suit other people's agendas." She did not elaborate what evidence she saw.

Palace officials have not commented on the series.

The first three installments of "Harry & Meghan," released last week, focused on the British media's coverage of the couple and the way it was influenced by racism.

The new episodes come at a crucial moment for the monarchy as King Charles III tries to show that the institution remains alive and vibrant after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, whose personal popularity damped criticism of the crown during her 70-year reign. Charles is making the case that the House of Windsor can help unite an increasingly diverse nation by personally meeting with representatives of the ethnic groups and faiths that make up modern Britain — trying to show that whatever the allegations against him, the reality is different.

Harry's 2018 marriage to the former Meghan Markle, a biracial American actress, was once seen as a public relations coup for the royal family, boosting the monarchy's effort to move into the 21st century by making it more representative of a multicultural nation. But the fairy tale, punctuated with a horse-drawn carriage ride and lavish wedding at Windsor Castle, soon unraveled amid relentless media attention, including allegations that Meghan was self-centered and bullied her staff.

"I wasn't being thrown to the wolves, I was being fed to the wolves," Meghan said.

The series is Harry and Meghan's latest effort to tell their own story after the couple stepped back from royal life in early 2020 and moved to the wealthy Southern California enclave of Montecito. Their life on an estate overlooking the Pacific Ocean has been partly funded by lucrative contracts with Netflix and Spotify.

Race became a central issue for the monarchy following Harry and Meghan's interview with Oprah Winfrey in March 2021. Meghan alleged that before their first child was born, a member of the royal family commented on how dark the baby's skin might be.

Prince William defended the royal family after the interview, telling reporters, "We're very much not a racist family."

Buckingham Palace faced renewed allegations of racism earlier this month when a Black advocate for survivors of domestic abuse said a senior member of the royal household interrogated her about her origins during a reception at the palace. Coverage of the issue filled British media, overshadowing William and his wife Kate's much-anticipated visit to Boston, which the palace had hoped would highlight their environmental credentials.

The Netflix series is problematic for the palace because Harry and Meghan are appealing to the same younger, more culturally diverse demographic that William and Kate are trying to win over, said Pauline Maclaran, author of "Royal Fever: The British Monarchy in Consumer Culture."

"I think, it has to be worrying for the royal family in terms of their future, because they really need to get this young generation on their side, to an extent, if they're going to survive," she said. "They will have to make a very big effort to make themselves appear more diverse, and I think we do see that happening a little bit, but not enough."

A week into China's easing, uncertainty over virus direction

By DAKE KANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A week after China dramatically eased some of the world's strictest COVID-19 containment measures, uncertainty remained Thursday over the direction of the pandemic in the world's most populous nation.

While there are no official indications yet of the massive surge of critically ill patients some feared, social media posts, business closures and other anecdotal evidence suggest huge numbers of people are being infected. In Beijing and elsewhere, there was a rush on cold medication and testing kits. Some hospital staff are staying home, while others are back to work after being infected.

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After years of trying to track the virus down to every last infection, the government now says that's essentially impossible — but it's not clear what that means for reporting the most serious cases.

While major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen have invested heavily in health care, second- and third-tier cities and communities in the vast rural hinterland have far fewer resources to deal with a major outbreak.

For a variety of economic and cultural reasons, Chinese tend to be more reliant than citizens of other countries on hospitals, even for illnesses that are not severe. The government has asked to those with mild symptoms to recuperate at home, but if they don't, that could lead to strains, Yale professor of public health Xi Chen said.

"If people do not have such culture to stay at home, to keep those resources for sicker people, then that could easily crash the system," Chen said.

So far, Beijing has more than tripled the number of fever clinics to over 300, and those visited by Associated Press journalists were generally calm and orderly, with few indications of overcrowding. A children's hospital had 50 or 60 people waiting in line Wednesday afternoon, but three others had shorter queues. At one clinic in southern Beijing, a few elderly patients were put on IV drips, and one was inhaling pressurized oxygen.

Though the health care system in big cities appears to be holding up so far, Chen cautions that it's too soon to tell when cases will peak. The January Lunar New Year — when millions of people travel to visit family — is expected to present another challenge, Chen said.

"I'm concerned it could be a super-spreader event," he said.

Winter is also a tough time to loosen restrictions, Chen said, as the virus circulates more easily.

Other concerns include boosting China's elderly vaccination rate and bolstering the country's intensive care capacity. Though most of China's population is vaccinated, millions of older adults haven't had a booster shot of the country's domestically made vaccines. Studies show Chinese vaccines are effective in preventing hospitalization and death, but require at least three doses in order to be fully effective.

According to authorities, 86.6% of people aged 60 or over have received at least two shots. On Wednesday, the government said it would offer a fourth shot to those in vulnerable groups who had received their first booster more than six months ago.

Downtown Beijing was largely empty Thursday and those businesses and restaurants that remained open or had not cut back radically on operating hours saw few customers. The empty streets reflected both the fact that many who are sick are staying home but also that others don't want venture out to avoid getting infected.

Experts have increasingly said China's "zero-COVID" policy of lockdowns, quarantines and mandatory testing was unsustainable, especially in the face of the more infectious omicron variant that resulted in increasingly harsh restrictions.

Those measures were blamed for hindering the economy and created massive societal stress. The easing began after Beijing and several other cities saw protests over the restrictions that grew into calls for President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party to step down — a level of public dissent not seen in decades.

Though the Dec. 7 relaxation of measures has allowed more avenues for the coronavirus's spread across the country, the full effects are not yet clear.

In the economy, the news has been mixed. The National Bureau of Statistics on Thursday said China's value-added industrial output rose a modest 2.2% year-on-year, while the urban unemployment rate rose slightly to 5.7% in November, from 5.5% the month before. China does not survey unemployment outside of major cities.

Xi's government is still officially committed to stopping virus transmission. But the latest moves suggest the Communist Party will tolerate more cases without quarantines or shutting down travel or businesses.

Mi Feng, spokesperson for National Health Commission, reiterated that shift in tone on Thursday.

"At present, the focus of epidemic prevention and control has shifted from prevention and control of infection to medical treatment," Mi said at a briefing.

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The task of gauging China's preparedness is made all the harder by the lack of reliable statistics and projections.

The only numbers the National Health Commission is currently reporting are confirmed cases detected in public testing facilities where symptoms are displayed.

The government stopped announcing asymptomatic case totals earlier this week, saying an accurate count was impossible. The results of home tests also won't be captured.

China's official death toll remains low, with just 5,235 deaths — compared with 1.1 million in the United States. However, public health experts caution that such statistics can't be directly compared.

Chinese health authorities count only those who died directly from COVID-19, excluding those whose underlying conditions were worsened by the virus. In many other countries, guidelines stipulate that any death where COVID-19 is a factor or contributor is counted as a COVID-related death.

Experts say this has been the longstanding practice in China, but questions have been raised at times about whether officials have sought to minimize the figures.

South Africa leader fights for political future over scandal

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — The president of South Africa is fighting for his political future amid an unfolding scandal that has tainted his reputation as an anti-apartheid icon once widely admired for tackling the problems of Africa's most developed economy.

Cyril Ramaphosa, 70, says he's innocent of charges that he hid at least \$580,000 in a sofa at his game ranch. He's accused of not registering the money with authorities, and when it was stolen not reporting the theft to police, in order to avoid questions about how he got the U.S. dollars.

South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress, is to vote in a conference starting Friday about whether Ramaphosa should step down as the party's leader. South Africa's past two presidents have had to resign after losing the party leadership at the ANC conference.

Ramaphosa handily survived an impeachment vote in parliament this week, strengthening his hand in the upcoming party conference vote.

Ramaphosa is also being investigated on possible charges of illegally holding foreign currency.

"From Ramaphoria to Ramafailure," read a headline this week on the News24 website that described how widespread admiration over Ramaphosa's leadership of this nation of 60 million has become dismay.

Once respected for his anti-apartheid activism and his bond with Nelson Mandela, Ramaphosa came from a trade union background to become a board member and shareholder in several of South Africa's largest corporations. Ranked as one of South Africa's wealthiest men, he appeared well-equipped to tackle the corruption that has reached into virtually every corner of South African life including dealings with police and accessing government services.

One of Ramaphosa's pet projects is his Phala Phala ranch in Limpopo province, where he raises prize Ankole cattle and African antelopes. The allegations against him stem from a report that undeclared foreign cash was hidden in a couch at his house on the ranch. When that money was stolen in 2020, Ramaphosa did not report the theft to police, apparently to avoid questions about where the money came from and why it had not been declared to officials.

Ramaphosa maintains that his ranch got the money from the sale of some buffalo to a Sudanese businessman and the ranch manager did not know what to do with the cash.

Ramaphosa's supporters argue that the allegations against him — that he broke South African regulations prohibiting citizens from holding foreign cash without declaring it to financial authorities — are minor compared with the billions of dollars that, critics say, were stolen from the state by associates of former President Jacob Zuma who got fraudulent contracts with state-owned corporations.

"The disappointment in Ramaphosa is profound," said William Gumede, head of the Democracy Works think tank. "But South Africa's expectations have dropped so low that Ramaphosa is still seen as better than other alternatives. I'm struck by how this is the view from the boardrooms of major corporations to

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people in rural villages.”

Parliament voted 214 to 148 against starting impeachment proceedings on Tuesday, with Ramaphosa getting support from almost all lawmakers in the ruling African National Congress party, which holds a majority of seats.

That ANC support bodes well for Ramaphosa being re-elected the party's leader. He must win the party leadership in order to stand for re-election to a second term as South Africa's president in 2024.

Nelson Mandela is the only post-apartheid South African president to retire voluntarily, after serving one term from 1994 to 1999. Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor, was forced to resign in 2008 after falling out with a faction linked to his then-deputy, Zuma.

Then came the Zuma years. A judge heading an extensive judicial investigation into corruption said those years were characterized by rampant looting of state coffers. Zuma was forced to resign when the corruption allegations against him became overwhelming.

When Ramaphosa took over from Zuma in 2018, he promised to clean up the mess and supported the judicial inquiry. He won respect for capably steering the country through the COVID-19 pandemic. But the scandal over the dollars stashed in a sofa at his ranch has forced him to concentrate on just staying in power.

“The majority of the ANC will no doubt close ranks around Ramaphosa and he will continue as the party's leader and as the country's president,” Gumede said. “But to survive he has had to get the support of many dodgy characters. They will demand a quid pro quo and he will no longer be able to effectively battle corruption. He will stay in power but he will have less power to do anything. This will make him a lame duck.”

Ramaphosa's political struggles come as South Africa is confronted by a daunting array of problems, including unemployment of 35%, inflation of 7.4% and national power outages lasting more than seven hours a day.

“Across South Africa, there is a sense of hopelessness. People don't have political leaders or political parties they trust,” Gumede said. “It's not a good outlook for South Africa. The only glimmer of hope is that elections in 2024 will bring a better set of leaders.”

Ordinary South Africans express a weary cynicism over Ramaphosa.

Lerato Makgatho, 38, who lives in Johannesburg's Kempton Park area, said the revelations about the cash at Phala Phala shocked her.

“He has always been known to be a billionaire, so to hear about dollars of cash in a couch at his farm does not fit with that picture,” she said. “This one was quite a shock to me.”

Thabiso Kome, 35, a community activist in Tembisa township, east of Johannesburg, said he did not expect Ramaphosa to solve the scourge of corruption because it is so widespread in the ruling party.

“Some of us have seen corruption at a local level, at local clinics and hospitals. That kind of corruption cannot be solved by one person,” said Kome. “It is normal to hear about corruption and controversy when it comes to the ANC. Ramaphosa, he is part of it.”

At 'Church City,' a taste of Catholic life in Qatar

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Hymns echo through the spacious, blue-walled church. The congregants listen to the Gospel and the homily. They kneel, eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer or palms turned skyward. They line up to receive Communion as a choir belts out: “Lord, for my sake, teach me to take one day at a time.”

In many ways, the service at the Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Rosary feels like a standard Sunday Mass. But at this church in Qatar, the small Gulf emirate hosting the World Cup, there are some tweaks.

The church sits in a “religious complex” housing other Christian denominations. Its building looks nondescript from the outside, with no crosses on its exterior. Sunday Mass is celebrated also on Fridays and Saturdays, the weekend days in the conservative Muslim country.

“This is something very unique here in the Middle East,” said parish priest, the Rev. Rolly Gonzaga. “Our

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Sunday is Friday.”

From Masses to baptisms, weddings and confessions, the church provides a window into the religious life of Catholic expatriates in Qatar. Mass is offered in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Konkani, Tagalog and Sinhala, to cater to Catholics from India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and other countries. While Qatar is unusually full of visitors now for the World Cup, migrant workers already make up the majority of the country’s population of about 3 million.

“When I was in the Philippines, I only catered to the Filipinos. But here, (there are) different nationalities and then they have different cultures,” Gonzaga said. “I could feel the real spirit of the church, the universal church,” he said, adding the different communities learn from each other.

Non-Muslim religious groups in Qatar include Hindus, Roman Catholics and Buddhists, with smaller groups of Anglicans, Protestants, Egyptian Copts and others, according to a U.S. Department of State’s report on international religious freedom for 2021.

Sunni and Shiite Muslims and eight Christian denominations constitute the registered religious groups; unregistered religious groups are illegal, but Qatari authorities generally permit them to practice their faith privately, the report added.

The complex known as “Church City,” located on government-owned land, provides worship space for Christian denominations, “with clear government instructions that Christian symbols such as crosses, steeples, and statues were not permitted on the exterior of church buildings,” the report said. Gonzaga said having no crosses outside was out of “respect” for the country and its people.

Like other Gulf nations, Qatar has faced criticism, particularly in the run-up to the World Cup, for its use of low-paid migrant workers to build and support skyscrapers, roads and other projects amid concerns for their rights. Qatari authorities say they have taken steps to improve labor conditions. Rights groups, while crediting Qatar with reforms, have called for more to be done.

The needs of migrant workers who have left behind wives and children to work for long stretches in Qatar and other Gulf countries condition much of the pastoral care that the Catholic Church provides in that region.

During a visit to Bahrain last month, Pope Francis lamented that much labor can be “dehumanizing” and encouraged the promotion of equal rights for workers. Worshipers from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf countries packed the Bahrain national stadium for Francis’ big Mass.

The pope delivered a similar message in 2019 in Abu Dhabi where he also called for greater access to citizenship for residents of different beliefs.

Gonzaga described a religious life within the church complex in Qatar that includes Masses, celebrations for Christmas and catechism classes where children are taught the basics of the faith from prayers to the sign of the cross.

“Many people think that there is no Christian church here,” Gonzaga said at his office, surrounded by statues of the Virgin Mary, a crucifix and illustrations of the sacraments. “That’s why they are surprised when they see ... that we could do everything that we are doing inside the compound of the church.”

A newly erected Christmas tree just outside the church building towers over churchgoers waiting to take photos with it.

Another priest, the Rev. Albert, said there are some differences in marking Christmas here from what he was used to in India.

“There, we can go for carol singing on the streets and we can go door-to-door and we can express our joy,” he said. “But, here, it’s not possible. ... We respect the feeling of other religion(s).”

Carol singing and other festivities take place within the complex, he added.

Qatari law restricts public worship for non-Islamic faiths and criminalizes proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam, the State Department’s report said.

Outside the complex, priests visit Christian inmates and go into hospitals to respond to requests for Communion, confessions or anointing of the sick.

“I go there wearing this,” Gonzaga said, pointing to his Franciscan habit, adding he feels accepted and

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respected. "I don't encounter any problem," he said.

Some Catholics living far from the complex would like to see a new church in a different part of the country, Gonzaga said. That might have helped Catholics like Christopher Battad. He used to work in an area that is far from the complex and couldn't regularly make the trip to church, which made him feel guilty.

"I just feel that something is less in my heart," he said.

Still, he would pray, use a rosary and sometimes watch online services streamed from the Philippines, where he's from. Now, he lives closer to the church.

Riya Sebastian, who moved to Qatar from India, said she's been finding solace and joy at the church.

"It gives more peace and happiness in my life," she said. "Christmas is coming and when this is going on, we should ... beautify our hearts to receive our Jesus Christ."

Musk's Twitter tweaks foreshadow EU showdown over new rules

By KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Self-proclaimed free speech warrior Elon Musk's more unfettered version of Twitter could collide with new rules in Europe, where officials warn that the social media company will have to comply with some of the world's toughest laws targeting toxic content.

While the new digital rulebook means the European Union is likely to be a global leader in cracking down on Musk's reimagined platform, the 27-nation bloc will face its own challenges forcing Twitter and other online companies to comply. The law doesn't fully take effect until 2024, and EU officials are scrambling to recruit enough workers to hold Big Tech to account.

Known as the Digital Services Act, the EU's sweeping set of rules aims to make platforms and search engines more accountable for illegal and harmful content including hate speech, scams and disinformation. They'll kick in next summer for the biggest digital companies like Google, Facebook and TikTok and then expand to all online services the following year.

Those standards are poised to run up against Musk's whipsawing policies at Twitter: He abruptly axed a group of advisers this week who address problems like hate speech, child exploitation and self-harm, halved Twitter's workforce and issued conflicting decisions about content moderation.

"A lot can change in six months, but it sure seems like Twitter is lining up to be Europe's first major test case when it comes to enforcing the DSA," said John Albert of Berlin-based AlgorithmWatch, a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

Musk has called for "freedom of speech, not freedom of reach," saying he wants to downgrade negative and hateful posts. The billionaire Tesla CEO considers the bloc's rules "a sensible approach to implement on a worldwide basis," EU digital policy chief Thierry Breton recounted after a video call with Musk this month.

Other jurisdictions are far behind Europe. In the U.S., Silicon Valley lobbyists have largely succeeded in keeping federal lawmakers at bay, and Congress has been politically divided on efforts to address competition, online privacy, disinformation and more. Britain is working on its own Online Safety Bill, but it was recently watered down and not clear when it will be approved.

Musk's style of making ad hoc changes won't fly under the new European rulebook, experts said.

Twitter's disastrous rollout of paid "verified" blue checks likely would have triggered an EU investigation and possibly big fines because such major design changes wouldn't be allowed without a risk assessment, Albert said.

The premium service was abandoned last month after a flood of imposter accounts spread disinformation. It relaunched this week.

The abrupt disbanding of Twitter's Trust and Safety Council also would "raise some eyebrows in Brussels," Albert said. Expert advisers aren't required under the EU rules, but "good-faith voluntary efforts" show "European regulators that you care about transparency and are invested in trust and safety," he said.

Musk's tinkering — including dropping enforcement of COVID-19 misinformation rules and granting amnesty to suspended accounts — has already alarmed European officials.

Musk's approach is "a big issue" that calls for "more regulation," French President Emmanuel Macron

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told "Good Morning America."

In Europe, "you can demonstrate you can have free speech, you can write what you want. But there is responsibilities and limits," he said. Macron, who met with Musk in the U.S. this month, tweeted that "efforts have to be made by Twitter to comply with European regulations."

The bloc will require online companies to follow clear rules on dealing with illegal content and explain to users why the material was taken down or given a warning label. They will have to be transparent about the workings of their content moderation systems and recommendation algorithms, which suggest the next song, news story or product to users. They must let EU regulators review their efforts.

Breton, the EU's digital policy chief, said he reminded Musk about the penalties for violations, including fines worth 6% of global annual revenue that could reach billions. Repeat violations could result in an EU-wide ban. Musk and Twitter didn't respond to messages seeking comment.

Musk is already "backtracking on the absolutism" of free speech by suspending the rapper formerly known as Kanye West for a swastika post, said Marietje Schaake, a former European Parliament lawmaker who's now international cyber policy director at Stanford University.

"The problem is that there is a lot of hateful content below this threshold, which will make Twitter under Musk less safe and pleasant for women, minorities and people whose opinions are met with aggression," Schaake said.

To tackle such "lawful but awful" content that frequently bedevils content moderators, the EU will require extra scrutiny for the biggest online platforms — those with 45 million monthly users.

There's speculation Twitter might not qualify. It reported 238 million users before it was bought by Musk, who complained that the number of fake accounts was vastly understated. Companies have to report their user numbers to the EU by mid-February.

Big platforms will have to assess how they're dealing with "systemic risks," such as harassment, election-related disinformation, hoaxes and manipulation during pandemics.

By the summer, the first changes stemming from the rules should start appearing via digital "buttons" on websites and apps so users can easily flag illegal content.

The wide-ranging rulebook also poses a challenge for regulators who need to hire enough enforcers. EU officials have estimated they will add more than 100 full-time staff by 2024 to enforce the DSA and other new rules on digital competition.

Each of the 27 EU countries also will have to hire more people to police smaller platforms and coordinate with Brussels. On top of that, tech companies need to recruit more compliance staff.

All three groups will be hiring for very specific and similar skill sets: experts who know how platforms and their algorithms work, have insight into sites' content moderation practices and have experience enforcing regulations.

The problem is they "might end up competing for the same talents," said Rita Jonusaite, advocacy coordinator at EU DisinfoLab, a nonprofit group that researches disinformation.

There are concerns some European countries won't have the means and expertise to enforce the rules, especially if they're building skills in areas like disinformation from scratch.

"Regulators need to train themselves and acquire capacity very quickly," Jonusaite said.

The EU's executive Commission has launched a recruitment spree for dozens of expert jobs, including legal officers, data scientists, technology specialists, and digital policy officers to help supervise the systems that online platforms use to combat illegal content such as terrorist or child sexual abuse material and to fight harmful posts like disinformation.

Meanwhile, Musk axed thousands of employees and many others resigned, including those in content moderation roles. It's unclear whether he plans to add staff to comply with Europe's rules.

"As Musk is scrambling to both save money, comply with the law, and keep advertisers on board, the main question is whether he will dedicate the needed resources to monitor content at all," said Schaake of Stanford.

"It is one thing to make a conscious decision to leave racist content up, it is another to have it be up unnoticed" because teams monitoring content "are simply not there," she said.

Home-grown supply operation outfits Ukraine's women soldiers

By VASILISA STEPANENKO and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — When 25-year-old Anastasia Mokhina donned fatigues and rushed off with her husband to help Ukraine defend itself as Russia invaded on Feb. 24, she quickly realized the military wasn't well prepared for an influx of women volunteers.

So her elder half-brother Andrii Kolesnyk, who was prevented from doing military service by a childhood disability, and his wife, Kseniia Drahaniuk, mobilized at home to ship her needed items. Word spread fast inside the ranks that amateur quartermasters were focusing on women's particular needs, and a home-grown supply operation for female soldiers was born.

Now, a volunteer group called "Zemliachky" — roughly translated as "women compatriots" — is serving many of the 57,000 women in the Ukrainian military with boots, uniforms, stand-to-pee tubes, wireless bras, thermal underwear, medicines, right-sized bulletproof plates for their flak jackets, and care packages with items like lotions, shampoo, toothpaste, and feminine hygiene products.

In short, the group fill unanticipated gaps in the Ukrainian military's own supply operation.

"Our army was not prepared for the fact that so many women would appear in the army," said Drahaniuk, a 26-year-old journalist from Yalta, in now-occupied Crimea, sitting in front of metal shelves stocked with army boots and uniforms.

Today, at least 6,000 Ukrainian women have deployed on or near the front lines, in roles like paramedics and intelligence officers — but also snipers and artillery gunners.

They have joined the fight in a country where all men aged 18 to 60, with some exceptions, have been barred from leaving under martial law enacted after Russia's invasion.

When it got started, the association outsourced manufacturing of uniforms for women, but has since designed and produced them from a factory in the northeastern city of Kharkiv.

It all began with a need expressed by Mokhina, recalled Drahaniuk: "I need lip balm and hand cream, because my hands crack in the cold, and it's a pain."

Zemliachky has helped distribute more than \$1 million worth of support — about one-fifth of that through direct donations, the rest in in-kind support. Its corporate contributors include medical supply firms, beauty salons and the gaming industry, Drahaniuk said.

All Ukrainians have been impacted by President Vladimir Putin's war in their country, which widened a conflict that began in 2014 when pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbas rebelled against the Kyiv government, and Russia illegally annexed Ukraine's southern peninsula of Crimea.

Women, in ways large and small, have borne the brunt: Millions fled the country, often with children or elderly relatives in tow. Human rights monitors say some who remained were raped, sexually abused, or otherwise brutalized. As with many Ukrainian civilians, an untold number were injured or killed in Russian attacks.

"I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to do something," said Mokhina, who has worked as a signals and communications specialist and with territorial defense units in Kyiv. "We just wanted to fight back. So my father and I said, 'We will go' — and went straight to the nearby army post."

After the war broke out, Ukraine's military outfitted many women with small-sized men's uniforms or boots. In recent months, as part of its response, Zemliachky has crafted its designs to account for women's bodies, sizes and needs.

Dozens of orders come in and go out by truck, train and courier daily, and a converted two-room warehouse stall in northeastern Kyiv serves as a showroom where women on leave can pick up the wares — made available for free — themselves.

Once, Drahaniuk recalled, she got a call indicating that an order for 10 uniforms and pairs of shoes needed to be reduced to five — after a Russian attack one night cost five lives.

"They really give their lives for the freedom of our country," she said.

Last week, a pair of women in fatigues drew a joyful hug from Drahaniuk as they entered the supply room to collect new gear, raving about Zemliachky's support, which goes beyond equipment — like post-

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ing personal portrait stories of women soldiers or training videos online.

"Ksyusha gave us everything we wear. ... She is our savior," said Maria Stalynska, who joined the military in August and has been on an unspecified front line, using a nickname for Drahaniuk. "There are even cases when we need medicine or a hospital. We immediately go to Ksyusha."

"We are really grateful. These people really do a lot for us women, for the army, for protection," she added. "They support us in everything."

Kateryna Pryimak, co-founder of Ukraine's Women Veteran Movement, says groups like Zemliachky and another whose name translates roughly as "Arm Women Now" provide a crucial role because for years, "material support of women in the army" — uniforms, shoes, underwear — "was a problem."

"Our organization, as a community of military women and veterans who have been taking care of these issues for a long time, is very glad that we have allies," she said.

The military activities of volunteers like her could reshape the image of women in what many see as a male-dominated society.

"After the victory of Ukraine, the behavior of men toward women will change," said Drahaniuk. "In civilian life, there will be the women who fought, and the men who didn't, and it could change things like professional advancement, salaries, even the culture of women in society ... to have more respect from men."

Relaxed COVID rules, deadly crowd crushes mark year in Asia

By The Associated Press undefined

Natural disasters and crowd-related tragedies claimed hundreds of lives in Asia and overshadowed the COVID-19 pandemic, with most countries easing or completely lifting the tough restrictions of the previous two years. Even China, the last major country to try to control virus transmission through a "zero-COVID" strategy, relaxed the rigorous rules that triggered rare public protests.

Political turmoil hit debt-laden Sri Lanka, where protesters broke into President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence and forced him into resigning after fleeing abroad. He later returned to the country headed by a new leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who negotiated a bailout package with international lenders contingent on sweeping economic reforms.

Japan was shocked by the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during a campaign rally on July 8. The suspect cited Abe's links to the ultra-conservative Unification Church, whose ties to the ruling party caused major headaches for the new prime minister, Fumio Kishida.

In Seoul, 156 young revelers were crushed to death when more than 100,000 people flocked to the city's popular nightlife district for Halloween celebrations, the first since the country's strict COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

Earlier in October, police at a soccer match in Indonesia fired tear gas after some fans spilled onto the field, sending people rushing toward the exits, some of which were locked, and causing a crush that left 135 dead.

Still that same month, the collapse of a newly repaired suspension bridge in India's Gujarat state killed 134 people as hundreds were celebrating the Hindu festival season.

In November, a shallow 5.6 magnitude earthquake struck Indonesia's main Java island, killing 334 people and injuring nearly 600.

And in Thailand, the deadliest mass killing in the country left 36 dead when a fired police officer stormed a rural day care center and massacred mostly preschoolers.

China entered the year as host of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February, with participants and guests sequestered in a "bubble" as part of strict COVID-19 rules.

But the country's pandemic approach — which seeks to isolate every single infection at a huge cost to the economy and freedom of movement — unraveled when thousands took to the streets in major cities to protest the restrictions and call for leader Xi Jinping and the Communist Party to step down. The party responded with a massive show of force and an unknown number of people were arrested.

The government under Xi, who granted himself new powers as China's potential leader for life, relaxed

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measures and indicated it will tolerate more cases without quarantines or shutting down travel or businesses as it winds down its "zero-COVID" strategy, even as cases rise and threaten to overwhelm health resources.

France celebrates World Cup victory, fans cheer Morocco team

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Crowds in Paris and other French cities erupted in shouts of joy as France advanced to the World Cup final Wednesday, while disappointed Morocco fans mingled with the exuberant supporters of the winning team, paying tribute to the African country's unprecedented achievement.

Football fans streamed to the Champs-Elysees avenue in Paris, shooting off firecrackers and red flares, to an unending chorus of honking cars.

On the famous avenue, many were brandishing French flags and singing "we are in the final."

Some Moroccan fans, wrapped in the North African country's flag, also cheered their team in the streets of the French capital.

France beat Morocco 2-0 to reach the World Cup final against Argentina, in a historic match between the defending champion and Africa's first ever semifinalist.

Supporters from both teams gathered in bars from the boulevards of Paris to the streets of Morocco's capital Rabat, from the cosmopolitan French Riviera city of Nice to the historic Moroccan city of Marrakech.

Celebrating the victory near the Bastille square, in central Paris, Adrien Vignau, a 22-year-old Parisian, praised a "great victory for France" and said he was looking forward to the final against Argentina and its star player, Lionel Messi.

"Bravo to Moroccans," said Parisian Corentin Voiseux. "Tonight it's not only France that wins but all of the French-speaking people. ... We are together and Moroccans will be with us at the final," he added.

In central Madrid, fans celebrated on Sol Square after the match, some with red Moroccan flags draped on their shoulders, jumping up and down, and some wearing the French tricolor.

In Belgium, scuffles briefly broke out in Brussels after the game and authorities countered with water cannon and teargas after they were targeted. One and a half hours later, a tense calm had returned. Media reports spoke of 40 detentions. There also was some unrest in northern Antwerp.

In Paris, riot police vans lined the broad thoroughfare and the base of the imposing Arc de Triomphe, and white-helmeted officers roamed the crowd on the Champs-Elysees. Minor incidents briefly broke out, leading officers to occasionally use teargas to move the crowd away.

Despite their sadness, Moroccan fans expressed pride in their team, highlighting the history-making moment this game represented.

A Rabat resident, Fatima Zahra Attaq said that she was "a bit sad, but this is football. ... After all, they gave their best and made us proud to reach this stage of the competition."

"The national team made us dream," said Reda Hakam, also working in Rabat. "The dream is now over. I am not sad. I am actually very proud."

Kenza El Amrani said that "I think Moroccans should wipe the tears off their faces and cheer for this team."

Those who attended the game in Qatar also paid tribute to the performance and fighting spirit of the African team.

"Morocco played with their hearts," said Ayaz Dhrolia, a fan from Canada whose face was painted in Morocco colors as he left Doha's Al Bayt Stadium. "They won the hearts of millions and millions of people around the world, well appreciated. Thanks, Morocco."

Youssra Zhata, a Moroccan woman who was at the game, stressed that "they made it to the semifinals and that's an accomplishment. ... And we had Africans, Arabs, everyone supporting us."

Morocco was under French rule from 1912-56, giving the match political and emotional resonance for both nations.

Morocco has exceeded all expectations in Qatar by beating second-ranked Belgium in the group stage and then eliminating European powerhouses Spain and Portugal in the knockout phase to reach the semifinals.

In Gaza, Palestinians who thronged cafes and outdoor large screens expressed disappointment at Morocco's loss.

"All of Gaza is now sad for this result. We were hoping they would win," said Wael al-Riffi, a Gaza resident, as he held Morocco's flag.

Crowds also gathered in the Israeli-occupied West Bank to watch the game.

The Palestinians felt empathy from the Moroccan national team as players held the Palestinian flag several times at the World Cup.

Bethlehem welcomes Christmas tourists after pandemic lull

By SAM MCNEIL Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Business is bouncing back in Bethlehem after two years in the doldrums during the coronavirus pandemic, lifting spirits in the traditional birthplace of Jesus ahead of the Christmas holiday.

Streets are bustling with tour groups. Hotels are fully booked, and months of deadly Israeli-Palestinian fighting appears to be having little effect on the vital tourism industry.

Elias Arja, head of the Bethlehem hotel association, said that tourists are hungry to visit the Holy Land's religious sites after suffering through lockdowns and travel restrictions in recent years. He expects the rebound to continue into next year.

"We expect that 2023 will be booming and business will be excellent because the whole world, and Christian religious tourists especially, they all want to return to the Holy Land," said Arja, who owns the Bethlehem Hotel.

On a recent day, dozens of groups from virtually every continent posed for selfies in front of the Church of the Nativity, built on the grotto where Christians believe Jesus was born. A giant Christmas tree sparkled in the adjacent Manger Square, and tourists packed into shops to buy olive wood crosses and other souvenirs.

Christmas is normally peak season for tourism in Bethlehem, located in the Israeli-occupied West Bank just a few miles southeast of Jerusalem. In pre-pandemic times, thousands of pilgrims and tourists from around the world came to celebrate.

But those numbers plummeted during the pandemic. Although tourism hasn't fully recovered, the hordes of visitors are a welcome improvement and encouraging sign.

"The city became a city of ghosts," said Saliba Nissan, standing next to a manger scene about 1.3 meters (4 feet) wide inside the Bethlehem New Store, the olive wood factory he co-owns with his brother. The shop was filled with Americans on a bus tour.

Since the Palestinians don't have their own airport, most international visitors come via Israel. The Israeli Tourism Ministry is expecting some 120,000 Christian tourists during the week of Christmas.

That compares to its all-time high of about 150,000 visitors in 2019, but is far better than last year, when the country's skies were closed to most international visitors. As it has done in the past, the ministry plans to offer special shuttle buses between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve to help visitors go back and forth.

"God willing, we will go back this year to where things were before the coronavirus, and be even better," said Bethlehem's mayor, Hanna Hanania.

He said about 15,000 people attended the recent lighting of Bethlehem's Christmas tree, and that international delegations, artists and singers are all expected to participate in celebrations this year.

"Recovery has begun significantly," he said, though he said the recent violence, and Israel's ongoing occupation of the West Bank, always have some influence on tourism.

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war. The internationally recognized Palestinian Authority has limited autonomy in parts of the territory, including Bethlehem.

The Christmas season comes at the end of a bloody year in the Holy Land. Some 150 Palestinians and 31 Israelis have been killed in Israeli-Palestinian fighting in the West Bank and east Jerusalem this year, according to official figures, making 2022 the deadliest year since 2006. Israel says most of the Palestin-

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ians killed were militants, but stone-throwing youths and some people not involved in the violence have also been killed.

The fighting, largely concentrated in the northern West Bank, reached the Bethlehem area earlier this month, when the Israeli army killed a teenager in the nearby Deheishe refugee camp. Palestinians held a one-day strike across Bethlehem to protest the killing.

Residents, however, seem determined not to allow the fighting to put a damper on the Christmas cheer. Bassem Giacaman, the third-generation owner of the Blessing Gift Shop, founded in 1925 by his grandfather, said the pandemic was far more devastating to his business than violence and political tensions.

Covered in sawdust from carving olive-wood figurines, jewelry and religious symbols, he said it will take him years to recover. He once had 10 people working for him. Today, he employs half that number, sometimes less, depending on demand.

"The political (situation) does affect, but nothing major," Giacaman said. "We've had it for 60-70 years, and it goes on for a month, then it stops, and tourists come back again."

How Fed's series of rate hikes could affect your finances

By CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Reserve's move Wednesday to raise its key rate by a half-point brought it to a range of 4.25% to 4.5%, the highest level in 14 years.

The Fed's latest increase — its seventh rate hike this year — will make it even costlier for consumers and businesses to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. If, on the other hand, you have money to save, you'll earn a bit more interest on it.

Wednesday's rate hike, part of the Fed's drive to curb high inflation, was smaller than its previous four straight three-quarter-point increases. The downshift reflects, in part, the easing of inflation and the cooling of the economy.

As interest rates increase, many economists say they fear that a recession remains inevitable — and with it, job losses that could cause hardship for households already badly hurt by inflation.

Here's what to know:

WHAT'S PROMPTING THE RATE INCREASES?

The short answer: Inflation. Over the past year, consumer inflation in the United States has clocked in at 7.1% — the fifth straight monthly drop but still a painfully high level.

The Fed's goal is to slow consumer spending, thereby reducing demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, eventually cooling the economy and lowering prices.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has acknowledged that aggressively raising interest rates would bring "some pain" for households but that doing so is necessary to crush high inflation.

WHICH CONSUMERS ARE MOST AFFECTED?

Anyone borrowing money to make a large purchase, such as a home, car or large appliance, will take a hit, according to Scott Hoyt, an analyst with Moody's Analytics.

"The new rate pretty dramatically increases your monthly payments and your cost," he said. "It also affects consumers who have a lot of credit card debt — that will hit right away."

That said, Hoyt noted that household debt payments, as a proportion of income, remain relatively low, though they have risen lately. So even as borrowing rates steadily rise, many households might not feel a much heavier debt burden immediately.

"I'm not sure interest rates are top of mind for most consumers right now," Hoyt said. "They seem more worried about groceries and what's going on at the gas pump. Rates can be something tricky for consumers to wrap their minds around."

HOW WILL THIS AFFECT CREDIT CARD RATES?

Even before the Fed's latest move, credit card borrowing rates had reached their highest level since 1996, according to Bankrate.com, and these will likely continue to rise.

And with prices still surging, there are signs that Americans are increasingly relying on credit cards to

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help maintain their spending. Total credit card balances have topped \$900 billion, according to the Fed, a record high, though that amount isn't adjusted for inflation.

John Leer, chief economist at Morning Consult, a survey research firm, said its polling suggests that more Americans are spending down the savings they accumulated during the pandemic and are using credit instead. Eventually, rising rates could make it harder for those households to pay off their debts.

Those who don't qualify for low-rate credit cards because of weak credit scores are already paying significantly higher interest on their balances, and they'll continue to.

As rates have risen, zero percent loans marketed as "Buy Now, Pay Later" have also become popular with consumers. But longer-term loans of more than four payments that these companies offer are subject to the same increased borrowing rates as credit cards.

For people who have home equity lines of credit or other variable-interest debt, rates will increase by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike, usually within one or two billing cycles. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which follows the Fed's.

HOW ARE SAVERS AFFECTED?

The rising returns on high-yield savings accounts and certificates of deposit (CDs) have put them at levels not seen since 2009, which means that households may want to boost savings if possible. You can also now earn more on bonds and other fixed-income investments.

Though savings, CDs, and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes, online banks and others that offer high-yield savings accounts can be exceptions. These institutions typically compete aggressively for depositors. (The catch: They sometimes require significantly high deposits.)

In general, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to boost their profits by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering juicier rates to savers.

WILL THIS AFFECT HOME OWNERSHIP?

Last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported that the average rate on the benchmark 30-year mortgage dipped to 6.33%. That means the rate on a typical home loan is still about twice as expensive as it was a year ago.

Mortgage rates don't always move in tandem with the Fed's benchmark rate. They instead tend to track the yield on the 10-year Treasury note.

Sales of existing homes have declined for nine straight months as borrowing costs have become too high a hurdle for many Americans who are already paying much more for food, gas and other necessities.

WILL IT BE EASIER TO FIND A HOUSE IF I'M STILL LOOKING TO BUY?

If you're financially able to proceed with a home purchase, you're likely to have more options than at any time in the past year.

WHAT IF I WANT TO BUY A CAR?

Since the Fed began increasing rates in March, the average new vehicle loan has jumped more than 2 percentage points, from 4.5% to 6.6% in November, according to the Edmunds.com auto site. Used vehicle loans are up 2.1 percentage points to 10.2%. Loan durations for new vehicles average just under 70 months, and they've passed 70 months for used vehicles.

Most important, though, is the monthly payment, on which most people base their auto purchases. Edmunds says that since March, it's up by an average of \$61 to \$718 for new vehicles. The average payment for used vehicles is up \$22 per month to \$565.

Ivan Drury, Edmunds' director of insights, says financing the average new vehicle with a price of \$47,000 now costs \$8,436 in interest. That's enough to chase many out of the auto market.

"I think we're actually starting to see that these interest rates, they're doing what the Fed wants," Drury said. "They're taking away the buying power so that you can't buy a vehicle anymore. There's going to be fewer people that can afford it."

Any rate increase by the Fed will likely be passed through to auto borrowers, though it will be slightly offset by subsidized rates from manufacturers. Drury predicts that new-vehicle prices will start to ease next year as demand wanes a little.

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HOW HAVE THE RATE HIKES INFLUENCED CRYPTO?

Cryptocurrencies like bitcoin have dropped in value since the Fed began raising rates. So have many previously high-valued technology stocks.

Higher rates mean that safe assets like Treasuries have become more attractive to investors because their yields have increased. That makes risky assets like technology stocks and cryptocurrencies less attractive.

Still, bitcoin continues to suffer from problems separate from economic policy. Three major crypto firms have failed, most recently the high-profile FTX exchange, shaking the confidence of crypto investors.

WHAT ABOUT MY JOB?

Some economists argue that layoffs could be necessary to slow rising prices. One argument is that a tight labor market fuels wage growth and higher inflation. But the nation's employers kept hiring briskly in November.

"Job openings continue to exceed job hires, indicating employers are still struggling to fill vacancies," said Odeta Kushi, an economist with First American.

WILL THIS AFFECT STUDENT LOANS?

Borrowers who take out new private student loans should prepare to pay more as rates increase. The current range for federal loans is between about 5% and 7.5%.

That said, payments on federal student loans are suspended with zero interest until summer 2023 as part of an emergency measure put in place early in the pandemic. President Joe Biden has also announced some loan forgiveness, of up to \$10,000 for most borrowers, and up to \$20,000 for Pell Grant recipients — a policy that's now being challenged in the courts.

IS THERE A CHANCE THE RATE HIKES WILL BE REVERSED?

It looks increasingly unlikely that rates will come down anytime soon. On Wednesday, the Fed signaled that it will raise its rate as high as roughly 5.1% early next year — and keep it there for the rest of 2023.

EXPLAINER: What can the Patriot missile do for Ukraine?

By TARA COPP and LOLITA BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Patriot missile systems have long been a hot ticket item for the U.S. and allies in contested areas of the world as a coveted shield against incoming missiles. In Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific, they guard against potential strikes from Iran, Somalia and North Korea.

So it was a critical turning point when news broke this week that the U.S. has agreed to send a Patriot missile battery to Ukraine — something Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has sought for months to augment his country's air defenses. U.S. officials have confirmed the agreement, and an official announcement is expected soon. But experts caution that the system's effectiveness is limited, and it may not be a game changer in the war.

A look at what the system is and what it does:

WHAT IS THE PATRIOT?

The Patriot is a surface-to-air guided missile system that was first deployed in the 1980s and can target aircraft, cruise missiles and shorter-range ballistic missiles.

Each Patriot battery consists of a truck-mounted launching system with eight launchers that can hold up to four missile interceptors each, a ground radar, a control station and a generator. The Army said it currently has 16 Patriot battalions. A 2018 International Institute for Strategic Studies report found those battalions operate 50 batteries, which have more than 1,200 missile interceptors.

The U.S. batteries are regularly deployed around the world. In addition, Patriots also are operated or being purchased by the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Taiwan, Greece, Spain, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Romania, Sweden, Poland and Bahrain.

The Patriot system "is one of the most widely operated and reliable and proven air missile defense systems out there," and the theater ballistic missile defense capability could help defend Ukraine against Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles, said Tom Karako, director of the Missile Defense Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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PATRIOT COST

Over the years the Patriot system and missiles have been continually modified. The current interceptor missile for the Patriot system costs approximately \$4 million per round and the launchers cost about \$10 million each, CSIS reported in its July missile defense report. At that price, it's not cost effective or optimal to use the Patriot to shoot down the far smaller and dramatically cheaper Iranian drones that Russia has been buying and using in Ukraine.

"Firing a million-dollar missile at a \$50,000 drone is a losing proposition," said Mark Cancian, a retired Marine Corps reserves colonel and senior adviser at CSIS.

DEPLOYMENT CONCERNS

A Patriot battery can need as many as 90 troops to operate and maintain it, and for months the U.S. was reluctant to provide the complex system because sending forces into Ukraine to operate it is a non-starter for the Biden administration.

But there were also concerns that deployment of the system would provoke Russia, or risk that a missile fired could end up hitting inside Russia, which could further escalate the conflict. According to officials, the urgent pleadings of Ukrainian leaders and the devastating destruction of the country's civilian infrastructure, including loss of electricity and heat as winter drags on, ultimately overcame U.S. reservations about supplying the Patriots.

A key hurdle will be training. U.S. troops will have to train Ukrainian forces on how to use and maintain the system. Army soldiers assigned to Patriot battalions get extensive training to be able to effectively locate a target, lock on with radar and fire.

The U.S. has trained Ukrainian troops on other complex weapons systems, including the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS. In many cases they've been able to shorten the training, getting Ukrainian troops out to the battlefield in weeks. Officials have declined to provide details on how long the Patriots training would take and where exactly it will be done.

PATRIOT CAPABILITIES

Ukraine faces a range of Russian threats, and the Patriot is good against some and not that useful against others.

One former senior military official with knowledge of the Patriot system said it will be effective against short-range ballistic missiles and it represents a strong message of U.S. support, but one battery isn't going to change the course of the war.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the Ukraine deal has not yet been made public, noted that one Patriot battery has a long firing range, but can cover only a limited broad area. As an example, Patriots can effectively protect a small military base, but can't fully protect a large city such as Kyiv. They could only provide coverage for a segment of a city.

Patriots are often deployed as a battalion, which includes four batteries. This won't be the case with Ukraine, which officials said would be receiving one battery.

The Patriot has a more powerful radar that is better at discriminating targets than the Soviet-era S-300 system the Ukrainians have been using, but it has limitations, both Karako and Cancian said.

Still the Patriot's ability to target some ballistic missiles and aircraft could potentially protect Kyiv if Russian President Vladimir Putin carried through on his persistent threat to deploy a tactical nuclear device. But that would depend on how the weapon was delivered, Karako said. If it was a gravity bomb delivered by a warplane, the system could target the aircraft; if it was a cruise or short-to-medium-range ballistic missile, it could also possibly intercept the missile, Karako said.

Raytheon, which manufactures the Patriot, says it has been involved in 150 intercepts of ballistic missiles since 2015. The success rate of the Patriot, however, has been repeatedly questioned. A 1992 Government Accountability Office report said it could not find evidence to support reports that the system had achieved a 70% success rate against Scud missiles in the Gulf War. In 2018, Saudi Arabia's success in using Patriots against missiles fired by Houthi rebels in Yemen was questioned when videos surfaced of systems failing.

But beyond the Patriot's capabilities, its deployment is a big statement of support for Ukraine.

"There's a lot of symbolism here," Cancian said.

Health officials revise tool to track severe obesity in kids

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

U.S. health officials have revised a tool to track the rising cases of severe obesity among children who were previously off the charts.

Updated growth charts released Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now extend to a body mass index of 60 — up from previous charts that stopped at a BMI of 37, with additional categories to track obesity in kids ages 2 to 19.

In recent decades, severe obesity among children in America has nearly quadrupled, experts said.

"We noticed a decade ago that we were kind of outstripping our growth charts," said Dr. Tom Inge, who directs the weight loss surgery program at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

The CDC charts are the most widely used tool in the U.S. to track growth and development in kids. Parents are used to discussing the progress of their children's growth from the time they are babies, noted the CDC's Dr. Alyson Goodman. The new charts will be "extremely helpful" in guiding better conversations between parents and health care providers, she said.

"You use these charts as a visual aid," Goodman said.

The old charts had been used since 2000. They were based on data from U.S. surveys conducted from 1963 to 1994, when far fewer children were obese, let alone severely obese, said Cynthia Ogden, a CDC epidemiologist. Today, about 4.5 million children — about 6% — fall into that category.

Growth charts show patterns of development by age, expressed in BMI, a calculation of height and weight, and also in curves called percentiles. Unlike adults, children are not classified as obese or severely obese based on a strict BMI cutoff, Inge noted. Instead, kids are described as obese based on percentiles — where they fall compared to other kids their age.

A child is considered obese if they reach the 95th percentile on the growth charts, and severely obese at 120% of that mark — or with a BMI of 35 or higher, according to the CDC. For instance, a 17-year-old boy who is 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighs 250 pounds would have a BMI of 38 and be described as severely obese.

The old charts didn't include children like Bryan Alcala of Aurora, Illinois, who first sought help in 2019 as a high school freshman who was 5 feet, 5 inches and weighed about 300 pounds.

"That was when it kind of got out of control," recalled Alcala, who had put on extra pounds after developing a rare childhood bone disease that limited his activity.

Children like Alcala, with BMIs of 45, 50 or higher, topped out on the CDC charts, making it difficult to assess their status or properly plot their progress, often delaying treatment, Inge said.

"It's like driving a car at night with no headlights and no dashboard," Inge said. "You don't know where they are with regard to their peers."

Alcala, now 17, had weight loss surgery in April and lost 115 pounds, with 10 more to go.

"Everything is going good now," he said.

However, one expert who questions the use of BMI to assess adults, said doctors need to be careful using the new charts with kids. They should focus on behaviors that drive weight gain, taking care not to stigmatize kids and families, said Dr. Tracy Richmond, an associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

"Using it as a visual tool for families, I find problematic," said Richmond. "The family and child already knows they're living in a large body. We clinicians are not going to be providing any new information with that."

But Erika Alcala, Bryan's mother, said she was glad the new growth charts will include kids like her son.

"Until you see it on paper and in front of you, you don't know," she said.

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Venezuela's Maduro enters 2023 seeking global recognition

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was not invited to a summit of Western Hemisphere leaders in June. But by October, he traveled to Egypt for a conference where he joked with French President Emmanuel Macron and shook hands with John Kerry, the U.S. government's climate envoy.

The encounters, with a towering Maduro graciously smiling throughout, were carefully captured on video, posted on social media and broadcast on Venezuela's state television.

A few months short of a decade since he inherited the country's leadership upon the death of President Hugo Chávez, Maduro is working to regain the international recognition he lost when his 2018 re-election was deemed a sham by dozens of nations.

Those efforts are also aimed at bolstering his strength at home as he enters 2023 while pressure mounts for a free and fair presidential election the following year.

Crucial to Maduro's calculations are his country's top asset — oil — and the war in Ukraine. The South American country has the world's largest proven oil reserves, but it has not supplied the West's market since the U.S. imposed crippling economic sanctions as democracy and human rights deteriorated after Maduro's re-election.

The international community wants "some kind of contribution to global energy security, and with Russian oil off the market, Venezuelan oil becomes attractive again," said Ryan Berg, director of the Americas program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank.

Maduro's attempt to clean up his image comes as many of the conditions that turned him into an international pariah remain unchanged.

Independent experts working with the U.N.'s top human rights body have documented a systemic attack on government opponents, journalists and others. Their report in September alleged Maduro personally ordered the detention of government opponents, who endured electric shocks, asphyxiation and other cruel acts while in custody.

An economic crisis that began during Chávez's last months in office has only worsened during Maduro's presidency. It has driven roughly 7 million Venezuelans to leave the country, made the local currency worthless and pushed millions into poverty.

Under Maduro, who succeeded Chavez in 2013, about three-quarters of the population lives on less than \$1.90 a day — the international benchmark of extreme poverty. Power outages are part of everyday life, and water supply is severely restricted.

"He's trying to project an image of strength, but the reality is that he's just incredibly thirsty right now for international attention," said Geoff Ramsey, director of Venezuela research at the U.S.-based Washington Office on Latin America think tank. "We saw this from Cairo, where he was ambushing world leaders and then projecting these hallway encounters as if they were official state visits."

Maduro has serious cashflow problems and wants access to the international financial system and the U.S. oil market, Ramsey said. But, he added, the only way Maduro likely will get access to dollars again is by engaging in negotiations with the opposition.

Talks between Maduro and the opposition, including the faction backed by the U.S. government, were suspended for more than a year after one of his key allies was extradited to the U.S. from Africa.

But both sides reached a significant agreement to fund much-needed social programs in late November. The agreement will result in a United Nations-managed fund to finance health, food and education programs in Venezuela.

The money will be drawn from the country's assets frozen abroad, and it is not expected to go directly to Maduro's government. But that hasn't stopped his administration from promoting the deal as a recovery of funds "kidnapped" by the U.S.

Still to be agreed on, though, are the conditions for the presidential election that is supposed to be held in 2024, the release of political prisoners and an end to prohibitions on many opposition politicians running for office.

The opposition plans to hold primary elections next year. Its clearest potential candidate is Juan Guaido,

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though his support within and outside Venezuela has plummeted since he declared himself a rival president to Maduro in 2019 while heading the then opposition-dominated congress and drew tens of thousands of anti-Maduro protesters to the streets.

There have been gains for Maduro.

A longtime supporter of Venezuela's opposition — the government in neighboring Colombia — is now headed by that country's first leftist president, Gustavo Petro. After taking office earlier this year, Petro immediately moved to restore relations with Venezuela. In a couple of weeks, Maduro will also regain the recognition of Brazil, as signaled by President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Berg said the region appears to be moving on from its anti-Maduro stance "mostly because of the governments that recent elections have brought to power."

He said some governments are working under the assumption that Venezuela's "democratization is going to be a long process," involving negotiations, multiple elections and sanctions relief, as opposed to a change at a "one discrete point in time."

"It seems to me like the region is much ready, much more disposed now, to try that method," Berg said, noting that many nations in the region are struggling with their own domestic problems.

US sues Arizona over shipping containers on Mexico border

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The U.S. government sued Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and the state Wednesday over the placement of shipping containers as a barrier on the border with Mexico, saying it is trespassing on federal lands.

The complaint filed in U.S. District Court comes three weeks before the Republican governor steps aside for Democratic Gov.-elect Katie Hobbs, who has said she opposes the construction.

Ducey told U.S. officials earlier this week that Arizona is ready to help remove the containers, which he says were placed as a temporary barrier. But he wants the U.S. government to say when it will fill any remaining gaps in the permanent border wall as it announced it would a year ago.

The U.S. "owes it to Arizonans and all Americans to release a timeline," he wrote in a Tuesday letter, responding to news of the pending federal complaint.

Border security was a focus of Donald Trump's presidency and remains a key issue for Republican politicians.

The Department of Justice complaint asks the court for Arizona to be ordered to halt placement and remove the containers in remote San Rafael Valley in southeastern Cochise County.

The work placing up to 3,000 containers at a cost of \$95 million is about a third complete, but protesters concerned about its impact on the environment have held up work in recent days.

"Officials from Reclamation and the Forest Service have notified Arizona that it is trespassing on federal lands," the complaint reads. The action also seeks damages to compensate the United States to fix any damage along the border.

The Justice Department sued on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service it oversees.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement from Washington that the project "is not an effective barrier, it poses safety hazards to both the public and those working in the area and has significantly damaged public land."

"We need serious solutions at our border, with input from local leaders and communities. Stacking shipping containers is not a productive solution," Vilsack said.

The complaint was applauded by U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva, a Democrat who represents southern Arizona. He called the project an "illegal junkyard border wall."

Russ McSpadden, Southwest conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the federal complaint "should be the beginning of the end of Doug Ducey's lawless assault on protected national forestlands and endangered wildlife."

Ducey wrote federal officials after being informed of their intent to file the complaint and rejected their

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argument that the containers “present serious public safety risks and environmental harms.”

“The number one public safety risk and environmental harm has come from inaction by the federal government to secure our border,” Ducey wrote, with the January 2021 halt in the building of Trump’s border wall resulting in “an ever-increasing number of migrants who continue to flow into the state.”

Ducey’s move comes amid a record flow of migrants arriving at the border. U.S. border officials have stopped migrants 2.38 million times in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, up 37% from the year before. The annual total surpassed 2 million for the first time in August and is more than twice the highest level during Trump’s presidency, in 2019.

Ducey also rejected the U.S. government’s claims that the containers interfere with the ability of federal agencies to carry out their official duties, as well as to complete construction of border infrastructure in some areas.

He said he was encouraged by the Biden administration’s earlier announcement it would fill gaps in the wall, but that was a year ago.

“Arizona had no other choice but to address the crisis at its southern border and began erecting a temporary border barrier,” the governor wrote.

Hobbs has said she considers the project a political stunt, but hasn’t decided what to do about the containers after her Jan. 5. inauguration.

Ducey sued federal officials over their objections to the container wall Oct. 21, insisting that Arizona holds sole or shared jurisdiction over the 60-foot (18.2 meter) strip the containers rest on and has a constitutional right to protect residents from “imminent danger of criminal and humanitarian crises.”

Ducey’s container wall effort began in late summer in Yuma in western Arizona, a popular crossing point, with scores of asylum-seekers arriving daily and often finding ways to circumvent the new barriers. The containers filled areas left open when Trump’s 450-mile (724 km) border wall was built. But remote San Rafael Valley — the latest construction site — is not typically used by migrants and was not contemplated in Trump’s wall construction plan.

3 dead in Louisiana as US storm spawns Southern tornadoes

By JAKE BLEIBERG and KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

KEITHVILLE, La. (AP) — A vast and volatile storm system ripping across the U.S. killed at least three people in Louisiana, spinning up tornadoes that battered the state from north to south, including the New Orleans area where memories of 2021’s Hurricane Ida and a tornado in March linger.

Elsewhere, the huge system hurled blizzard-like conditions at the Great Plains.

Several injuries were reported around Louisiana by authorities, and more than 40,000 power outages statewide as of Wednesday night.

The punishing storms barreled eastward Wednesday after killing a mother and son in the northwestern part of the state a day earlier. The system spun off a suspected tornado that killed a woman Wednesday in southeast Louisiana’s St. Charles Parish and another that pummeled parts of New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes — including areas badly damaged by a March tornado.

A tornado struck New Iberia, Louisiana, slightly injuring five people and smashing out windows of a multistory building at Iberia Medical Center, the hospital said. As night drew on, tornado threats eased in Mississippi, although some counties in Florida and Alabama remained under a severe weather threat.

New Orleans emergency director Collin Arnold said business and residences in the city suffered significant wind damage, largely on the Mississippi River’s west bank. One home collapsed. Four people were injured there, he said, adding, “The last word we had is that they were stable.”

Similar damage was reported nearby.

“Several homes and businesses have suffered catastrophic damage,” the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office said in a statement from that large suburb west of New Orleans. Among the heavily damaged buildings was the sheriff’s office’s training academy building.

In St. Bernard Parish — where the March twister caused devastation — Sheriff Jimmy Pohlman said the

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latest tornado damage covered a roughly 2-mile (3.2-kilometer) stretch. Parish President Guy McInnis said the damage was less than in the March tornado though numerous roofs were blown away or damaged.

Authorities in St. Charles Parish, west of New Orleans, said a woman was found dead there after a suspected tornado on Wednesday struck the community of Killona along the Mississippi River, damaging homes. Eight people were taken to hospitals with injuries, they said.

"She was outside the residence, so we don't know exactly what happened," St. Charles Parish Sheriff Greg Champagne said of the woman killed. "There was debris everywhere. She could have been struck. We don't know for sure. But this was a horrific and a very violent tornado."

About 280 miles (450 kilometers) away in northern Louisiana, it took hours for authorities to find the bodies of a mother and child missing after a tornado swept away their mobile home Tuesday in Keithville, south of Shreveport.

"You go to search a house and the house isn't even there, so where do you search?" Gov. John Bel Edwards told reporters, noting the challenge faced by emergency responders as he toured a mile-long (1.6-kilometer) path of destruction in rural Keithville. He had issued an emergency declaration earlier in the day.

The Caddo Parish Coroner's Office said the body of 8-year-old Nikolus Little was found late Tuesday night in some woods and the body of his mother, Yoshiko A. Smith, 30, under storm debris early Wednesday.

Caddo Parish Sheriff's Sgt. Casey Jones said the boy's father had gone for groceries before the storm. "He just went to go shopping for his family, came home and the house was gone," said Jones.

The storms battered Louisiana from north to south. In Union Parish, near the Arkansas line, Farmerville Mayor John Crow said a tornado Tuesday night badly damaged an apartment complex where 50 families lived, wiping out a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes. "It happened quick," Crow said Wednesday, adding about 30 homes also were damaged along nearby Lake D'Arbonne.

A suspected tornado reported Wednesday in New Iberia in southwest Louisiana damaged several buildings of the New Iberia Medical Center, hospital officials said, with five people reporting minor injuries.

In neighboring Mississippi's Rankin County, a suspected tornado destroyed four large chicken houses, one containing 5,000 roosters, Sheriff Bryan Bailey said. Mobile homes at a park in Sharkey County, Mississippi, were reduced to shredded debris.

The storm began its cross-country journey by dumping heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada. Damage followed Tuesday when thunderstorms from the storm swept through Texas. At least five people were injured in the Dallas suburb of Grapevine, police spokesperson Amanda McNew said.

Forecasters now expect the vast system to hobble the upper Midwest with ice, rain and snow for days, and also move into the central Appalachians and Northeast. The National Weather Service issued a winter storm watch from Wednesday night through Friday afternoon, depending on the timing of the storm. Residents from West Virginia to Vermont were told to watch for a possible significant mix of snow, ice and sleet.

"This system is notable for the fact that it's going impact areas all the way from California to eventually the Northeast," said meteorologist Frank Pereira with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

In the Black Hills of western South Dakota, snow piled up to nearly 2 feet (60 centimeters) in some spots. "They shovel for hours on end," said Vicki Weekly, who manages a historic hotel in the tourist and gambling city of Deadwood, where some visitors still ventured out to the casinos.

A roughly 320-mile (520-kilometer) span of Interstate 90 in South Dakota was closed Wednesday, and state officials warned drivers there to stay off most highways.

In northern Minnesota, wet, heavy snow left tree limbs sagging and made driving treacherous Wednesday. Weather Service meteorologist Ketzell Levens in Duluth said 6 to 8 inches (15-20 centimeters) of snow had accumulated in some areas.

Twitter changes rules over account tracking Elon Musk's jet

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Twitter on Wednesday suspended an account that used publicly available flight data to track Elon Musk's private jet, despite a pledge by the social media platform's new owner to keep it up because of his free speech principles.

Then, hours later, Musk brought back the jet-tracking account after imposing new conditions on all of Twitter's users — no more sharing of anyone's current location.

But shortly afterward, the account was suspended again. That came after Musk tweeted that a "crazy stalker" attacked a car in Los Angeles carrying his young son.

He also threatened legal action against Jack Sweeney, the 20-year-old college sophomore and programmer who started the @elonjet flight-tracking account, and "organizations who supported harm to my family." It's not clear what legal action Musk could take against Sweeney for an account that automatically posted public flight information.

Before Wednesday, the account had more than 526,000 followers.

"He said this is free speech and he's doing the opposite," Sweeney said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Sweeney said he woke up Wednesday to a flood of messages from people who saw that @elonjet was suspended and all its tweets had disappeared. Started in 2020 when Sweeney was a teenager, the account automatically posted the Gulfstream jet's flights with a map and an estimate of the amount of jet fuel and carbon emissions it expended.

He logged into Twitter and saw a notice that the account was permanently suspended for breaking Twitter's rules. But the note didn't explain how it broke the rules.

Sweeney said he immediately filed an online form to appeal the suspension. Later, his personal account was also suspended, with a message saying it violated Twitter's rules "against platform manipulation and spam."

And then hours later, the flight-tracking account was back again, before it was shut down anew. Musk and Twitter's policy team had sought to publicly explain Wednesday that Twitter now has new rules.

"Any account doxxing real-time location info of anyone will be suspended, as it is a physical safety violation," Musk tweeted. "This includes posting links to sites with real-time location info. Posting locations someone traveled to on a slightly delayed basis isn't a safety problem, so is ok."

"Doxxing" refers to disclosing online someone's identity, address, or other personal details.

For Sweeney, it was the latest in a longtime tangle with the billionaire. The University of Central Florida student said Musk last year sent him a private message offering \$5,000 to take the jet-tracking account down, citing security concerns. Musk later stopped communicating to Sweeney, who never deleted the account. Their exchange was first reported by tech news outlet Protocol earlier this year.

But after buying Twitter for \$44 billion in late October, Musk said he would let it stay.

"My commitment to free speech extends even to not banning the account following my plane, even though that is a direct personal safety risk," Musk tweeted on Nov. 6.

Sweeney ran similar "bot" accounts tracking other celebrities' airplanes. For hours after the suspension of the @elonjet account, other Sweeney-run accounts tracking private jets used by Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and various Russian oligarchs were still live on Twitter.

But by later Wednesday, Twitter suspended all of them, including Sweeney's personal account. He also operates accounts tracking Musk's jet on rival social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Twitter didn't respond to a request for comment. Musk has promised to eradicate automatically generated spam from the platform, but Twitter allows automated accounts that are labeled as such — as Sweeney's were.

Its note to Sweeney about the suspension, which he shared with the AP, said "You may not use Twitter's services in a manner intended to artificially amplify or suppress information or engage in behavior that manipulates or disrupts people's experience on Twitter." But that rationale was different from what

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Musk explained later Wednesday.

Sweeney had days earlier accused Musk's Twitter of using a filtering technique to hide his tweets, and revealed what he said were leaked internal communications showing a Twitter content-moderation executive in charge of the Trust and Safety division ordering her team to suppress the account's reach. The AP has not been able to independently verify those documents.

Sweeney said that he suspects the short-lived ban stemmed from anger over those leaks.

Musk has previously criticized that filtering technique — nicknamed "shadowbanning" — and alleged that it was unfairly used by Twitter's past leadership to suppress right-wing accounts. He has said the new Twitter will still downgrade the reach of negative or hateful messages but will be more transparent about it.

In his push to loosen Twitter's content restrictions, he's reinstated other high-profile accounts that were permanently banned for breaking Twitter's rules against hateful conduct, harmful misinformation or incitements of violence.

Sweeney said he originally started the Musk jet tracker because "I was interested in him as a fan of Tesla and SpaceX."

In the weeks since the Tesla CEO took over Twitter, the @elonjet account has chronicled Musk's many cross-country journeys from his home base near Tesla's headquarters in Austin, Texas, to various California airports for his work at Twitter's San Francisco headquarters and his rocket company SpaceX.

It showed Musk flying to East Coast cities ahead of major events, and to New Orleans shortly before a Dec. 3 meeting there with French President Emmanuel Macron.

In a January post pinned to the top of the jet-tracking account's feed before it was suspended, Sweeney wrote that it "has every right to post jet whereabouts" because the data is public and "every aircraft in the world is required to have a transponder," including Air Force One that transports the U.S. president.

Nevada flower listed as endangered at lithium mine site

By SCOTT SONNER Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A Nevada wildflower was declared endangered at the only place it's known to exist — on a high-desert ridge where a lithium mine is planned to help meet growing demand for electric car batteries, U.S. wildlife officials announced Wednesday.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's formal listing of Tiehm's buckwheat and its accompanying designation of 910 acres (368 hectares) of critical habitat for the 6-inch-tall (15-centimeter-tall) flower with yellow blooms raises another potential hurdle for President Joe Biden's "green energy" agenda.

With an estimated remaining population of only about 16,000 plants, the service concluded that Tiehm's buckwheat is on the brink of extinction.

"We find that a threatened species status is not appropriate because the threats are severe and imminent, and Tiehm's buckwheat is in danger of extinction now, as opposed to likely to become endangered in the future," the agency said.

The proposed mining and mineral exploration poses the biggest threat to the flower. It's also threatened by road-building, livestock grazing, rodents that eat it, invasive plants and climate change, the service said. It said an apparent, unprecedented rodent attack wiped out about 60% of its estimated population in 2020.

Ioneer, the Australian mining company that's been planning for years to dig for lithium where the flower grows on federal land halfway between Reno and Las Vegas, says it has developed a protection plan that would allow the plant and the project to coexist.

But the listing under the Endangered Species Act subjects the mine to its most stringent regulatory requirement to date.

It also underscores the challenges facing the Biden administration in its efforts to combat climate change through an accelerated transition from fossil fuels to renewables.

"Lithium is an important part of our renewable energy transition, but it can't come at the cost of extinction," said Patrick Donnelly, Great Basin director for the Center for Biological Diversity, which petitioned for the listing in 2019 and sued last year to expedite the plant's protection.

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The mining company said the decision “provides further clarity for the path forward” and is “fully in line with Ioneer’s expectations” for development of the mine site at Rhyolite Ridge in the Silver Peak Range west of Tonopah, near the California border.

“We are committed to the protection and conservation of the species and have incorporated numerous measures into our current and future plans to ensure this occurs,” Ioneer managing director Bernard Rowe said in a statement.

“Our operations have and will continue to avoid all Tiehm’s buckwheat populations,” he said.

The service’s final listing rule will be published Thursday in the Federal Register.

The conservationists who sued to protect the plant insist that Ioneer’s mitigation plan won’t pass legal muster. They pledge to resume their court battle if necessary to protect the buckwheat’s habitat from the rush to develop new lithium deposits.

The flowers are found on a total of just 10 acres (4 hectares) spread across about 3 square miles (7.8 square kilometers). Federal agencies are prohibited from approving any activity on federal lands that could destroy, modify or adversely affect any listed species’ critical habitat.

Donnelly said the company’s latest operations plan for the first phase of the mine proposes avoiding a “tiny island of land” containing 75% of its population — surrounded by an open pit mine and tailings dumps within 12 feet (3.7 meters) of the flowers.

The Bureau of Land Management is reviewing the environmental impacts of Ioneer’s latest operations and protection plans.

But Donnelly noted that USFWS estimated in Wednesday’s final listing rule that the proposed scenario would “disturb and remove up to 38% of the critical habitat for this species, impacting pollinator populations, altering hydrology, removing soil and risking subsidence.”

“Ioneer’s ‘Buckwheat Island’ scenario would spell doom for this sensitive little flower,” Donnelly said.

The mine is among several renewable energy-related projects facing legal or regulatory challenges in Nevada. They include another lithium mine proposed near the Oregon border and a geothermal power plant where the Dixie Valley toad has been declared endangered in wetlands about 100 miles (160 kilometers) east of Reno.

“Now that the buckwheat is protected, we’ll use the full power of the Endangered Species Act to ensure Ioneer doesn’t harm one hair on a buckwheat’s head,” Donnelly said.

Biden tells African leaders US is ‘all in’ on the continent

By AAMER MADHANI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden told dozens of African leaders gathered in Washington that the United States is “all in on Africa’s future,” laying out billions in promised government funding and private investment Wednesday to help the growing continent in health, infrastructure, business and technology.

“The U.S. is committed to supporting every aspect of Africa’s growth,” Biden told the leaders and others in a big conference hall, presenting his vision at the three-day U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit of how the U.S. can be a critical catalyst.

Biden, who is pitching the U.S. as a reliable partner to promote democratic elections and push critical health and energy growth, told the crowd the \$55 billion in committed investments over the next three years — announced on Monday — was “just the beginning.”

He announced more than \$15 billion in private trade and investment commitments and partnerships.

“There’s so much more we can do together and that we will do together,” Biden said.

The president after his speech spent some time with leaders, including Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, watching Morocco’s World Cup match with France. Morocco lost but made history as the first African team to advance to the tournament’s semifinal round.

The United States has fallen well behind China in investment in sub-Saharan Africa, which has become a key battleground in an increasingly fraught competition between the major powers. The White House insists this week’s gathering is more a listening session with African leaders than an effort to counter

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Beijing's influence, but the president's central foreign policy tenet looms over all: America is in an era-defining battle to prove democracies can out-deliver autocracies.

That message was clear in Wednesday's events. In his speech, Biden spoke of how the U.S. would help in modernizing technology across the continent, providing clean energy, moving women's equality forward through business opportunities, bringing clean drinking water to communities and better funding health care. First lady Jill Biden's office also laid out \$300 million for cancer prevention, screening, treatment and research in Africa.

On Wednesday Biden also held a smaller meeting at the White House with the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Thursday is to be dedicated to high-level discussions among leaders; Biden will open the day with a session on partnering with the African Union's strategic vision for the continent.

The president and first lady hosted a White House dinner for all the leaders and their spouses Wednesday night, with the food prepared by Mashama Bailey, the executive chef of The Grey, a Southern cooking spot in Savannah, Georgia. Gladys Knight provided the post-dinner entertainment.

Biden in a toast at the start of the dinner noted the "original sin" of enslaved Africans brought to U.S. shores and paid tribute to the next generation of leaders in both the U.S. and sub-Saharan Africa.

"Because particularly of our young people, in all our countries together, we can deliver a world that is healthier and safer, more equal, more just, more prosperous and more filled with opportunity for everyone," Biden said.

Senegalese President Macky Sall, who also heads the African Union bloc, expressed hope in his own toast that the U.S. and African leaders could advance their partnership "to the next level."

The summit is the largest international gathering in Washington since before the start of the pandemic. Roads all around the city center were blocked off, and motorcades zoomed by gridlocked traffic elsewhere, ferrying some of the 49 invited heads of state and other leaders.

Many leaders of the continent's 54 nations often feel they've been given short shrift by leading economies. But the continent remains crucial to global powers because of its rapidly growing population, significant natural resources and sizable voting bloc in the United Nations. Africa also remains of great strategic importance as the U.S. recalibrates its foreign policy with greater focus on China — the nation the Biden administration sees as the United States' most significant economic and military adversary.

But Biden invited several leaders who have questionable records on human rights, and democracy loomed large.

Equatorial Guinea was invited despite the State Department stating "serious doubts" about last month's election in the tiny Central African nation. Election officials reported that President Teodoro Obiang's ruling party won nearly 95% of the vote.

Zimbabwe, which has faced years of U.S. and Western sanctions, also was invited.

Tunisian President Kais Saied, who has been criticized by the United States for democratic backsliding, used an appearance before reporters with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday to offer a stout defense of actions he has taken, including suspending the parliament and firing judges.

"The country was on the brink of civil war all over the country, so I had no other alternative but to save the Tunisian nation from undertaking any nasty action," Saied said.

Biden made no mention of China in his remarks, and White House officials rejected the notion that the summit was in part about countering China's influence.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the administration is "refusing to put a gun" to Africa's head and make it choose between U.S. and China. At the same time, he said "there's nothing inconsistent about calling a fact a fact and shedding light on what is increasingly obvious to our African partners about China's malign influence on the continent."

Still, the summit-related activity got a rise out of China. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said the U.S. should "respect the will of the African people and take concrete actions to help Africa's development, instead of unremittingly smearing and attacking other countries."

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Wang said at a briefing Wednesday that it is the "common responsibility of the international community to support Africa's development." But he added: "Africa is not an arena for great power confrontation or a target for arbitrary pressure by certain countries or individuals."

Rwandan President Paul Kagame also bristled at the idea of his country and others on the continent getting caught between the U.S. and China. "I don't think we need to be bullied into making choices between U.S. and China," Kagame said during an event on the summit's sideline hosted by the news organization Semafor.

Biden has promised U.S. support for a permanent Group of 20 seat for the African Union, and the appointment of a special representative to implement summit commitments.

In addition to China, talks also spotlighted what the U.S. has seen as malevolent Russian action on the continent.

The administration argued in its sub-Saharan strategy published earlier this year that Russia, the preeminent arms dealer in Africa, views the continent as a permissive environment for Kremlin-connected oligarchs and private military companies to focus on fomenting instability for their own strategic and financial benefit.

During an appearance with Blinken on Wednesday, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo expressed alarm about the presence of mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group in Burkina Faso directly north of Ghana. This follows a similar deployment of Wagner forces in Burkina Faso's immediate neighbor Mali.

"Today, Russian mercenaries are on our northern border," said Akufo-Addo, adding that he believed Burkinabe authorities had given the Wagner Group control of a mine for payment and that the country's prime minister had recently visited Moscow.

Paul Pelosi attack: Man told cops of 'evil' in Washington

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The man accused of attacking the husband of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said there was "evil in Washington" and he was looking to harm Pelosi because she is second in line for the presidency, a San Francisco police investigator testified Wednesday.

The suspect, David DePape, broke into the couple's San Francisco home Oct. 28, seeking to kidnap the speaker — who was out of town — and instead beat her 82-year-old husband, Paul Pelosi, with a hammer, authorities said. The violence sent shockwaves through the political world.

San Francisco Superior Court Judge Stephen Murphy ruled that prosecutors had shown enough evidence during a preliminary hearing to move forward with a trial on the state charges, including attempted murder. DePape is due back in state court on Dec. 28.

Lt. Carla Hurley, who interviewed DePape for an hour the day of the attack, testified Wednesday that the defendant told her of other people he wanted to target, including California Gov. Gavin Newsom, actor Tom Hanks and Hunter Biden, one of President Joe Biden's sons. Hurley did not say whether police had any evidence of a plot against them, and San Francisco District Attorney Brooke Jenkins said after the hearing she couldn't comment further.

Authorities had previously said DePape told investigators he had other targets, but a court document stated only that they were a local professor as well as several prominent state and federal politicians and members of their families.

DePape, who appeared in court wearing orange jail clothes, has pleaded not guilty to federal and state charges, including attempted murder, burglary and elder abuse. He remains held without bail.

"There is evil in Washington, what they did went so far beyond the campaign," DePape told Hurley, according to a recording of their interview that was played in court.

DePape's public defender, Adam Lipson, declined to comment after the judge's ruling, saying, "We'll be fighting this case in court, not in the hallway."

In November, Nancy Pelosi said she would step down as Democrats' leader in the House after 20 years but remain in office. Her official portrait was unveiled Wednesday in Washington as the court hearing took place more than 2,500 miles (4,023 kilometers) away.

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Paul Pelosi, her husband of nearly 60 years, joined her for the ceremony at the U.S. Capitol wearing a hat and a glove that covered his injuries from the attack.

Hurley, who was a sergeant at the time of the attack and was recently promoted to lieutenant, testified that DePape told Paul Pelosi he wanted to talk to Nancy Pelosi because "she is the second in line to the presidency."

If the U.S. president and the vice president become unable to serve, the speaker of the U.S. House assumes the presidency.

Hurley also said DePape told her that he was seeking the speaker and told her husband that he was not part of the plan.

Still, DePape told Paul Pelosi, "I can take you out, I can take you out," Hurley testified.

Hurley said DePape told her that after he saw the lights of a police patrol car, he told Paul Pelosi, "I'm not going to surrender, I am here to fight. If you stop me from going after people, you will take the punishment instead."

Prosecutors presented the hammer that was allegedly used in the assault during Wednesday's proceedings, which were attended by Christine Pelosi, one of the Pelosis' five adult children.

The district attorney's office also played audio of Paul Pelosi's 911 call to San Francisco police in the courtroom and showed video — less than a minute long — of the attack that was captured on body cameras.

DePape (dih-PAP') told police he was on a "suicide mission," court documents say. Authorities have said he was drawn to conspiracy theories.

DePape smashed his way into the Pelosis' home, confronted Paul Pelosi, who was sleeping in boxer shorts and a pajama top, and demanded to know where "Nancy" was, according to court documents.

DePape then told Paul Pelosi that if Nancy Pelosi told him the "truth," he would let her go and if she "lied," he was going to break her kneecaps, " the criminal complaint alleges.

San Francisco Police Officer Kyle Cagney, who was one of two first responding officers testified Wednesday that he saw both men holding the hammer when the door opened. DePape did not obey officers' commands to drop the weapon and instead lunged at Paul Pelosi and swung the hammer at him, Cagney said.

Paul Pelosi was knocked unconscious and woke up in a pool of his own blood. He later underwent surgery to repair a skull fracture and serious injuries to his right arm and hands.

The speaker was in Washington at the time and under the protection of her security detail, which does not extend to family members.

California reparations task force dives into what is owed

By SOPHIE AUSTIN and JANIE HAR Associated Press/Report for America

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — After more than a year delving into history and studies to make its case for reparations to California descendants of enslaved Black people, a first-in-the-nation task force began deliberations Wednesday to quantify how financial compensation might be calculated and what might be required to prove eligibility.

Conversations for how to determine payments are in the early stages, with task force members acknowledging they have more questions than answers. Economists hired by the task force are seeking guidance in five harms experienced by Black people: government taking of property, devaluation of Black-owned businesses, housing discrimination and homelessness, mass incarceration and over-policing, and health.

California's task force met Wednesday at City Hall in Oakland, a city that was the birthplace of the Black Panthers but has lost some of its African American population as rising home prices forced people out.

The task force must determine when each harm began and ended and who should be eligible for monetary compensation in those areas. For example, the group could choose to limit cash compensation to people incarcerated between 1970 — when more people started being imprisoned for drug-related crimes — to the present. Or they could choose to compensate everyone who lived in over-policed Black neighborhoods, even if they were not themselves arrested.

The task force has a July 1 deadline to complete its final report for the Legislature listing recommendations

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for how the state can atone for and address its legacy of discriminatory policies against Black Californians. Lawmakers will need to pass legislation for payments and other policy changes to take place.

Earlier this year, the committee made the controversial decision to limit reparations to descendants of Black people in the United States as of the 19th century, either as freed or enslaved people.

Task force member Monica Montgomery Steppe said Wednesday they need to take more time addressing time frames, payment calculations and residency.

"This is the foundation of all the other recommendations," she said.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed legislation in 2020 creating the task force, giving hope to reparations advocates who had despaired that anything might happen at the federal level. Since then, reparations efforts have bubbled up in cities, counties and at colleges.

On Wednesday, the Boston City Council voted to form a task force to study reparations and other forms of atonement to Black residents for the city's role in slavery and its legacy of inequality. Lawmakers in other parts of the country have pushed their states and cities to study reparations without much progress. But Evanston, Illinois, became the first U.S. city last year to make reparations available for Black residents, and public officials in New York will try anew to create a reparations commission in the state.

About 60 people attended California's meeting, nodding in agreement as task force members spoke of the generational trauma suffered by Black children amid inaccurate and ongoing depictions of white families as ideal and Black families as not.

Max Fennell, a 35-year-old coffee company owner, said every person should get \$350,000 in compensation to close the racial wealth gap and Black-owned businesses should receive \$250,000, which would help them to flourish.

"It's a debt that's owed, we worked for free," he said. "We're not asking; we're telling you."

Demnlus Johnson III, a Richmond City Council member, said it's remarkable that the issue is even being talked about publicly.

"You have to name a problem in order to address it," he said. "Of course we want to see it addressed now, the urgency is now, but just having it all aired out and put on the line is a major feat."

Members of the committee will make preliminary policy recommendations, such as audits of government agencies that deal with child welfare and incarceration with the aim of reducing disparities in how Black people are treated.

The group discussed how the state may address its impact on Black families whose property was seized through eminent domain. The topic garnered renewed attention after lawmakers last year voted to return a beachfront property known as Bruce's Beach to descendants of the Black residents who owned it until it was taken in the 20th century.

Officials from Oakland, Sacramento, Los Angeles and other California cities spoke about local reparations efforts.

That included Khansa T. Jones-Muhammad, vice-chair of Los Angeles' Reparations Advisory Commission, created last year under then-Mayor Eric Garcetti. The goal of the commission is to advise the city on a pilot program for distributing reparations to a group of Black residents, but it doesn't have a timeline set in stone for finishing its work.

In September, economists started listing preliminary estimates for what could be owed by the state as a result of discriminatory policies. But they said they need more data to come up with more complete figures.

Kamilah Moore, the task force's chairperson, said the group has not decided on any dollar amounts or what form reparations could take, nor where the money would come from.

California Secretary of State Shirley Weber, a former assemblywoman, authored the bill that created the state's task force, and the group began its work last year. The bill was signed into law in September 2020 after a summer of nationwide protests against racism and police brutality following the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a white police officer in Minnesota.

In June, the task force released a 500-page report describing discriminatory policies that drove housing segregation, criminal justice disparities and other realities that harmed Black Californians in the decades since the abolition of slavery.

Diplomats: UN blocks Myanmar military from taking UN seat

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — A key U.N. committee has again blocked Myanmar's military junta from taking the country's seat at the United Nations, two well-informed U.N. diplomats said Wednesday.

The General Assembly's credentials committee met Monday and deferred action on the junta's request, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity before a formal announcement likely later this week.

The decision means that Kyaw Moe Tun, who was Myanmar's ambassador at the United Nations when the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, 2021, will remain on the job.

Last December, Myanmar's military rulers also failed in their effort to replace Tun, who remains a supporter of the previous government and the opposition National Unity Government, which opposes the junta.

Chris Gunness, director of the London-based Myanmar Accountability Project, welcomed the credentials committee's move, saying it has "great diplomatic and symbolic significance, at a time when the illegal coup leaders are attempting to gain international recognition."

"General Min Aung Hlaing has inflicted on the people of Myanmar violence of a scale not seen in southeast Asia since Pol Pot unleashed the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror on Cambodia," Gunness said in a statement.

Damian Lilly, an Accountability Project official, urged the United Nations to ensure that Tun is afforded all U.N. rights and privileges and that the National Unity Government "is allowed to represent Myanmar in all UN bodies."

"At present, there are glaring inconsistencies," he said, with Tun sitting in the 193-member General Assembly while Myanmar's seat at the U.N. Human Rights Council is empty.

Lilly said the credentials committee's action "must pave the way to resolving these anomalies which are depriving 55 million people in Myanmar of the opportunity to be represented at the U.N. by the government which they elected by a landslide in 2020."

Suu Kyi, who was arrested when the military seized power from her elected government, has been sentenced to 26 years' imprisonment and faces additional charges.

Rights groups and supporters of Suu Kyi say the charges against her are politically motivated and an attempt to discredit her and legitimize the military's seizure of power while preventing her from returning to politics.

Peru's new government declares police state amid protests

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Peru's new government declared a national emergency Wednesday as it struggled to calm violent protests over President Pedro Castillo's ouster, suspending the rights of "personal security and freedom" across the Andean nation for 30 days.

Acts of vandalism, violence and highway blockades as thousands of Peruvians are in the streets "require a forceful and authoritative response from the government," Defense Minister Luis Otarola Peñaranda said.

The declaration suspends the rights of assembly and freedom of movement and empowers the police, supported by the military, to search people's homes without permission or judicial order. Otarola said it had not been determined whether a nightly curfew would be imposed.

Peru has been wracked by nearly a week of political crisis and unrest that have undermined stability.

The troubles have "been increasing in such magnitude that the very idea of order, the very idea of authorities that can govern the country in some way is called into question," said Jorge Aragón, a political science professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Peru.

The decree, he added, is "a way of wanting to recover a certain minimum stability, a certain minimum functioning of the country, but obviously it is also the recognition that without that use of force that cannot be achieved."

The defense minister said the declaration was agreed to by the council of ministers. It didn't mention Peru's new president, Dina Boluarte, who was sworn in by Congress last week hours after lawmakers ousted Castillo.

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Boluarte pleaded for calm as demonstrations continued against her and Congress.

"Peru cannot overflow with blood," she said earlier Wednesday.

Referring to demands for immediate elections, she suggested they could be held a year from now, four months before her earlier proposal, which placated no one.

Boluarte floated the possibility of scheduling general elections for December 2023 to reporters just before a hearing to determine whether Castillo would remain jailed for 18 months while authorities build a rebellion case against him. The judge postponed the hearing after Castillo refused to participate.

"The only thing I can tell you sisters and brothers (is) to keep calm," Boluarte said. "We have already lived through this experience in the '80s and '90s, and I believe that we do not want to return to that painful history."

The remarks of Castillo's running mate recalled the ruinous years when the Shining Path insurgency presided over numerous car bombings and assassinations. The group was blamed for more than half of the nearly 70,000 estimated deaths and disappearances caused by various rebel groups and a brutal government counterinsurgency response.

Protesters have blocked streets in Peru's capital and many rural communities, demanding Castillo's freedom, Boluarte's resignation and the immediate scheduling of general elections to pick a new president and replace all members of Congress.

At least seven people have been killed, including a teenager who died Wednesday after being injured during protests in Andahuaylas, a hospital director said.

All perished in the same kinds of impoverished communities whose voters propelled the rural teachers union leader to victory last year after he promised a populist approach to governing.

Castillo was ousted by lawmakers Dec. 7 after he sought to dissolve Congress ahead of their third attempt to impeach him. His vehicle was intercepted as he traveled through Lima's streets with his security detail. Prosecutors accused him of trying to seek political asylum at the Mexican Embassy.

In a handwritten letter shared Wednesday with The Associated Press by his associate Mauro Gonzales, Castillo asked the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to intercede for his "rights and the rights of my Peruvian brothers who cry out for justice." The commission investigates allegations of human rights violations and litigates them in some cases.

In the last week, protesters have burned police stations, taken over an airstrip used by the armed forces and invaded the runway of the international airport in Arequipa, a gateway to some of Peru's tourist attractions. The passenger train that carries visitors to Machu Picchu suspended service, and roadblocks on the Pan-American Highway have stranded trailer trucks for days, spoiling food bound for the capital.

Otarola on Tuesday said the total number of people "causing this disturbance" has been no more than 8,000 nationwide, an estimate that vastly understates support for Castillo, who took office in July 2021 after gaining nearly 8.8 million votes to win the presidential runoff election by a narrow 50.1% share of the vote.

Boluarte said Wednesday that 200 police officers had been injured in the protests. and she met with at least two of them at a hospital.

Speaking to an officer with facial injuries, the president said that "one group," which she did not identify, is leading the protests.

"It is a group that is pulling the uninformed community because, surely, many come out to this protest and do not even know what they are going out to protest for," Boluarte said. "But this smaller group that is behind them encourages them to come out with these violent attitudes."

By Wednesday, members of the armed forces had already been deployed to Arequipa and other areas outside Lima. Securing rural areas far from the capital could take longer.

Five of the deaths have been in Andahuaylas, an Andean community whose impoverished residents have long felt abandoned by the government and occasionally rebelled against it. College student Luis Torres joined a protest of about 2,000 people there Wednesday as a few white vans carrying soldiers moved through the streets.

"This measure is disproportionate. It shows the political precariousness of the government that Mrs. Dina Boluarte is having now," Torres said. "We are all marching peacefully, for something fair that we are

demanding. At least Andahuaylas will continue to fight.”

Sandy Hook anniversary: Biden cites ‘societal guilt’ on guns

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday said the U.S. “should have societal guilt” for the slow pace of action on restricting access to firearms as he marked the 10th anniversary of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Twenty students and six educators died in the massacre at the Newtown, Connecticut, school which shocked the nation. Biden was using the anniversary to renew his call for a ban on assault-style weapons like the one used in the Sandy Hook shooting, as well as high-capacity magazines.

“We should have societal guilt for taking too long to deal with this problem,” Biden said in a statement. “We have a moral obligation to pass and enforce laws that can prevent these things from happening again. We owe it to the courageous, young survivors and to the families who lost part of their soul ten years ago to turn their pain into purpose.”

Biden was vice president at the time of the shooting and was tapped by then-President Barack Obama to lead an ill-fated effort to tighten gun laws. He said he and his wife, first lady Jill Biden, were praying for the victims and their families.

It wasn’t until after the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, that Congress this summer passed the most substantial gun reforms in decades, targeting so-called “ghost guns” that don’t have serial numbers, yet Biden’s calls for more aggressive action, including banning assault-style weapons, have faced stiff opposition in Congress.

“Enough is enough,” Biden said. “Our obligation is clear. We must eliminate these weapons that have no purpose other than to kill people in large numbers. It is within our power to do this - for the sake of not only the lives of the innocents lost, but for the survivors who still hope.”

There were no official remembrances Wednesday in Newtown, in keeping with the town’s tradition of quiet reflection. Several churches planned memorial services.

The White House was illuminated green on Wednesday evening in honor of the Connecticut school shooting victims.

“All of the families honor their loved ones in unique ways, including through different symbols and colors — and green is the color many of the families who lost loved ones in the Sandy Hook shooting used in ribbons and memorials in the early days after the shooting,” the White House said in a statement.

On Wednesday, there was a groundbreaking in town for the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary, named after a 6-year-old animal lover who died in the shooting.

“Catherine’s legacy lives on at the sanctuary, a place where all creatures know safety and kindness,” Catherine’s mother, Jenny Hubbard, said in a statement.

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, said in a video message posted on social media, “Newtown, you’re always in our hearts.”

The state passed new gun controls after the massacre, including bans on certain semiautomatic rifles and large-capacity magazines.

“What would be even more tragic — if we didn’t learn and do everything we can to make sure a tragedy like this is less likely to ever happen again,” Lamont said.

Mbappe, France advance to World Cup final, beat Morocco 2-0

By STEVE DOUGLAS AP Sports Writer

AL KHOR, Qatar (AP) — Kylian Mbappé vs. Lionel Messi.

Soccer’s latest superstar against perhaps the sport’s greatest player in the World Cup final just about everyone was hoping for.

France and Mbappé are headed back to the biggest game in soccer, and to a much-anticipated matchup with Argentina, after ending Morocco’s historic run at the World Cup on Wednesday.

In front of the country’s president, Emmanuel Macron, France beat Africa’s first ever semifinalist 2-0,

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with Mbappé playing a part in goals by Theo Hernandez in the fifth minute and substitute Randal Kolo Muani in the 79th.

Mbappé became a global phenomenon by leading France to the title in Russia in 2018 and has a chance to emulate Brazil great Pele as a champion in his first two World Cups when he comes up against the 35-year-old Messi, who has dominated the game with Cristiano Ronaldo for the past 15 years.

It's the dream final for many, with France looking to become the first team to retain the title since Brazil in 1962 and Argentina on a mission to win soccer's ultimate prize for the third time in what is likely to be Messi's last World Cup.

"We need all our strength, all our energy to face a very competitive team with one of the legends in the sport with Messi," France goalkeeper Hugo Lloris said.

There will be no team from the Arab world in the final of the first World Cup in the Middle East, a prospect that seemed high impossible before the tournament yet nearly happened in Qatar.

Morocco has been widely lauded for breaking ground for Africa and generated an outpouring of pride among Arab nations after topping a group containing Croatia and Belgium and eliminating two more European powers — Spain and Portugal — in the knockout stage. Their players gave France a far-from-easy ride, too, before collapsing on the ground in despair after the final whistle.

"We are disappointed for the Moroccan people — we wanted to keep their dream alive," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "We felt we could have gone further but we have given a good image of Morocco and of African football. That was important to us."

Remarkably, Hernandez's early goal was the first scored against Morocco by an opposition player in the tournament — the other had been an own-goal in the group stage — but the team responded to that and injury issues in its defense with a fearless performance in front of tens of thousands of fans who dominated the 60,000-seat Al Bayt Stadium.

France was forced into some last-ditch defending at times but has developed a knack of pulling out victories despite not playing its best. The country will be playing in the final for the fourth time in the last seven World Cups, more than anyone else.

"It wasn't easy," France coach Didier Deschamps said, "and we showed our quality, experience and team spirit."

Mbappé failed to add to his five goals in the tournament but helped create the opener for Hernandez when his shot deflected off a defender and into the path of the left back. Hernandez let the ball bounce before driving a downward effort into the net from a tight angle.

Typically a defense-first team, Morocco was forced to come out and play even though it was reeling from losing Nayef Aguerd to injury in the warmup and another center back, captain Romain Saiss, after only 21 minutes because of a hamstring injury. Both players were doubts ahead of the game but were risked by Regragui along with left back Noussair Mazraoui, who has had the flu and only lasted until halftime.

Roared on by its red-and-green-clad fans, Morocco came closest to scoring when Jawad El Yamiq hit the post with an overhead kick in the 44th minute and forced France to defend in numbers, with Antoine Griezmann — the team's playmaker — effectively playing as a deep-lying midfielder and often clearing balls from inside his box.

However, Mbappé enjoyed more space as Morocco tired late in the second half and he was moved into a central position. After dribbling past two defenders, he took a shot that deflected toward Kolo Muani, who tapped in having been on the field for less than a minute.

The goal was celebrated in the VIP seats by Macron, who flew in for the match and had earlier visited the Souq Waqif bazaar in Doha before traveling to the stadium. The president congratulated France's players in the locker room after the match.

They might need to raise their game against Argentina, though.

"Any team with Messi in," Griezmann said, "is a totally different proposition."

TOP SCORER

The World Cup trophy isn't the only thing at stake on Sunday. Messi and Mbappé are tied as the leading

scorers with five goals as they chase the Golden Boot award.

THIRD PLACE

Morocco's World Cup isn't over. The team will play the third-place playoff match against Croatia at Khalifa International Stadium on Saturday.

Fed raises key rate by half-point and signals more to come

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve reinforced its inflation fight Wednesday by raising its key interest rate for the seventh time this year and signaling more hikes to come. But it announced a smaller hike than it had in its past four meetings at a time when inflation is showing signs of easing.

The Fed made clear, in a statement and a news conference by Chair Jerome Powell, that it thinks sharply higher rates are still needed to fully tame the worst inflation bout to strike the economy in four decades.

The central bank boosted its benchmark rate a half-point to a range of 4.25% to 4.5%, its highest level in 15 years. Though lower than its previous three-quarter-point hikes, the latest move will further increase the costs of many consumer and business loans and the risk of a recession.

More surprisingly, the policymakers forecast that their key short-term rate will reach a range of 5% to 5.25% by the end of 2023. That suggests that the Fed is poised to raise its rate by an additional three-quarters of a point and leave it there through next year. Some economists had expected that the Fed would project only an additional half-point increase.

The latest rate hike was announced one day after an encouraging report showed that inflation in the United States slowed in November for a fifth straight month. The year-over-year increase of 7.1%, though still high, was sharply below a recent peak of 9.1% in June.

"The inflation data in October and November show a welcome reduction," Powell said at his news conference. "But it will take substantially more evidence to give confidence that inflation is on a sustained downward path."

In its updated forecasts, the Fed's policymakers predicted slower growth and higher unemployment for next year and 2024. The unemployment rate is envisioned to jump to 4.6% by the end of 2023, from 3.7% today. That would mark a significant increase in joblessness that typically would reflect a recession.

Consistent with a sharp slowdown, the officials also projected that the economy will barely grow next year, expanding just 0.5%, less than half the forecast it had made in September.

"The Fed is not done — it sees a prolonged slowdown and a rise in unemployment as the only way to fully derail inflation," Diane Swonk, chief economist at KPMG, said in a research note.

Though Powell said he thought the economy could still avoid a recession, the Fed's economic forecasts show the policymakers expect job losses to result from its higher rates.

"They really need the unemployment rate to go higher and wages to start coming down," said Subadra Rajappa, an investment strategist at Societe Generale. Powell has said that slower wage growth would reduce inflation pressures.

Powell said Wednesday, "I just don't think anyone knows whether we're going to have a recession or not. ... I wish there were a completely painless way to restore price stability. There isn't."

In recent weeks, Fed officials have indicated that they see some evidence of progress in their drive to bring inflation back down to their 2% annual target. The national average for a gallon of regular gas, for example, has tumbled from \$5 in June to \$3.21.

Many supply chains are no longer clogged, thereby helping reduce goods prices. The better-than-expected November inflation data showed that the prices of used cars, furniture and toys all declined last month.

So did the costs of services from hotels to airfares to car rentals. Rental and home prices are falling, too, though those declines have yet to feed into the government's data.

And one measure the Fed tracks closely — "core" prices, which exclude volatile food and energy costs for a clearer snapshot of underlying inflation — rose only slightly for a second straight month.

Inflation has also eased slightly in Europe and the United Kingdom, leading analysts to expect the Eu-

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European Central Bank and the Bank of England to slow their pace of rate hikes at their meetings Thursday. Both are expected to raise rates by half a point to target still painfully high prices spikes after big three-quarter-point increases.

Inflation in the 19 countries using the euro currency fell to 10% from 10.6% in October, the first decline since June 2021. The rate is so far above the bank's 2% goal that rate hikes are expected to continue into next year. Britain's inflation also eased from a 41-year record of 11.1% in October to a still-high 10.7% in November.

Many economists think the Fed will further downshift to a quarter-point rate hike when it next meets early next year. Asked about that Wednesday, Powell said he has yet to decide how large he thinks the next hike should be. But having raised rates so fast, he said, "we think the appropriate thing to do now is to move at a slower pace. That will allow us to feel our way."

Powell downplayed any notion that the Fed might decide to reverse course next year and start cutting rates to support growth, as Wall Street investors are expecting.

"I wouldn't see the committee cutting rates until we're confident that inflation is moving down in a sustained way," he said.

Cumulatively, the Fed's hikes have led to much costlier borrowing rates for consumers as well as companies, ranging from mortgages to auto and business loans. They have sent home sales plummeting and are starting to weigh down rents on new apartments, a leading source of high inflation.

Fed officials have said they want rates to reach "restrictive" levels that slow growth and hiring and bring inflation down to their target range. Worries have grown that the Fed is raising rates so much in its drive to curb inflation that it will trigger a recession next year.

Powell's biggest focus has been on services prices, which he has said are likely to stay persistently high. In part, that's because sharp increases in wages are becoming a key contributor to inflation. Services companies, like hotels and restaurants, are particularly labor-intensive. And with average wages growing at a brisk 5%-6% a year, price pressures keep building in that sector of the economy.

With many service-sector employers still desperate for workers, Powell said pay growth may remain above what's consistent with the Fed's 2% inflation target.

"We have a long way to go," the Fed chair said, "to get to price stability."

Ukraine: Russian strikes thwarted, wreckage hits buildings

By HANNA ARHIROVA and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian authorities said they thwarted a Russian attack on Kyiv and the surrounding region Wednesday as their air defense system destroyed 13 explosive-laden drones, although wreckage damaged five buildings, without causing casualties.

The attempted strikes underlined how vulnerable Ukraine's capital remains to the regular Russian attacks that have devastated infrastructure and population centers in recent weeks, mostly in the country's east and south. But they also highlighted Ukraine's claims of increasing efficiency in intercepting drones and missiles, and the possibility that Patriot missiles from the U.S. may further boost defenses.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a video the "terrorists" fired 13 Iranian-made drones, and all were intercepted. Such drones have been part of the firepower — along with rockets, missiles, mortars and artillery — that Russia uses to target power stations, water facilities and other public utility equipment.

The snow-covered capital remained largely calm after the foiled attack, which occurred around daybreak. As the working day began, authorities sounded the all-clear.

The head of the Kyiv city administration, Serhii Popko, wrote on Telegram that the attempted strikes came in two waves. Wreckage from the intercepted drones damaged an administrative building and four residential buildings, he said.

A blast left the three-story tax office building in the central Shevchenkyvskyi district with a gaping hole in the roof and blew out windows in parked cars and in a neighboring building.

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Clean-up crews were on site quickly to shovel away the rubble and roll out plastic sheeting to cover the blown-out windows in freezing temperatures. One man, unfazed, pushed his son on a swingset at a nearby playground as the crews worked.

Another parent, Anton Rudikov, said his family was sleeping when they heard an explosion and smashing windows. "Thank God the children were not affected" beyond their fright, said Rudkov, whose daughters are 13 and 18 years old. But why Russia would attack his neighborhood left him perplexed.

"I didn't do anything bad to them, but it struck my house. From where? I don't understand why," he said.

Residents told Associated Press reporters they saw fragments from a drone bearing the words "For Ryazan." The Kremlin claims Ukraine was responsible for a cross-border attack last week on a military base in the Ryazan region of western Russia.

Ukrainian authorities have trumpeted their ability to knock down Russian weapons. But strikes in some areas continue to cause deaths and havoc, particularly close to the front lines in the east and south. In the southern city of Odesa, drone strikes temporarily shut off the power last week. Kyiv has suffered comparatively little damage.

More air defense help was apparently on the way. U.S. officials said Tuesday the United States was poised to approve sending a Patriot missile battery to Ukraine, agreeing to an urgent Ukrainian request. The Patriot would be the most advanced surface-to-air missile system the West has provided to Ukraine to help repel Russian aerial attacks since Russia invaded Feb. 24.

The Russian Embassy in Washington said a Patriot missile delivery would be "another provocative step by the administration, which could lead to unpredictable consequences." It added that this would cause "colossal damage not only to Russian-American relations but would create additional global security risks."

U.S. officials said last week that Moscow has looked to Iran to resupply its military with drones and surface-to-surface missiles.

The damage from Russian strikes has interrupted electricity, heating and water supplies as winter approaches. Yet the U.N. migration agency said more than 5 million people who were displaced within or outside Ukraine since Russia invaded have returned. The International Organization for Migration said a Nov. 25-Dec. 5 phone survey of 2,002 respondents in Ukraine found that only 7% were considering leaving.

Providing other estimates, Ukraine's human rights chief said Wednesday that close to one-fifth of the country's prewar population sought refuge abroad during the war. Dmytro Lubinets said 7.9 million Ukrainian citizens left the country and 4.9 million were internally displaced. Lubinets did not specify how many Ukrainian refugees have returned.

Prisoners of war also were on the move. The head of Zelenskyy's office, Andriy Yermak, said 64 Ukrainian soldiers and a U.S. national living in Ukraine were released in the latest prisoner swap with Russia. In a Telegram post, he identified the "U.S. citizen who helped our people" as Suedi Murekezi. Yermak did not elaborate.

What — if any — role Murekezi was serving in Ukraine wasn't immediately clear. A U.S. official speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the Ukraine conflict confirmed Murekezi was released. The official said Murekezi had been living in or near Kherson and that Russian forces had detained him. A group claiming to have helped rescue him, Project Dynamo, said Murekezi was a U.S. air force veteran whom Russian forces detained in June. The Florida-based group Project DYNAMO — an international search, rescue, aid non-profit organization — said he was freed Oct. 28, and then lived in Donetsk.

In other developments Wednesday:

— Ukrainian authorities said they have discovered evidence that children were tortured during Russian occupation. Lubinets, Ukraine's human rights chief, said "torture chambers for children" accused of resisting Russian forces were found in recaptured areas of northeastern and southern Ukraine. Lubinets said he saw two torture sites in Balakliya, in the northeastern Kharkiv region, and spoke with a boy who said he was held for 90 days and cut with a knife, burned, and subjected to mock executions.

— The Ukrainian presidential office said Russian forces struck ten regions in central and southeastern Ukraine, destroying two university buildings in Kramatorsk. It said high-rise apartment blocks, a hospital

and a bus station were also damaged. Russian forces also shelled eight towns and villages in the southern Kherson region, the presidential office reported.

— The International Atomic Energy Agency said it would station nuclear safety and security experts at Ukraine's nuclear power plants to prevent a nuclear accident. The U.N. nuclear watchdog already has deployed a permanent mission to the Russian-held Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The plant, Europe's biggest nuclear power station, has faced repeated shelling. Its six reactors have been shut down for months. Three other nuclear plants are located in Ukrainian-held territory, as is the decommissioned Chernobyl plant.

An 84-year-old filmmaker looks into a donkey's soul in 'EO'

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

It was the eyes that did it. Filmmaker Jerzy Skolimowski had decided some years ago that his next film was going to be about an animal. He and his wife and co-writer, Ewa Piaskowska, had been getting bored of traditional movie structure and dialogue and wanted to do something different.

They didn't know which animal to choose, though. Cats and dogs were out. That's been overdone, they thought. Then they came upon the donkey, an intelligent, stoic creature with historic significance in not only religion but cinema as well, most famously in Robert Bresson's 1966 masterpiece "Au Hasard Balthazar." But it was those massive, expressive eyes that convinced them they'd found a star who could hold the frame.

The resulting film, "EO," is the story of a circus donkey who is taken from his owner and begins a long, spiritual journey through the modern Polish and Italian countrysides, encountering humans both kind and cruel. Eo doesn't talk, but he does dream and you can't help but feel his burdens, his loneliness and his hope. It is, they said, a love letter to animals and it's currently playing in theaters nationwide.

"We wanted this film to be more of an experience than a traditional feature film," Piaskowska said in a recent interview with Skolimowski by her side. "We were very conscious of the fact that we wanted to speak to the viewer through emotions mostly because our hero is devoid of any words. The idea was from the very beginning that we don't want to tell the story about the donkey, but that we want the audience to feel like it is a donkey."

Skolimowski, who is 84 and has been making films since 1960, has received wide praise for the film in what has been a whirlwind year. After a very long production that began in 2020 and was delayed several times because of the pandemic, they finally wrapped in March and two months later were at the Cannes Film Festival where it won the jury prize. Since then "EO" has been selected to represent Poland at the Oscars, picked up several prestigious critics' group awards and was named the best film of the year by Manohla Dargis of The New York Times.

Though there were headaches because of the pandemic, the production was actually quite a serene undertaking. They employed six donkeys to play Eo, named Marietta, Tako, Hola, Ettore, Rocco and Mela, and everyone took care to create a relaxing and supportive environment to get the donkeys to do what they needed them to do.

"Everything was very quiet, very smooth," Skolimowski said. "There was no rushing and people were really keeping down their nerves."

If they needed the donkey to cross a bridge and the donkey didn't want to cross the bridge, all they could do was wait.

"Time ceased to exist," said Piaskowska, who also produced the film. "You give him some carrots and then you wait some more. Then you try the other donkey. I can't tell you how much nicer sets were. Everybody uses a very gentle voice. Everyone's smiling. We were like kids in kindergarten devising ways to convince the donkey to do this or that."

Both give special credit to cinematographer Michal Dymek, who would sometimes shoot from the donkey's point of view, and editor Agnieszka Glińska for canny cuts and juxtapositions that help make the performance and get the audience invested in the emotional life of the animal without the use of dialogue. Composer Pawel Mykietyn was even asked to think of the score as Eo's inner monologue.

"Instead of having dialogue, he would produce the sound which would express the emotion, the mood

of the animal," Skolimowski said. "He did it in a perfect, perfect way. I think the film owes him a lot."

Giving credit and praise is somewhat new for Skolimowski, he said. But perhaps part of the success of the film because of the cross-generational (and species) crew.

"I think the biggest difference between 'EO' and my other films is that for the first time, I was able to fully use the talents and enthusiasm and the goodwill of my collaborators," Skolimowski said. "Before that, I was a little bit too selfish, putting myself in front of the film."

He attributes the evolution to a 17-year hiatus from filmmaking in which he recommitted himself to painting, a passion he always had but never had enough time to practice. In that time, he said, he became, "a young, hungry artist, but not as selfish as I was as a young, hungry filmmaker."

"Now I can be much more generous and generous towards my collaborators, who had enormous input in the film," Skolimowski said.

Club Q shooting survivors press Congress to act on guns

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Survivors of last month's deadly mass shooting at a Colorado gay nightclub testified Wednesday to Congress about the onslaught of threats and violence against members of the LGBTQ community as they urged lawmakers to pass a law banning some semiautomatic weapons.

Michael Anderson, a 25-year-old bartender at Club Q, described how his place of work was a safe haven for him and many others before a 22-year-old shooter turned a drag queen's birthday celebration into a massacre on Nov. 19. Five people were killed and 25 were injured before the shooter armed with an AR-15-style semiautomatic weapon was subdued by patrons.

"This shooter entered our safe space and our home with the intention of killing as many people as possible, as quickly as possible," Anderson said. "They used a military-style weapon that exists solely for the intention of killing other human beings, and began to hunt us down as if we were disposable, as if our lives meant nothing."

James Slaugh testified about watching his sister, Charlene, bleed on the nightclub floor after a bullet ripped through her right arm. "My heart melted as she tried to dial 911 with her good arm. I called out to her and I heard no response," he said. The siblings were there to celebrate Transgender Day of Remembrance before several pops rang out in between the pounding club music. James Slaugh also was among those shot.

Wednesday's testimony to the House Oversight Committee came as lawmakers race to finish their work for the year. To the frustration of many Democrats, the year-end agenda doesn't include legislation to ban semiautomatic firearms due to firm Republican opposition.

The House passed legislation in July that would ban assault weapons for the first time since 2004, but it failed to pass in the Senate. Republicans dismiss the bill as an attack on Second Amendment rights.

Wednesday's hearing also came on the 10-year anniversary of the mass shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, that took the lives of 20 students and six teachers. Mass shootings haven't abated since then, with another deadly attack at a school occurring just this summer in Uvalde, Texas.

In the weeks after the attack in Texas and a grocery store shooting in Buffalo, New York, Congress made its most far-reaching response in decades to the nation's run of brutal mass shootings by passing a package of bills that would toughen background checks for the youngest gun buyers and keep firearms from more domestic violence offenders, among other things.

But Democrats, including President Joe Biden, say far more action on guns is needed, particularly given that mass shootings frequently target specific ethnic groups and religions.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., the chairwoman of the Oversight committee, said the hearing Wednesday was meant to show that violence against LGBTQ people does not happen in a vacuum.

"The attack on Club Q — and the LGBTQI+ community — is not an isolated incident, but part of a broader trend of violence and intimidation across the country," Maloney said. She pointed to the hundreds of anti-LGBTQ bills passed in statehouses across the U.S. since 2018.

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Matthew Haynes, the founding owner of Club Q, said the political rhetoric targeting the LGBTQI+ community can have deadly consequences due to the availability of semiautomatic weapons.

"We were lucky that night that the casualties were not much higher," Haynes said.

Haynes, who is gay, was among the thousands of people who gathered Tuesday at the White House to watch Biden sign historic legislation protecting same-sex marriages.

"It was honestly the first joy and pride I have felt since the horrific shooting at Club Q," Haynes said. But he criticized the 169 Republicans in the House who voted against the legislation.

"To the members of this committee I humbly ask, are LGBTQ people not part of your constituency?" he asked the panel. "Do you not represent us? While we wait for you to answer, we are being slaughtered and dehumanized across this country, in communities you took oaths to protect. LGBTQ issues are not political issues."

In his opening statement, Rep, James Comer of Kentucky, the committee's top Republican, said Republicans condemn all violence and hate, including the recent attack in Colorado.

But Comer accused Maloney and other Democrats on the panel of using the mass shooting at Club Q as a political tool to attack Republicans across the aisle, instead of focusing on rising crime.

The AP names its nine Breakthrough Entertainers of 2022

By The Associated Press undefined

They worked hard, with the rewards coming slowly but surely. Then something came along — often a key role or sometimes a cluster, maybe an album — and it all became next-level, a shift triggering where-did-you-come-from vibes.

That describes most of this year's nine Associated Press' Breakthrough Entertainers of the Year, a class of talent that flowered in 2022. They are Sadie Sink, Stephanie Hsu, Tenoch Huerta, Joaquina Kalukango, Iman Vellani, Daryl McCormack, Tobe Nwigwe, Simone Ashley and Danielle Deadwyler.

Sink had been on Broadway and worked alongside stars such as Naomi Watts and Helen Mirren. But playing Max Mayfield in the fourth season of "Stranger Things," she broke through as a brave skater girl who never lets go of her Walkman, who hates pink, plays video games and is a "Dragon's Lair" champion.

Hsu also was a Broadway veteran with a few TV credits when she was asked to play both a sullen teen and an intergalactic supervillain in the movie "Everything Everywhere All at Once." That led to an unforgettable performance that included dressing as Elvis and walking a pig on a leash.

Like many of the others on the list, Kalukango had racked up plenty of Broadway credits when she took a risk and played the lead in a Broadway musical, "Paradise Square." It led to a best actress in a leading role Tony Award and a stunning moment in the telecast when she sang "Let It Burn."

"Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" isn't one of Huerta's biggest roles but the Mexican actor suddenly launched a hundred memes as the mutant leader of a kingdom based on Mayan and Aztec influences beneath the ocean for centuries. Huerta, known for roles in the Netflix series "Narcos: Mexico" and the movie "The Forever Purge," has taken a big step for movie diversity.

Nwigwe, just nominated for a Grammy as best new artist, has been bubbling up with noted appearances on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series and earning a spot on Michelle Obama's 2020 workout playlist with "I'm Dope." This year, the Houston-based artist was featured on the "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" soundtrack and dropped the EP "moMINTs" to acclaim.

McCormack has worked consistently since 2018 but 2022 seems to have turned into something special with a constellation of roles — "Peaky Blinders," the buzzy, dark comedy thriller "Bad Sisters," plus a star-making performance as the title character in the film "Good Luck to You, Leo Grande" opposite Emma Thompson.

Ashley, a British actress of Indian heritage with a Tamil background, found herself leading season two of the Regency-era period drama "Bridgerton." She had a role in the series "Sex Education," but playing the fiercely independent Kate Sharma for Shonda Rhimes was her first lead character in a major production.

Deadwyler burst into the awards race this year with her performance in "Till" as Mamie Till-Mobley, the

mother of teenager Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955. She has also appeared in "The Harder They Come," "Watchmen" and the Netflix series "From Scratch" and "Station Eleven."

Vellani, another member of the Marvel Cinematic Universe on this list, is the exception, having had no such slow burn. The 19-year-old actor in "Ms. Marvel" plays a high school student enamored with all things superheroes only to find herself suddenly wielding powers of her own. And Vellani, in real life, is just starting to find her powers, like all the entertainers nominated here.

US deaths fell this year, but not to pre-COVID levels

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The number of U.S. deaths dropped this year, but there are still more than there were before the coronavirus hit.

Preliminary data — through the first 11 months of the year — indicates 2022 will see fewer deaths than the previous two COVID-19 pandemic years. Current reports suggest deaths may be down about 3% from 2020 and about 7% vs. 2021.

U.S. deaths usually rise year-to-year, in part because the nation's population has been growing. The pandemic accelerated that trend, making last year the deadliest in U.S. history, with more than 3.4 million dying. If current trends continue, this year will mark the first annual decline in deaths since 2009.

It will be months before health officials have a full tally. The October and November numbers are not yet complete and a late-December surge could change the final picture, said Farida Ahmad, who leads mortality surveillance at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the decline does hold, it will still be a far cry from where the nation was before the coronavirus appeared. This year's count is likely to end up at least 13% higher than what it was in 2019.

"We're (still) definitely worse off than we were before the pandemic," said Amira Roess, a George Mason University professor of epidemiology and global health.

Once again, most of the annual change is due to the ebb and flow of COVID-19, which has killed more than 1,080,000 Americans since it first was recognized in the U.S. in early 2020.

This year started off horribly, with about 73,000 COVID deaths in January alone — the third deadliest month from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. For 2022, "the bulk of mortality was concentrated during that omicron wave at the beginning of the year," said Iliya Gutin, a University of Texas researcher tracking COVID-19 mortality.

Monthly COVID-19 deaths dropped below 4,000 in April and averaged about 16,000 per month through November. The monthly average for 2021 was more than double that.

COVID-19 will nevertheless end up as the nation's third leading cause of death this year, just as it was in 2020 and 2021 — behind the perennial leader, heart disease, and cancer.

Heart disease deaths, which have tended to surge in tandem with COVID-19 deaths, are on track to be down from 2021, Ahmad said. And it's not clear whether the number of cancer deaths will change, based on preliminary data.

There may be some relatively good news regarding drug overdose deaths, which hit an all-time high last year. Provisional overdose death data posted by the CDC on Wednesday — through the first seven months of this year — suggests overdose deaths stopped climbing early this year, around last winter's end.

Also Wednesday, the CDC released its first report on deaths involving long COVID — long-term symptoms after a person has recovered from coronavirus infection. The CDC estimates that about 3,500 deaths from January 2020 through June 2022 involved long COVID. That's about 1% of deaths in which COVID was deemed the underlying or contributing cause.

Experts believe pharmaceutical weapons against the coronavirus have been making a difference. The Commonwealth Fund this week released a modeling study that concluded the U.S. COVID-19 vaccination program prevented more than 3.2 million deaths.

"We all really would expect that the number of deaths — and the number of severe cases — would decrease, due to a combination of immunity from natural infection and vaccination ... and treatment," Roess said.

Company holiday parties are back -- but with some restraint

By ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Say goodbye to virtual wine tastings, and bust out the karaoke. Love them or hate them, company holiday parties are back — in a toned-down kind of way.

After more than two years of working in pajama bottoms and clinking glasses over Zoom, many office workers seem to be yearning for a bit of glamour. The same is true for some front-line workers who saw festivities canceled even as they showed up to work every day during the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It just always makes me feel special," said Shobha Surya, who missed treating herself to a new dress every year for the dinner and karaoke party thrown by Ajinomoto Health and Nutrition North America, a Japanese-owned company based in the Chicago area. She was so excited the party was back for the first time in two years that she picked out her black-and-white cocktail dress two months in advance.

"Everybody let loose," she said, smiling the Monday after the party, where she accepted a recognition award for 15 years at the company. "It gets you into the holiday season."

More than 57% of companies are planning in-person holiday celebrations this year, according to a survey of 252 U.S.-based companies conducted by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a hiring firm. While that's still notably fewer than the 75% that threw parties in 2019, it's a big leap from 26% in 2021 and 5% in 2020.

Still, not everyone is ready to party like it's 2019.

Many parties will be more intimate, as companies try to accommodate workers who are increasingly remote and far-flung. Some businesses are opting for spas, juggling shows and even private movie theater showings to lure out employees who have relished working from home. And a few are sticking to the bonuses or extra time off that they offered instead of parties during the pandemic.

Cari Snavely's team of 20 opted for an afternoon of pickleball when her Boston-based software company gave them a budget to decide on their own how to celebrate.

It's a far cry from the giant bashes she remembers from her days just a few years ago working at Coca-Cola Co. in Atlanta, but Snavely said it's a better way to break the ice for people who haven't worked together in person much. Besides, she said, many of her teammates wanted the chance to leave work and get home early.

"We really wanted to make sure that as many people as possible could go," said Snavely, who works in finance. "People have home commitments, kids."

Quickbase has 700 employees but many of them are remote — and as far away as Bulgaria — so it didn't make sense to have a big party at headquarters, said Chief People Officer Sherri Kottmann. Instead, the company left it to individual teams to organize their own fun. Even in Boston, she said only 30% to 40% of employees come to the office in the middle of the week, when it's busiest.

But one thing seems sure: People are fed up with getting on screens for cocktail mixing or secret Santa exchanges. Fewer than 2% of companies are hosting virtual celebrations this year, compared to 7% last year and 17% in 2020, Challenger's survey found.

Jeff Consoletti, founder of Los Angeles event production company JJLA, said he has received zero requests this year for the gift boxes and cheese-and-wine pairing kits that helped keep his business afloat for the past two years. Instead, he has seen a 100% increase in bookings for in-person events, though they are much smaller than the 5,000-person revelries he often staged before the pandemic.

Ksenia Kulynych, director of operations at Monarch Rooftop & Indoor Lounge in New York, said she's seen a more than 30% increase in small group reservations this year — and often, a drastic undercount or overcount of guests as planners struggle to gauge how deep the enthusiasm for parties goes. Lunches are surprisingly popular, and Fridays are out.

"We will pitch away on Fridays and the response is always, 'no one's in the office. It's too hard to get anyone to come into the office. No one's going to come into the city on a Friday,'" Kulynych said.

Even before the remote work revolution, some people were pushing back at the idea of "forced fun" at work, particularly in corporate cultures where heavy drinking is intertwined with networking.

Shwetha Pai, who works from home in Cincinnati for a small workplace analytics firm, said big holiday parties stir up memories of her early career days in investment banking, when her guard was always up

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at male-dominated nights out, and she often used her commute home as an excuse to leave early.

"People make bad decisions in those situations. They just do," said Pai, 41, head of operations and marketing at Worklytics. "There is definitely this expectation that you take part in all of it because that's part of 'team bonding.' But in fact, for women, it's really fraught with a lot of challenges and risk."

Bill MacQueen, 46, is far removed from big city nightlife as assistant director of commercialization at Ajinomoto's manufacturing plant in Eddyville, Iowa. And he doesn't drink.

But count him in for bingo.

MacQueen said his heart gave a "leap for joy that we were back to pre-COVID" when he got his bingo card at the entrance of Ajinomoto's dinner party for its plant workers, an event he has cherished since he started working there 28 years ago, two days after graduating high school.

"It was just so nice to hear everyone in that hall talking and laughing, and people teasing each other," MacQueen said. "And sounding cheesy, it was just kind of like a family reunion."

God of War, Wordle lead a bumpy year in video games

By LOU KESTEN Associated Press

It's been a bumpy year for video games, in part thanks to the ongoing repercussions of the pandemic. Some major releases got delayed (2023 could be a doozy), but enough crossed the finish line to keep gamers happy. Indie developers held up their end, delivering innovative challenges and fascinating stories. Here are the games we enjoyed the most in 2022:

1. **God of War: Ragnarök:** The latest chapter in the saga of surly Spartan warrior Kratos delivers everything you could ask for in a AAA Sony PlayStation blockbuster. There's bone-crushing combat against awe-inspiring mythical monsters. There are clever environmental puzzles to solve when you need a break from the mayhem. There's a surprisingly moving story about fatherhood, regret and the battle between fate and free will. And there's the year's best voice performance, by Richard Schiff (Toby from "The West Wing"!) as a droll, manipulative Odin. Epic in every way.

2. **Wordle:** On the other end of the spectrum is this simple yet seductive word and logic game that you can play in a few minutes while you're eating breakfast. Created by software engineer Josh Wardle for his partner's amusement, Wordle became a phenomenon when he added the ability for players to share their successes (and failures) on social media. Some fans grouched when Wardle sold his creation to The New York Times for a reported seven-figure payday, but it remains a tasty daily snack for language lovers.

3. **Horizon: Forbidden West:** Back to the epic. Sony's other big release of 2022 is this sprawling post-apocalyptic adventure. In 2017's "Horizon: Zero Dawn," fearless heroine Aloy discovered why civilization collapsed; now she has to stop a mysterious enemy from wiping out humanity for good. The result is a spirited journey across an often breathtaking American West, where the robotic buffalo roam while our descendants patiently try to rebuild culture from the mess we've created.

4. **Pentiment:** It's not often that you see a video game in which a major plot point revolves around Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. But such is life in 16th century Germany, the setting of this thought-provoking whodunit. It starts with a murder in an abbey, and your choices as you investigate the crime have irreversible effects on the people in the surrounding village as the decades go by. It's a provocative examination of faith, history and unforeseen consequences, told with beautiful graphics that evoke the manuscripts and woodcuts of the medieval era.

5. **Norco:** A young woman named Kay returns to her Louisiana hometown after her mother's death in this absorbing mystery. Norco — an actual town, built around a giant oil refinery — is a desolate place, damaged by flooding and decades of pollution, but it takes on an odd kind of beauty thanks to vivid pixel art reminiscent of classic LucasArts games of the 1990s. And as Kay searches for her missing brother, there are lively characters and moments of rueful comedy that balance out the sense of melancholy. It's one of the most thoughtfully written games in years.

6. **Return to Monkey Island:** Speaking of LucasArts, one of the mad geniuses of its golden age, Ron Gilbert, came back this year with an uproarious reprise of his most famous creation. Stumbling wannabe swashbuckler Guybrush Threepwood is determined to finally learn the Secret of Monkey Island that was

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promised in the 1990 original. (Spoiler: It's very silly.) The puzzles are as demented as ever — one involves repairing a laundry machine so you can flatten a talking skull — and every encounter is crammed with jokes. Even if you're new to the franchise, it's a cruise worth taking.

7. Elden Ring: Since 2011's Dark Souls, Japan's From Software has built a dedicated fan base for its notoriously difficult — some would say sadistic — adventures. Elden Ring is a bit more welcoming, at least giving newcomers time to get their bearings and build up their strength before taking on its most fearsome beasts. It's still challenging, but the studio's move from gloomy, claustrophobic castles into a more colorful, inviting open world at least gives less masochistic players a chance to explore its singular take on sword-and-sorcery.

8. The Case of the Golden Idol: The tiny studio Color Gray Games (essentially two Latvian brothers) made a splash with this ingenious mystery linking 12 gruesome crimes into one big conspiracy. Each case gives you a series of mostly static screenshots, and your job is to figure out not just whodunit, but what the heck happened in the first place. It'll make you feel like Columbo — albeit in the 18th century — as you piece together bits of evidence to assemble a coherent narrative. Golden Idol has more "a-ha" moments than most big-budget games, and I hope the brothers have more cases up their sleeves.

9. Marvel Snap: There are tons of collectible card games and just as many superhero games, but somehow the studio Second Dinner (formed by a veteran of the card battle classic Hearthstone) has combined the two in a completely unique way. Each player has a handful of Marvel characters that are played onto three locations that have different effects; the goal is to take over two of the three spots. One game takes just a few minutes, but it's easy to lose hours playing just one more as you try to assemble a killer deck.

10. Kirby and the Forgotten Land: Nintendo's best Switch game this year finally takes Kirby into a 3D world, opening up some new skills and challenges for the adorable pink blob. Kirby's talent — he can inhale enemies and take on their powers — has always ensured plenty of variety, but whoever expected him to vacuum up an entire car? Forgotten Land is easy, but it's fun to play co-op with younger kids, and there are enough hidden secrets that you'll want to replay each level after the kids have gone to bed.

Trump Org. was secretly held in contempt for hindering probe

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's company impeded a grand jury investigation last year by repeatedly failing to turn over evidence in a timely fashion, leading to a secret contempt finding and a \$4,000 fine, according to court records made public Tuesday.

The Trump Organization was found to have been "willfully disobeying" four grand jury subpoenas and three court orders, to the detriment of Manhattan prosecutors who were left ill-prepared to question witnesses, Judge Juan Manuel Merchan ruled.

The subpoenas, issued in March, April, May and June 2021, preceded the Trump Organization's July 2021 indictment on criminal tax fraud charges for helping executives avoid taxes on company-paid perks. The company was convicted this month and faces a fine of up to \$1.6 million.

The \$4,000 contempt fine was the maximum allowable by law.

It's yet another kerfuffle involving Trump and allegations of mishandling or withholding records. In April, a judge held Trump in contempt and fined him \$110,000 for being slow to respond to a civil subpoena issued by New York's attorney general. The former president has also been under investigation for storing classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

Merchan vaguely referenced the Trump Organization's contempt proceeding while presiding over the company's criminal trial, saying he would wait until after it was over to unseal records related to an unspecified proceeding held last year.

That proceeding turned out to be the Trump Organization's closed-door contempt trial on Oct. 7, 2021 and Merchan's partially redacted 28-page ruling finding the company in contempt, which he issued on Dec. 8, 2021.

While the company's name was blacked out in the court record released Tuesday, the details in the deci-

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sion and the manner in which it was unsealed by the judge made it clear who was involved.

Manhattan prosecutors, frustrated with the company's lack of compliance, had sought "coercive sanctions" of \$60,000 per day, Merchan said.

Trump Organization lawyers argued that the company had been providing a steady stream of records, at one point totaling more than 3.5 million pages of records, but Merchan said that was "just enough to fend off" the prosecution's request for penalties "while never fully meeting any of the deadlines."

"When challenged (the company) provided one excuse after another," Merchan wrote. "At times it claimed it was impossible to meet deadlines because the demands were too voluminous, overbroad or vague. On other occasions, it blamed delays and omissions on human error" or technical issues.

In the recently concluded criminal tax fraud trial, two corporate entities at the Trump Organization were convicted Dec. 6 of charges including charges of conspiracy and falsifying business records. Sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 13. The defense said it will appeal. Trump himself was not on trial.

The company's former finance chief, Allen Weisselberg, previously pleaded guilty to charges that he manipulated the company's books to illegally reduce his taxes on \$1.7 million in fringe benefits such as a Manhattan apartment and luxury cars. He testified in exchange for a promised five-month jail sentence.

Foreign college athletes chase endorsement money outside US

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas (AP) — Marta Suarez stepped in front of the white backdrop, rotated the basketball to put the logo forward and propped it against her hip. She looked into the camera and smiled, her head tilting slightly to the right.

Flashes came in quick succession. Music streamed from a nearby Bluetooth speaker. Suarez lifted the ball onto her right shoulder and smiled again, and soon was spinning the ball on her finger from a squatted pose.

"Get the bruises," she quipped, pointing to a knee exposed by her cutoff jeans.

Only a few hours had passed since the third-year forward from Spain had helped Tennessee win its Battle 4 Atlantis tournament opener. This part of the trip — in a foyer outside the Atlantis resort's Grand Ballroom — was for herself, available only because the Lady Vols were in the Bahamas.

College athletes from foreign countries have been left out of the rush for endorsement deals because student visa rules largely prohibit off-campus work while in the U.S. But a growing number are using a loophole when they leave the country, doing the legwork needed — but not allowed on U.S. soil — to eventually profit from the use of their name, image and likeness (NIL).

At holiday tournaments in the Bahamas this fall, startup company Influxer worked with about three dozen international athletes to create photos, videos and introductory podcasts that could be used for potential deals.

Founder and chief executive Tyler Jaynes said the sessions are something Influxer wants "to repeat over and over." There's no guarantee they will lead to deals for international athletes, but it's an avenue for them to find what might be out there.

"Having fun?" Jaynes asked Suarez during a pause in her shoot.

"Yeah," she said, nodding back to the speaker. "The music."

"Yes," Jaynes said, "we've thought of everything."

That's the hope for international athletes hoping to cash in on their fame like their American teammates.

"I'm just glad right now we at least get a chance to do something, even if it's just outside the U.S.," said DePaul's Brendan Favre, a graduate student guard from Switzerland. "It's still nice to be able to do something."

International athletes account for roughly 14,000 of the more than 113,000 athletes across Division I, according to NCAA data. The obstacle for them to make NIL money is federal immigration law, not NCAA rules.

The NCAA largely cleared the way in July 2021 for athletes to earn NIL money and deals worth millions

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have been struck across the country. But the majority of international athletes are on F-1 student visas prohibiting off-campus work except in rare exceptions such as internships or work-study programs. Violations could lead to the visa's termination, and deportation.

Blake Lawrence, co-founder/CEO of athlete-marketing platform Opendorse, said it is unclear exactly how much international athletes are missing out. But with their presence in men's and women's basketball, two of the most marketable and compensated sports, he said it takes merely "deductive reasoning" to know there is an impact.

Now the market is evolving to address it.

"Administrators and coaches are trying to solve this problem, and it will be solved," Lawrence said. "It will not be as convenient as driving down the street and signing autographs. But international student-athletes that are having an impact from their community will benefit from NIL. They just might have to take a flight or a longer drive."

Influxer launched late last year to connect athletes with companies, with a goal of becoming a full-service NIL company with merchandising and consulting. It's led by people familiar with college sports, including Jaynes, a former Baylor football player.

Jaynes said Influxer has spent months talking with school compliance staffers and immigration attorneys to ensure nothing jeopardizes athlete visas. They've also studied state NIL laws.

"We understand it's a very sensitive subject with a lot of potential ramifications if not done the right way," Jaynes said.

Influxer paid athletes the same, unspecified amount for their time at the Bahamas sessions, Jaynes said. After creating the marketing materials, Influxer can sell them to brands for use in a brokered endorsement deal. Athletes could then receive royalties as permissible "passive" income, meaning it came through signing a licensing agreement for existing materials as opposed to a work activity such as making a commercial.

Influxer's first offshore shoot came in August when Kentucky big man Oscar Tshiebwe — last season's Associated Press men's college basketball player of the year, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo — visited the Bahamas for the Wildcats' exhibition tour.

The company replicated that on a broader scale last month as teams arrived for the Battle 4 Atlantis men's and women's tournaments as well as games at the Baha Mar resort in Nassau. Players came and went between meals, shootarounds and games.

Suarez and Australian teammate Jessie Rennie arrived carrying their jerseys. Favre and Canadian teammate Nick Ongenda soon followed from Baha Mar, carrying their own DePaul jerseys. Influxer staffers briefly introduced themselves, then the athletes got to work.

Rennie sat down for a podcast focused on her background. Suarez headed to a director's chair for a stylist to freshen her makeup and hair ahead of her photo shoot.

Ongenda and Favre were soon joking and mugging together at the photo set before breaking off for their own sessions.

"I love being in front of the camera on and off the court," Ongenda said. "It's a great experience. I'm glad they reached out and let us know about this opportunity."

That includes collecting photos with an eye toward versatility. With Favre, for example, some included him holding his empty hand palm up — ready for an item to be added later via photo editing software to accommodate a specific branding deal.

"That's great, you can put so many different things there," Jaynes said, swiping through the shots on an iPad.

Rennie, sidelined this year with a knee injury, has been happy to see teammates get deals. Like Suarez, she couldn't help but feel disappointed at being unable to do the same. Still, she didn't commit to Influxer's shoot until having enough conversations to feel it was OK.

"We do Tennessee photo shoots all the time," Rennie said, "but it was nice to do something that was more about me and who I am and it's going to be for my benefit, if that makes sense."

Influxer returned three days later before the men's Atlantis tournament, with Southern California's Australian big man, Harrison Hornery, visiting as the day's final appointment.

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"It's been frustrating at USC and being such a high-profile school, and all those NIL opportunities that everyone is getting," Hornery said. "We have people come to practice and pitch us stuff all the time, and I'm just like, 'Man, I can't do it.'"

"I'm not saying I need X amount of dollars to make me happy," he added. "Just being here and getting the opportunity to do a cool shoot and then do a podcast with those guys over there — and whatever happens, happens."

Influxer ultimately worked with roughly 35 international athletes through the Thanksgiving holiday week, the final session coming in a Nassau studio.

Ask Jaynes about what's next for Influxer, and he mentions events beyond basketball such as college golf tournaments in Mexico and elsewhere in the Bahamas. Director of business development Steve McLean even imagines a large-scale media day for international athletes, complete with corporate sponsorship.

"There's going to be a lot of trial and error," McLean said of future events, "and we're open to all of it."

Deputy dressed as Grinch gives onions to speeding drivers

MARATHON, Fla. (AP) — Several motorists who were speeding through an elementary school zone on the Florida Keys Overseas Highway received an odorous onion as a reminder to slow down from a county sheriff's deputy dressed as the Grinch.

Col. Lou Caputo, a 37-year veteran of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office who conjured up the concept more than 20 years ago, was back on the streets Tuesday.

Drivers who travel about 5 mph or less above the school zone's speed limit can choose between traffic citations and an onion presented by the Grinch. Those speeding beyond that likely receive a costly ticket.

"It's about education, awareness that our school zones are still operating even though it's the holiday season," Caputo said. "We want people to slow down."

Caputo said he portrays the fictional character created by children's author Dr. Seuss to give motorists a "gift" but also to call attention in a nice way to the need to obey speed limits in school zones.

"It catches them off guard," Caputo said.

"But when I give them a clear choice of a citation or the onion, they will take the onion. And I've had them eat the onion right in front of me."

Keys schools remain in session through Dec. 16.

Morocco faces France in politically charged World Cup game

TARIK EL BARAKAH and BARBARA SURK Associated Press

RABAT, Morocco (AP) — Hind Sabouni bristles with pride as she recalls her country's history-making World Cup run as it eliminated one European soccer powerhouse and former colonial power after another — Belgium, Spain and Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal — to become the first African and Arab nation to reach the semifinals.

For the 26-year-old English teacher in Morocco's capital, and many of her countrymen both inside the North African nation and throughout the diaspora, it's about to get more complicated. Next up is France: The defending champion and Morocco's former colonial ruler for much of the first half of the 20th century.

Wednesday's match has political and emotional resonance for both nations. It dredges up everything that's complex about the relationship in which France still wields considerable economic, political and cultural influence.

"This game is one of a kind," Sabouni said. "Especially since France is next to beat."

"We can show the rest of the world that Morocco is no longer France's backyard."

For the former protectorate, the match against the defending champion is an opportunity to show that Morocco is a formidable foe — on the soccer pitch at least — even though immigration between the two countries has blurred the lines for many in France and Morocco about who to support Wednesday in Qatar.

Over the past decade, Morocco's relationship with France has changed. Sabouni said her generation of

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Moroccans is tired of France's dominance. Young Moroccans, she said, "speak English instead of French, they buy more American products than French ones and even those who want to seek a better life abroad try to avoid France."

"Even though this is just a football game, some people view it as an opportunity for revenge," Sabouni said.

But not everyone.

Kenza Bartali, a communications professional in Rabat, sees no political overtones to the match. She obtained her master's degree in France, and lived for two years in Paris and the southern cities of Nice and Toulon between 2016 and 2018. She made "wonderful friends" who are still her friends today. "Most Moroccan students were treated with respect," the 26-year-old said.

Still, there is no doubt which team she's supporting.

"I sincerely hope that Morocco advances to the final," Bartali said. "I am aware that it will be difficult because France is a very good team, but we are hoping for the best."

Sabouni's sentiments resonate with Moroccans and other North Africans in France. Although the younger generation of immigrants and their descendants appear to be more at ease with multiple identities and languages in France, they still face institutional discrimination, racial and ethnic prejudice in public life, economic hardship and lack of job opportunities.

As in previous World Cups, France once again has turned to their national soccer team made up of players from diverse backgrounds as evidence that the country has indeed become a melting pot despite lurking prejudice, stoked against immigrants by elected right-wing politicians.

"Cultural changes and changes in life on the ground do have an effect and the team represents that," said Laurent Dubois, a professor at University of Virginia in Charlottesville who has authored two books on French and international soccer.

"The way the players inhabit being French and don't seem to have an issue with also being African or anything else at the same time is an antidote to the immigrant resentment on the right."

In Morocco, people have embraced the team's foreign-born players as their native sons. They welcome the experience and professionalism they bring from Europe's top clubs and are proud they chose Morocco as their national team when they could have played for the countries of their births, from Spain to Canada to Belgium and beyond.

The Morocco national team depends heavily on the diaspora, with 14 of the squad's 26 players born abroad, including their French-born coach, Walid Regragui, the highest proportion for any team at the World Cup.

Like Morocco's supporters at home and an estimated 5 million scattered around Europe and beyond, many players grapple with family tales of colonial history, the challenges of immigration and questions of national loyalty. They want desperately to detach from the burdens of the past and win a place in the World Cup final — whether home for them is in France or Morocco, or Belgium, Canada, Tunisia, Algeria or elsewhere.

"Most of the Moroccan players who were born abroad chose Morocco as their national team because they feel they play for more than just to win a football match," said Maher Mezahi, a Marseille-based Algerian journalist covering African football. "They play to elevate national pride and to make their family proud."

For Regragui, his and his player's dual identities are meaningless in the biggest match the squad has faced.

"I'm a dual national, and that's an honor and a pleasure," the Moroccan coach said. "And it's an honor and a pleasure to face France. But I'm the Morocco coach and we're going to be playing the best team in the world. The most important thing is to get through to the final."

"When we play for the Moroccan national team, we are Moroccans," Regragui said.

4 confirmed dead as migrant boat capsizes in English Channel

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A small boat laden with migrants capsized in the dark in the English Channel Wednesday, killing four and increasing calls on the British government to do more to prevent people from risking

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their lives trying to cross one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Helicopters and lifeboats raced from bases in southern England after authorities received reports of a small boat in difficulty in waters between Britain and France just after 3 a.m. local time. Britain's Press Association, citing government sources, said 43 people were rescued, with more than 30 of those pulled from the water. The operation was coordinated by the U.K. Maritime and Coastguard Agency and included personnel from both Britain and France.

It was unclear whether there were any more people missing.

"Investigations are ongoing and we will provide further information in due course," the government said in a statement. "This is a truly tragic incident."

The British government has been under pressure to stop the smugglers, who charge migrants thousands of dollars each to cross the Channel in flimsy inflatable boats, after at least 27 people died when their craft sank in November of last year. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his predecessors have gone as far as threatening to deport those entering the country illegally to Rwanda in an effort to dissuade people from making the crossing.

But the numbers keep rising as the prospect of work and education in Britain lure both economic migrants and those fleeing war, persecution and famine. Some 44,000 people have made the journey so far this year, compared to 23,000 in all of last year and 8,500 in 2020, according to government figures.

Sunak pledged Tuesday to clear the backlog of asylum applications and announced new measures aimed at curbing the number of migrants crossing the Channel.

Sunak said he planned to introduce legislation early next year to ensure people who arrive illegally cannot remain in the country.

The prime minister also said he was adding hundreds of workers to process asylum claims and clear the backlog, estimated at more than 143,000 pending applications, by the end of 2023. The extra staff will also focus on the swift removal of Albanian migrants who come from a country Britain considers safe but are crossing the Channel in increasing numbers, Sunak said.

Lawmakers announce 'framework' on bill to keep gov't open

KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers leading the negotiations on a bill to fund the federal government for the current fiscal year announced late Tuesday they've reached agreement on a "framework" that should allow them to complete work on the bill over the next week and avoid a government shutdown.

Congress faces a midnight Friday deadline to pass a spending bill to prevent a partial government shutdown. The two chambers are expected to pass another short-term measure before then to keep the government running through Dec. 23, which will allow negotiators time to complete work on the full-year bill.

"Now, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees will work around the clock to negotiate the details of final 2023 spending bills that can be supported by the House and Senate and receive President Biden's signature," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, the Democratic chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

Earlier in the day, Senate leaders said lawmakers from the two parties were nearing an agreement, but Republicans warned Democrats that lawmakers would need to complete their work by Dec. 22 or they would only support a short-term extension into early next year. That would give House Republicans more leverage over what's in the legislation, since they will be in the majority then.

"We intend to be on the road going home on the 23rd. We intend not to be back here between Christmas and New Year's, and if we can't meet that deadline, we would be happy to pass a short-term (resolution) into early next year," said Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader in the Senate.

McConnell voiced confidence Republicans would be able to meet their priorities of increasing spending on defense without "having to pay a bonus above what President Biden asked for" on non-defense priorities. He said Democrats were willing to accept that because they had previously passed two bills on a party-line basis that allow for more government spending on various domestic priorities.

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Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., said last week that the two parties were about \$25 billion apart in what is expected to be about a \$1.65 trillion package, not including mandatory spending on programs such as Social Security and Medicare. However, Democrats in their statements did not indicate what topline spending number had been reached in the framework announced Tuesday.

Today in History: December 15, Bill of Rights takes effect

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 15, the 349th day of 2022. There are 16 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 15, 1791, the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, went into effect following ratification by Virginia.

On this date:

In 1890, Sioux Indian Chief Sitting Bull and 11 other tribe members were killed in Grand River, South Dakota, during a confrontation with Indian police.

In 1939, the Civil War motion picture epic "Gone with the Wind," starring Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, had its world premiere in Atlanta.

In 1944, a single-engine plane carrying bandleader Glenn Miller, a major in the U.S. Army Air Forces, disappeared over the English Channel while en route to Paris.

In 1967, the Silver Bridge between Gallipolis (gal-ih-puh-LEES'), Ohio, and Point Pleasant, West Virginia, collapsed into the Ohio River, killing 46 people.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced he would grant diplomatic recognition to Communist China on New Year's Day and sever official relations with Taiwan.

In 1989, a popular uprising began in Romania that resulted in the downfall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHEHS'-koo).

In 2000, the long-troubled Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine was closed for good.

In 2001, with a crash and a large dust cloud, a 50-foot tall section of steel — the last standing piece of the World Trade Center's facade — was brought down in New York.

In 2011, the flag used by U.S. forces in Iraq was lowered in a low-key Baghdad airport ceremony marking the end of a war that had left 4,500 Americans and 110,000 Iraqis dead and cost more than \$800 billion.

In 2013, Nelson Mandela was laid to rest in his childhood hometown, ending a 10-day mourning period for South Africa's first Black president.

In 2016, a federal jury in Charleston, South Carolina, convicted Dylann Roof of slaughtering nine Black church members who had welcomed him to their Bible study.

In 2020, the Food and Drug Administration cleared the first kit that consumers could buy without a prescription to test themselves for COVID-19 entirely at home. After weeks of holding out, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Joe Biden on winning the presidential election.

Ten years ago: A day after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, investigators worked to understand what led the 20-year-old gunman to slaughter 26 children and adults after also killing his mother and before taking his own life. In his Saturday radio address, President Barack Obama declared that "every parent in America has a heart heavy with hurt" and said it was time to "take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this."

Five years ago: Republicans revealed the details of their huge national tax rewrite; the 35 percent tax rate on corporations would fall to 21 percent, and the measure would repeal the requirement under President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act that all Americans have health insurance or face a penalty. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said the middle class would "get skewered" under the GOP tax measure, while the wealthy and corporations would "make out like bandits."

One year ago: Former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty to a federal charge of violating George Floyd's civil rights, admitting for the first time that he held his knee across Floyd's neck

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and kept it there even after Floyd became unresponsive, resulting in the Black man's death. A federal appeals court panel lifted a nationwide ban against President Joe Biden's vaccine mandate for health care workers, instead blocking the requirement in only certain states and setting the stage for patchwork enforcement across the country. New York City Mayor-elect Eric Adams named Keechant Sewell, a Long Island police official, as the city's next police commissioner, making her the first woman to lead the nation's largest police force.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Cindy Birdsong (The Supremes) is 83. Rock musician Dave Clark (The Dave Clark Five) is 80. Rock musician Carmine Appice (Vanilla Fudge) is 76. Actor Don Johnson is 73. Actor Melanie Chartoff is 72. Movie director Julie Taymor is 70. Movie director Alex Cox is 68. Rock musician Paul Simonon (The Clash) is 67. Movie director John Lee Hancock is 66. Democratic Party activist Donna Brazile is 63. Country singer Doug Phelps (Brother Phelps; Kentucky Headhunters) is 62. Movie producer-director Reginald Hudlin is 61. Actor Helen Slater is 59. Actor Paul Kaye (TV: "Game of Thrones") is 58. Actor Molly Price is 57. Actor Garrett Wang (wahng) is 54. Actor Michael Shanks is 52. Actor Stuart Townsend is 50. Figure skater Surya Bonaly is 49. Actor Geoff Stults is 46. Actor Adam Brody is 43. Actor Michelle Dockery is 41. Actor George O. Gore II is 40. Actor Camilla Luddington is 39. Rock musician and actor Alana Haim (HYM) is 31. Actor Maude Apatow (AP'-ih-tow) is 25. Actor Stefania Owen is 25.