

Groton Daily Independent

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St. John's Video Replaced

A high definition video of the St. John's Lutheran Pre-School Christmas program is being uploaded this morning. There are times when we have to livestream in lower quality due to internet quality. We always record the events in situations like this so we can replace the video. It should be available for viewing by 10 a.m. today. It is listed under Archived Videos, Other Events.

Groton Community Calendar

Friday, Dec. 23

Senior Menu: Baked chicken, rice pilaf, cauliflower and pea salad, banana, whole wheat bread.

No School, Christmas Vacation begins

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

Saturday, Dec. 24

Notice Time Change: St. John's Christmas Eve service, 4 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran Christmas Eve service with communion, 7 p.m.

Groton United Methodist service, 5 p.m.

Conde United Methodist service, 7 p.m.

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



"Forgiveness is an inner correction that lightens the heart."

-Gerald Jampolsky

Groton CM&A Candlelight service, 5 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 25 - CHRISTMAS DAY

Groton CM&A: Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.

Zion worship, 9 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran worship with communion, 9 a.m.

No worship at United Methodist Churches

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

Monday, Dec. 26

Emmanuel Lutheran Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

The Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Tuesday, Dec. 27

Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, pineapple tidbits.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #8 Results

Team Standings: Chipmunks – 3, Jackelopes, 3, Foxes – 3, Cheetahs – 1, Coyotes – 1, Shihtzus – 1
Men's High Games: Brody Sombke – 207, Mike Siegler – 206, Roger Spanier – 204
Women's High Games: Vicki Walter – 187, Darci Spanier – 168, Brenda Madsen – 163
Men's High Series: Brad Waage – 566, Roger Spanier – 560, Mike Siegler – 545
Women's High Series: Vicki Walter – 487, Darci Spanier – 466, Brenda Madsen – 446
Fun Game: Most 6 Spares – Shihtzus with 5!

Gov. Noem Declares Winter Storm Emergency Activates National Guard

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Gov. Kristi Noem signed Executive Order 2022-12, which declares an emergency for the winter storms that have been impacting South Dakota. Governor Noem also activated the South Dakota National Guard.

"My administration has been assisting county and tribal governments in the local response to the ongoing winter storms across the state," said Governor Kristi Noem. "Under the direction of the Office of Emergency Management, we will continue to help all of South Dakota's communities get through these storms, together."

The South Dakota National Guard has been activated pursuant to the statewide emergency, and resources are needed to provide additional assistance to the tribes. When the tribes request help, it is evaluated to see if it is an appropriate use for our National Guard. The Guard's immediate mission is hauling available firewood from the Black Hills Forest Service to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Other missions may be necessary as coordination between tribal and local governments and State Emergency Management continues.

The Noem Administration had already been responding to the various needs of South Dakota's tribes throughout these storms, and those are detailed in this release by the South Dakota Office of Public Safety.

These actions are in addition to the ongoing steps being taken by numerous state agencies, especially the South Dakota Department of Public Safety and the South Dakota Department of Transportation.

State's interstate network closed

Interstate 90 was closed from the Minnesota State line to Rapid City. Interstate 29 was closed from the I29-I90 intersection in Sioux Falls to the North Dakota border due to sustained high winds causing blizzard-like conditions. As high winds move east, low visibility and drifting snow are worsening.

The National Weather Service (NWS) has issued a blizzard warning in effect through Friday, Dec. 23, 2022. In addition to blizzard-like conditions, many stuck and stranded vehicles are blocking lanes of traffic.

Officials will continually assess conditions to determine when I-90 and I29 can be reopened safely.

Motorists are asked to avoid travel due to the extremely serious weather conditions, and rapidly deteriorating roads. Significantly reduced visibilities and blizzard-like conditions, along with extreme wind chills, make travel very dangerous.

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

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** See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.

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EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING OFFERS AVAILABLE!



Gov. Noem Appoints Melissa Magstadt as Secretary of Health

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Gov. Kristi Noem appointed Melissa Magstadt as Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Health. Melissa's appointment will be effective on the next state work day, which will be Tuesday, December 27.

"Melissa has proven her ability to provide innovative and cost-effective healthcare to the people of South Dakota," said Governor Kristi Noem. "She will bring a fresh perspective to the department. We've set an example for the nation over the past several years by trusting our people to exercise personal responsibility over their healthcare decisions. Melissa will advance that vision for the people of South Dakota."

Melissa is an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (ARPN). She is a co-owner of Quick Care SD, an organization that provides quick and affordable healthcare access across Eastern South Dakota. She also owns an integrated medicine practice called SG Essentials in both Watertown and Pierre. Melissa served in the South Dakota House of Representatives from 2011 to 2014 and was a member of the House Committee on Health and Human Services. She has been involved in South Dakota healthcare for more than 30 years.

"South Dakota should be on the forefront of supporting proactive quality of care for our people," said Melissa Magstadt, South Dakota Secretary of Health. "Our state has unique health challenges, which vary from our rural communities to our big cities. We can tackle these challenges by focusing on an innovative, forward-looking approach to public health, rather than simply reacting to difficulties."

Melissa has a Master's in Science from South Dakota State University with a focus as a family nurse practitioner. She also has a Master's in Business Administration from Mount Marty University. She is a graduate of the Great Plains Public Health Leadership Institute at the University of Nebraska. And she is a fellow at the University of Arizona's Center for Integrated Medicine.

Melissa and her family live in the Castlewood and Watertown area. She was born and raised in South Dakota.

Labor Department Provides Funding for High School Apprenticeship Programs

PIERRE, SD – The Department of Labor and Regulation (DLR) has awarded four recipients \$35,500 each to assist in the development of high school registered apprenticeships through the Pathway Partnership Initiative.

Recipients and programs include Bear Butte Gardens for agriculture, Belle Fourche School District for healthcare, Harrisburg School District for agriculture, and Dakota State University for education.

"High school apprenticeships provide the foundation for students to choose among multiple pathways after graduation – to enroll in college, to enter an apprenticeship program, begin full-time employment or a combination," said state Labor and Regulation Secretary Marcia Hultman.

The awardees submitted applications through a competitive process. Each awardee's application demonstrated leadership and partnership between employers, secondary and post-secondary education institutions, government agencies, and community partners.

"Awardees will receive technical assistance from DLR and the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Apprenticeship as they create these programs," said Secretary Hultman. "In addition, awardees will assist in the development of a guide schools districts can use to implement registered apprenticeships into their learning models."

Visit StartTodaySD.com to become an employer sponsor in the Registered Apprenticeship Program in South Dakota, build a qualified workforce and reduce turnover.

Amid historic decline, 2022 pheasant season off to strong start in South Dakota



Scott Waltman
South Dakota
News Watch

Few if any people in South Dakota will argue that the state's vaunted pheasant hunting industry in 2022 is as strong as in the past.

Compared to prior decades, the slow and steady declines are apparent in both license sales and bird numbers and, to some extent, how out-of-state visitors who pump millions into the East River economy plan their trips.

Still, state officials with ties to the pheasant and tourism industries remain optimistic about this year's season and what the future might hold. Hunters interviewed recently report solid results in the field, and businesses that rely on pheasant hunting revenues are also seeing strong financials so far this season.

While the odds of the glory years returning are long, hunting the state bird is still a popular activity that generates hundreds of millions of dollars into the South Dakota economy each year.

South Dakota remains home to a lucrative but steadily declining pheasant hunting industry that generated nearly \$300 million in direct spending in the state in 2016, a majority of that from non-resident hunters.

The state Game, Fish and Parks Department estimates the number of pheasants taken each year by hunters. Last year's total was roughly 1.07 million. There are no 2022 numbers yet as the season stretches until the end of January, but GFP spokesman Chris Hull said he checks in with businesses on a weekly basis, has been out hunting and has visited with other hunters. Anecdotally, he said, this season is going better than last year when it comes to pheasant numbers.

"I would be shocked if the number wasn't well over 1 million birds shot," Hull said of this season.

In 2020, more than 1.1 million pheasants were taken by roughly 121,000 hunters. Those numbers, perhaps aided by the COVID-19 pandemic that left many people looking for more outdoor activities, are higher than they were in 2019, when 111,000 hunters collected about 830,000 birds.

License numbers are also going to be modestly higher again this year, according to GFP statistics. Sales of combination small game/fishing licenses, available only to South Dakota residents, were 48,746 in 2021 and 47,395 through Nov. 16 this year.

There are no numbers yet to track how much pheasant hunters have spent in South Dakota this season. But it is substantial. The overall revenue generated in recent years, according to GFP and South Dakota Department of Tourism numbers, include:



The 2022 pheasant season is off to a good start in South Dakota, according to hunters and experts in the industry. Photo: News Watch file

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2021: \$246.8 million
2020: Not available
2019: \$202.4 million
2018: \$218 million
2017: \$287 million

Katlyn Svendsen, global media and public relations director for the South Dakota Department of Tourism, said GFP tracks more details about the economic impact hunting has on the state than her office. Tourism numbers in South Dakota are strong and hunting is one reason why, she said.

In 2021, 13.5 million overall visitors to South Dakota spent an estimated \$4.4 billion, according to department statistics. For comparison, 13.7 million visitors spent \$3.8 billion in South Dakota in 2015.

Svendsen said the reports she is hearing about pheasant hunting are that the season is going well and hunters are having a great time.



Casey Weismantel

In Brown County, pheasant hunting has an economic impact of \$12 million to \$16 million a year, said Casey Weismantel, executive director for the Aberdeen Convention & Visitors Bureau. That number was down to \$8.7 million in 2013 before rebounding, he said.

Critical non-residents adapt to changes

Through recent decades, South Dakota has depended more and more on out-of-state hunters, according to GFP data. The last time more hunting licenses were sold to residents than visitors was in 2002, and the number of in-residents has been generally decreasing since then. The low was 47,403 in 2019, before an uptick the past few years.

Falling out-of-state license numbers is also a concern. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of non-resident hunters declined from 79,195 to 69,018, GFP statistics show. In recent years, most out-of-state hunters stay at lodges or outfitters that provide everything from lodging to dogs to land, Weismantel said.

There are still visitors who want to access public land that offer hunting without resort fees. But, he said, more often than not, they prefer a lodge that can guarantee bird numbers.

As the number of businesses that offer those services has grown, the days of knocking on the doors of farmers and asking to walk through their fields have largely fallen away. That can be aggravating for South Dakotans looking for hunting opportunities.

A lodge is where first-time pheasant hunter Mike Larsen of California stayed when he and five friends visited northeastern South Dakota to hunt. They stayed at Doland Hunting Lodge in eastern Spink County.

Larsen said the setup was great, as the lodge even had a spare shotgun for a member of the group who needed one. He said his group shot its limit of 18 pheasants on Nov. 22 and got 10 of a possible 18 the next day, when marksmanship was an issue. Larsen said he saw hundreds of birds even though his gang missed plenty of them.

Return visitors make up the bulk of business at Doland



An Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition sign indicates a field that is open to public hunting southwest of Aberdeen. Photo: Scott Waltman

for News Watch

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Hunting Lodge, said owner Joe Remily. Hunters return year after year because they enjoy their time, he said. Sometimes wives join their husbands, he said. The lodge is generally booked for much of the season and even offers a couple's hunt, he said.

Luring more pheasant hunters to South Dakota

A big part of Weismantel's job is drawing pheasant hunters to the Aberdeen area, even though he hears complaints that hunting isn't what it once was. To do that, he visits shows like Pheasant Fest each February in Minneapolis.

"The golden days of pheasant hunting, they're in the past," he admitted.

But there remain plenty of good opportunities and birds, he said.

Weismantel said he doesn't pull any punches as he chats with would-be visitors. He is honest about what he hears concerning pheasant numbers and conditions, and reminds them there is no way to ensure a visiting hunter will get a limit of pheasants or even one bird. But Weismantel can promise those interested in hunting in northeastern South Dakota that there are ample opportunities. And a lot of that, he says, has to do with public land access.

There are visiting hunters who don't want to pay to stay at a hunting lodge and favor public land, Weismantel said. That land can make for tough walking because of the habitat, but it has pheasants, he said, so some out-of-staters are willing to find a base for lodging and drive 100 miles a day to find accessible land, he said.

For many out-of-state hunters, the experience is more about camaraderie and spending time with friends and family than it is about limiting out in birds, Weismantel said.

Most surrounding states have focused on increasing pheasant habitat and/or releasing birds to increase the population. And all have some kind of survey to track pheasant numbers. South Dakota discounted its summer brood surveys in 2000, which sparked criticism from some who thought the decision was made to hide the decreasing pheasant population.

Discussing the issue can sometimes require thick skin, Hull said, but most folks just want to be heard.

The surveys were not used for management practices, and Hull said there could be hope for people who miss the annual reports.

"I wouldn't be shocked if it came back, but I also wouldn't be shocked if it didn't," he said.

Hunters report positive results

The first Chinese ring-necked pheasants were released in Spink County in 1908, and the first season, a one-day hunt in Spink County, was in 1919.

It turns out the hardy birds didn't mind South Dakota's extreme weather. The state bought pheasants in the early years, and the bird population took off.

By 1945, South Dakota had roughly 16 million pheasants, according to numbers tracked by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, and an estimated 7.5 million were harvested that year. An industry was born.

Numbers fluctuated for decades, but have not topped 10 million since 2008. In recent history, 2007 was an exceptional year with an estimated pheasant population of 11.9 million. Some 180,000 licensed hunters



The German shepherd-Weimaraner cross owned by Ken Hubbart of Aberdeen found success in the field. Photo: Ken Hubbart Facebook page

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A pheasant flies out of walk-in land available to hunters southwest of Aberdeen. Photo: Scott Waltman for News Watch

gathered about 2.1 million birds, according to GFP statistics. But the number of pheasants and licenses have decreased since then and have become a concern for the state.

Last year, more than 129,000 licenses were issued, with about 1.07 million birds harvested, according to the GFP.

Certainly, things have changed as the generations have rolled by, but that's not to say hunters aren't seeing birds.

Ken Hubbard of Aberdeen was out hunting a public walk-in area west of town the Sunday after Thanksgiving. He bagged a bird in 90 minutes of walking with his German shepherd-Weimaraner cross.

Hubbard said he had hunted about 15 times this season, mostly near Aberdeen, but also in the Brookings and Wessington Springs areas. He said he had yet to be

skunked. The Thursday and Friday of Thanksgiving week near Brookings, he said he got a couple of birds each day. And during the in-state pheasant opener, which is the week before the traditional opener that draws tens of thousands of visitors to South Dakota, he and his dad got their combined limit of six pheasants that Saturday. The next day, his group of three bagged seven birds out of a combined maximum of nine, again on public land.

Hunting in the Wessington Springs area was a little slower, Hubbard said. There, he hunted on his in-law's property. But generally, he has hunted in state walk-in areas.

"I've been fairly impressed with the public land. You would think it'd get kind of trampled down (as the season goes on), but we've been able to scratch out a pheasant or two," he said after finishing a trip through public land as the sun set on a mild Sunday that capped the holiday weekend.

That day, he said, he saw plenty of birds, but getting near them was a challenge. Some of the public land can make for tough walking, but it also provides excellent cover for pheasants.

Tony Julik, who splits his time between South Dakota, Minnesota and Arizona, said pheasant numbers seem higher this year compared to recent years. He visits South Dakota three or four times each fall to hunt on land he and friends own near Hosmer. There's no way to know for sure, he said, but there seem to be more pheasants in more places, he said.

He noted that the weather in the past year has been good for pheasants. Across much of northeastern South Dakota, generally mild weather and timely rains have provided good habitat this fall. And, Julik said, it didn't get too hot during the summer. The heat can kill bugs that young pheasants eat, he said. He didn't believe an ice storm in the second half of November harmed pheasants because they could find cover.

A focus on public land available to hunters

South Dakota is working to gather more public land for hunting, which should mean more pheasants and more hunters, said Hull, communications specialist with GFP.

Habitat is the key to keeping the pheasant industry a strong part of South Dakota's economy and helping bird numbers increase, he said.

"The discussion starts and ends with habitat. If you have habitat, the birds are going to be there," Hull said.

Between 2006 and 2012, South Dakota lost 1.8 million acres of grassland, according to an April 2014 study by the South Dakota State University Plant Science Department. Higher returns for corn and soybeans have led to farmers and ranchers breaking the grassland to maximize crop profits.

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South Dakota had nearly 1.8 million acres protected under the CRP program in 1994, according to data reported to the state. In the next 20 years, that number dipped to 930,000 acres. By 2019, it had rebounded to 1.1 million acres.

In recent years, GFP has added about 6,000 acres of public land in the James River Valley area in north-eastern South Dakota, Hull said. Another similar project will add about 25,000 public acres along the Big Sioux River, he said. It's part of what's called the Conservation Enhancement Reserve Program, which offers payments for land in the program that can be used by hunters.

The program offers farmers a chance to get payments for marginal or non-farmable land, Hull said.

CREP improvements are funded, in part, by the habitat stamp approved by the state legislature in 2020. Adult hunters and anglers pay \$10 for in-state residents and \$25 for out-of-staters. It generated more than \$9 million in the first two years, with the money dedicated toward land and water improvements.

Weismantel said there's also a local program working to improve habitat.

The Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition has gathered money for extra payments to farmers who have land in the Conservation Reserve Program that is open to the public for hunting. Chris Goldade with the coalition said it has 4,000 Brown County acres in the program. No land has been added in the past few years, he said, but as the James River CREP program wraps up, the Aberdeen Pheasant Coalition will again begin raising another \$100,000 for its program. The project is a joint effort with Pheasants Forever and local businesses and organizations.

DOES 'PHEASANT CAPITAL OF THE WORLD' CLAIM STILL HOLDS UP?

South Dakota has often claim to be the unofficial "Pheasant Capital of the World," or at least in the United States. Given that the number of birds and hunters have generally decreased, some have questioned the validity of that claim.

However, some data show that while the South Dakota pheasant population is down from what it once was, the state still sits atop the heap when it comes to bird and hunter numbers compared to some other Great Plains states.

South Dakota: In 2020, more than 1.1 million pheasants were taken by roughly 121,000 hunters.

North Dakota: An estimated 47,020 hunters bagged 260,000 pheasants in 2021, according to the state Game and Fish Department.

Minnesota: An estimated pheasant population of 226,679 in 2019 compared to 1.8 million in 1941, according to the Department of Wildlife and Parks.

Iowa: Between 300,000 and 400,000 hunters are expected to harvest about 600,000 pheasants this season, per the state Department of Natural Resources.

Nebraska: The pheasant harvest has been less than 200,000 birds per year for the past decade, according to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Kansas: Another pheasant hotbed, Kansas has between 110,000 and 150,000 hunters each year, according to the Department of Wildlife and Parks. The annual harvest has ranged between 425,000 and 824,000 since 1990, according to state data.

Montana: Since 2000, an average of 23,862 pheasants have been shot each year, according to the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department most recent upland bird strategic plan.

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at SDNewsWatch.org.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Transgender advocacy group plans to sue state over contract cancellation

Legal claims will focus on discrimination, civil rights

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 22, 2022 9:57 AM

A transgender advocacy organization plans to sue the state of South Dakota for civil rights violations over Gov. Kristi Noem's abrupt cancellation of a health care facilitation contract with the group.

Brendan Johnson, a former U.S. district attorney who works for the law firm Robins Kaplan, told South Dakota Searchlight that his firm will represent The Transformation Project at no cost in a civil action against the state.

Johnson said he plans to send the state a litigation hold this week, which is a legal notice of pending action that orders the expected defendant to preserve all records and correspondence related to a legal claim.

The group's claim originates with the contract cancellation, Johnson said, but "it's not a contract dispute." "This is about violating federal law, equal protection," Johnson said. "You cannot discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. We believe that's in violation of agreements between the state of South Dakota and the federal government that provided these funds."

The Sioux Falls-based nonprofit was awarded about \$136,000 in federal funds to hire and train a community health worker to help connect members of the LGBTQ community to physical and mental health care. The funds, dispensed by the state, were earmarked by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control for the hiring of community health workers to serve rural areas and marginalized communities.

For a story published on Friday, a conservative media outlet questioned Gov. Noem's office about the contract. Through spokesman Ian Fury, Noem, a Republican, told the outlet that she does not support the group's "radical ideology," that she didn't know about the contract, and that she would order a review of all state Department of Health contracts. More than 60 other community health worker contracts have been granted this year.

State Health Secretary Joan Adam announced her retirement through a governor's office press release on Monday, three days after the news broke.

The Freedom Caucus, a coalition of South Dakota lawmakers aligned with the Freedom Caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives, issued a statement Monday that praised Noem's decision to cut the contract. It also called on the South Dakota attorney general to investigate The Transformation Project and Sanford Health, which is set to host a Gender Identity Summit next month, for "promoting child abuse."

Johnson said his firm aims to show that the stated reasons for the contract cancellation do not align with the Noem administration's actual motivations.

"The facts will show that The Transformation Project did not violate its contract with the state of South Dakota," Johnson said. "This was a decision based on politics, not the law. We applaud the strength and dignity of the LGBTQ community, and we will aggressively defend their right to access health care and the vital services provided by The Transformation Project, including mental health and suicide prevention services."

In the cancellation letter, Deputy Health Secretary Lynne Valenti said The Transformation Project had failed to hire a certified community health worker and had missed a required annual conference, among other violations. But The Transformation Project has said it hired a community health worker who is still

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employed by the group, and the required annual conference took place before the contract was awarded.

The group's director, Susan Williams, said in an open letter that the group was in compliance with contract terms. It had received about \$23,000 of contract funds before the Dec. 16 cancellation letter.

"We are also deeply concerned by the appearance that the termination of this contract stems not from our actions, but as a result of the population we serve," Williams said.

Williams named the community health worker hired by the group to South Dakota Searchlight and noted that he'd completed his certification. On Tuesday evening, the group tweeted its congratulations to that employee along with a photo of staff and supporters. Two of the people were wearing hoodies from the Union Gospel Mission, a homeless shelter that had also been awarded funds for a community health worker, and whose director told South Dakota Searchlight this week that his "heart goes out" to the group over the dispute.

The Transformation Project also announced its intention to retain the employee despite the loss of funding. It has since set up a pledge website that asks the public to "raise \$105,000 to cover the funding shortfall that was created."

"These funds will help us to continue to develop a Community Health Worker program and allow our CHW to meet the needs of South Dakota members of the LGBTQ2S community across the state who experience disparate health outcomes," the site said.

The group will not be charged legal fees for its action against the state, Johnson said, but taxpayers won't avoid them.

"This is incredibly unfair to one of our most vulnerable populations in South Dakota," Johnson said. "This will be a long and expensive fight. This is going to cost the state of South Dakota a great deal in legal fees."

Fury, Noem's spokesman, told South Dakota Searchlight on Tuesday that the state would be unable to comment on The Transformation Project situation because of the threat of litigation.

On Thursday morning, Fury reiterated that the state cannot comment for that reason.

On Monday, South Dakota Searchlight sent an email to Fury and Department of Health spokeswoman Kieran Tate, asking if three other community health worker contractors who'd inked deals around the same time as The Transformation Project had complied with each of the same contract requirements. Tate has not replied.

A spokesman for the South Dakota Attorney General's Office, which typically serves as the state's legal counsel in lawsuits against state agencies and officials, said the litigation hold had not been received as of Thursday morning.



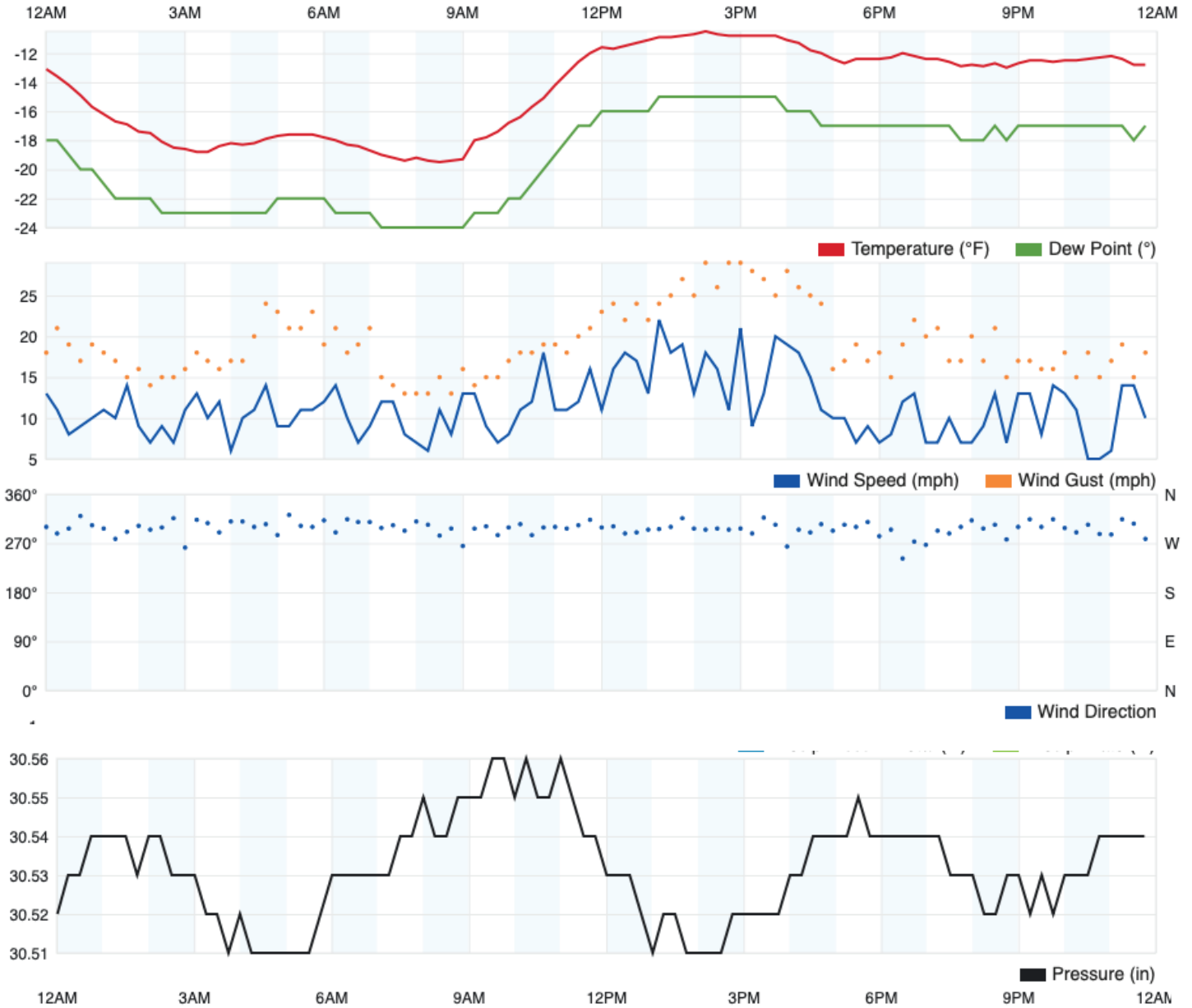
JOHN HULT ✉ 🐦

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wind Chill Warning

Blizzard Warning

Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Christmas Day	Sunday Night	Monday
Blowing Snow and Blustery	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Clear	Cold	Mostly Clear	Chance Snow then Snow Likely	Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Cold
High: -8 °F	Low: -21 °F	High: -5 °F	Low: -22 °F	High: 13 °F	Low: -7 °F	High: 7 °F



Extreme Winter Weather Continues

December 23, 2022
5:18 AM

Key Messages

- Strong winds and ground blizzard conditions lessening from west to east into Saturday.
- Extreme cold and dangerous wind chills into Saturday morning.
- **Stranded motorists could face the threat of frostbite, hypothermia and even life threatening exposure with these winds and temperatures!**

NEW What Has Changed

- Headlines remain the same

Next Scheduled Update

- Friday afternoon

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	12/23 Fri						12/24 Sat							
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen	41	43	41	41	36	32	24	21	18	17	18	18	13	12
Britton	40	44	43	43	38	35	28	21	18	18	20	20	13	13
Eagle Butte	41	41	37	33	26	20	16	13	10	10	8	8	13	13
Eureka	41	41	41	39	33	25	22	18	16	16	16	15	10	10
Gettysburg	44	43	41	39	31	28	22	18	17	15	16	14	12	12
Kennebec	41	43	41	39	30	23	21	18	16	14	15	14	9	9
McIntosh	39	38	38	32	23	18	14	12	10	9	8	6	10	12
Milbank	45	46	48	46	48	47	44	38	37	35	36	35	22	20
Miller	44	44	44	43	33	28	25	22	21	20	20	17	12	10
Mobridge	37	37	36	31	25	20	16	13	13	10	10	10	9	9
Murdo	41	39	38	32	24	20	17	14	12	10	10	10	12	12
Pierre	44	35	33	31	22	16	14	9	9	9	10	8	7	7
Redfield	43	43	43	41	36	29	26	24	22	21	22	20	13	12
Sisseton	51	48	48	48	49	47	45	39	39	35	35	35	24	21
Watertown	45	45	45	46	44	39	35	33	32	31	32	30	20	18
Webster	46	48	47	48	46	44	38	35	33	29	30	30	22	20
Wheaton	44	45	45	45	45	45	40	36	36	32	33	32	23	18



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Windy and blizzard conditions remain in place today, diminishing from west to east this evening and overnight. Extreme cold and dangerous wind chills remain into Saturday across the area.

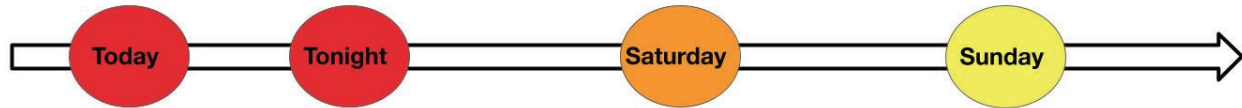
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Threats Timeline

December 23, 2022
5:20 AM



Today
Ground Blizzard continues, with a diminished threat across central SD this evening

Dangerous wind chills with the continued threat of frostbite & hypothermia

Tonight
Ground Blizzard potential diminishes across northeastern SD and west central MN after 6am

Improving travel conditions, but blowing/drifting snow potential continues

Dangerous cold lingers

Saturday
Clipper system for Christmas day brings accumulating snowfall James Valley east

Uncertainty in blowing snow potential with windy conditions across central SD.

Risk Levels

Little to None

Minor

Moderate

Major

Extreme



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Blizzard Warning Wind Chill Warning

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE
National Weather Service Aberdeen SD
202 AM CST Fri Dec 23 2022

Brown-Spink-

Including the cities of Aberdeen and Redfield

...BLIZZARD WARNING REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL 6 PM CST THIS EVENING...

...WIND CHILL WARNING REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL NOON CST SATURDAY...

* WHAT...For the Wind Chill Warning, dangerously cold wind chills. Wind chills as low as 45 below zero. For the Blizzard Warning, blizzard conditions. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

* WHERE...Brown and Spink Counties.

* WHEN...For the Wind Chill Warning, until noon CST Saturday. For the Blizzard Warning, until 6 PM CST this evening.

* IMPACTS...Widespread blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute. The dangerously cold wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes.

* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Pre-Holiday travel Thursday through Friday will be impacted. Stranded motorists will face the threat of frostbite, hypothermia and even life threatening exposure.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Avoid outside activities if possible. When outside, make sure you wear appropriate clothing, a hat, and gloves.

Travel should be restricted to emergencies only. If you must travel, have a winter survival kit with you. If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.

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

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Minimum Wind Chills, High Temps

December 23, 2022
5:24 AM

Don't see your city? Check out weather.gov/forecastpoints

Minimum Wind Chill Forecast

	12/23 Fri					12/24 Sat					12/25 Sun										
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm
Aberdeen	-43	-42	-38	-36	-39	-40	-40	-41	-41	-39	-26	-25	-25	-29	-31	-31	-31	-28	-19	-7	-3
Britton	-42	-41	-39	-38	-41	-40	-40	-39	-39	-38	-31	-31	-31	-32	-31	-32	-29	-25	-18	-10	-8
Eagle Butte	-51	-50	-42	-37	-39	-39	-37	-33	-34	-32	-19	-13	-22	-26	-26	-26	-22	-16	-2	18	12
Eureka	-48	-47	-43	-42	-45	-46	-46	-46	-45	-45	-32	-29	-33	-35	-32	-32	-31	-24	-14	1	-1
Gettysburg	-52	-48	-44	-40	-45	-46	-44	-44	-44	-40	-30	-26	-26	-28	-29	-29	-25	-13	5	4	
Kennebec	-45	-44	-40	-36	-40	-41	-41	-39	-39	-35	-25	-20	-22	-24	-27	-28	-26	-19	-3	13	13
McIntosh	-51	-51	-44	-38	-45	-44	-40	-39	-39	-37	-22	-15	-28	-29	-30	-30	-24	-17	5	13	3
Milbank	-41	-41	-40	-39	-40	-40	-39	-38	-39	-36	-31	-30	-29	-29	-29	-29	-26	-21	-15	-10	-6
Miller	-47	-44	-40	-39	-41	-43	-43	-43	-42	-40	-27	-23	-25	-28	-28	-26	-26	-21	-11	5	6
Mobridge	-45	-44	-39	-36	-40	-41	-38	-36	-36	-32	-24	-21	-18	-21	-22	-21	-21	-17	3	12	4
Murdo	-48	-46	-42	-36	-39	-42	-40	-35	-35	-34	-21	-18	-22	-25	-26	-22	-13	3	18	16	
Pierre	-41	-39	-35	-31	-35	-38	-37	-34	-34	-32	-22	-16	-15	-16	-19	-22	-21	-13	-1	16	15
Redfield	-45	-44	-40	-38	-42	-43	-44	-45	-44	-42	-30	-26	-27	-30	-30	-29	-30	-29	-20	-5	2
Sisseton	-41	-41	-38	-39	-40	-40	-39	-39	-38	-36	-32	-31	-30	-31	-30	-29	-26	-21	-14	-9	-7
Watertown	-44	-45	-43	-42	-44	-44	-43	-43	-43	-41	-34	-32	-30	-30	-30	-29	-26	-23	-15	-8	-2
Webster	-45	-44	-42	-41	-43	-44	-44	-44	-44	-42	-36	-32	-30	-31	-30	-28	-26	-23	-17	-10	-3
Wheaton	-41	-42	-40	-38	-39	-40	-40	-39	-40	-39	-35	-33	-33	-33	-33	-33	-31	-25	-20	-13	-11

Daily High Temperature Forecast

Greatest uncertainty on Sun & Mon

	12/23 Fri	12/24 Sat	12/25 Sun	12/26 Mon	12/27 Tue
Aberdeen	-8	-4	15	7	28
Britton	-9	-7	10	6	28
Eagle Butte	-10	0	35	19	33
Eureka	-11	-7	21	11	30
Gettysburg	-10	-5	25	16	34
Kennebec	-7	-1	34	21	38
McIntosh	-11	-3	32	17	33
Milbank	-9	-4	10	7	27
Miller	-9	-3	25	14	34
Mobridge	-9	-4	31	18	36
Murdo	-8	1	36	23	40
Pierre	-5	0	36	22	38
Redfield	-9	-5	21	8	31
Sisseton	-8	-5	10	8	27
Watertown	-11	-6	12	6	28
Webster	-10	-8	10	5	27
Wheaton	-8	-6	6	5	24



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

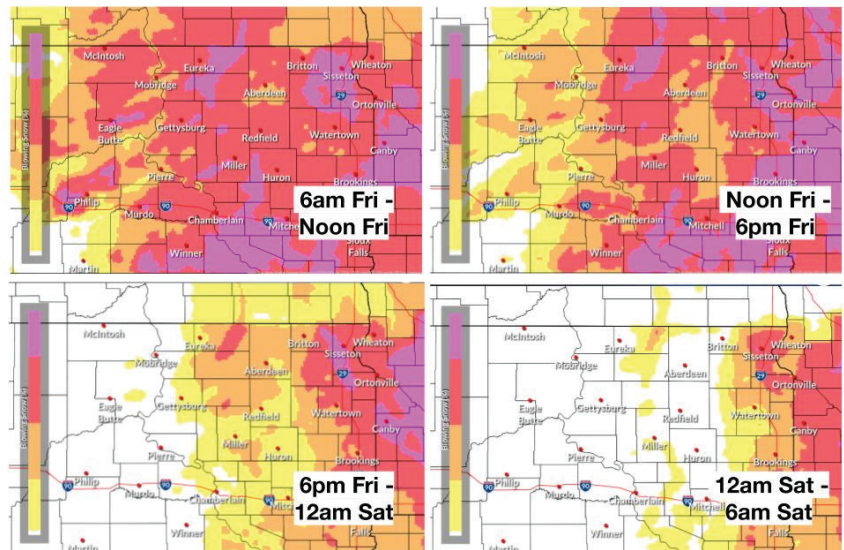


Blowing Snow Potential

December 23, 2022
5:27 AM

Key Messages

- Persistent northwest winds will significantly impact travel into Saturday.**
 - Wind and thus blowing snow will slowly diminish from west to east Friday night into Saturday AM
- RED and PINK = Highest Likelihood of Blizzard Conditions** (visibilities 1/4 mile or less). Blowing snow with significant visibility reductions still possible in orange and yellow areas.



Minor ☁️ Patchy Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected	Moderate ☁️☁️ Areas of Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected	Significant ☁️☁️☁️ Widespread Blowing Snow and greatly reduced visibilities expected	Blizzard ☁️☁️☁️☁️ Significant Blowing Snow possible, travel may be impossible
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National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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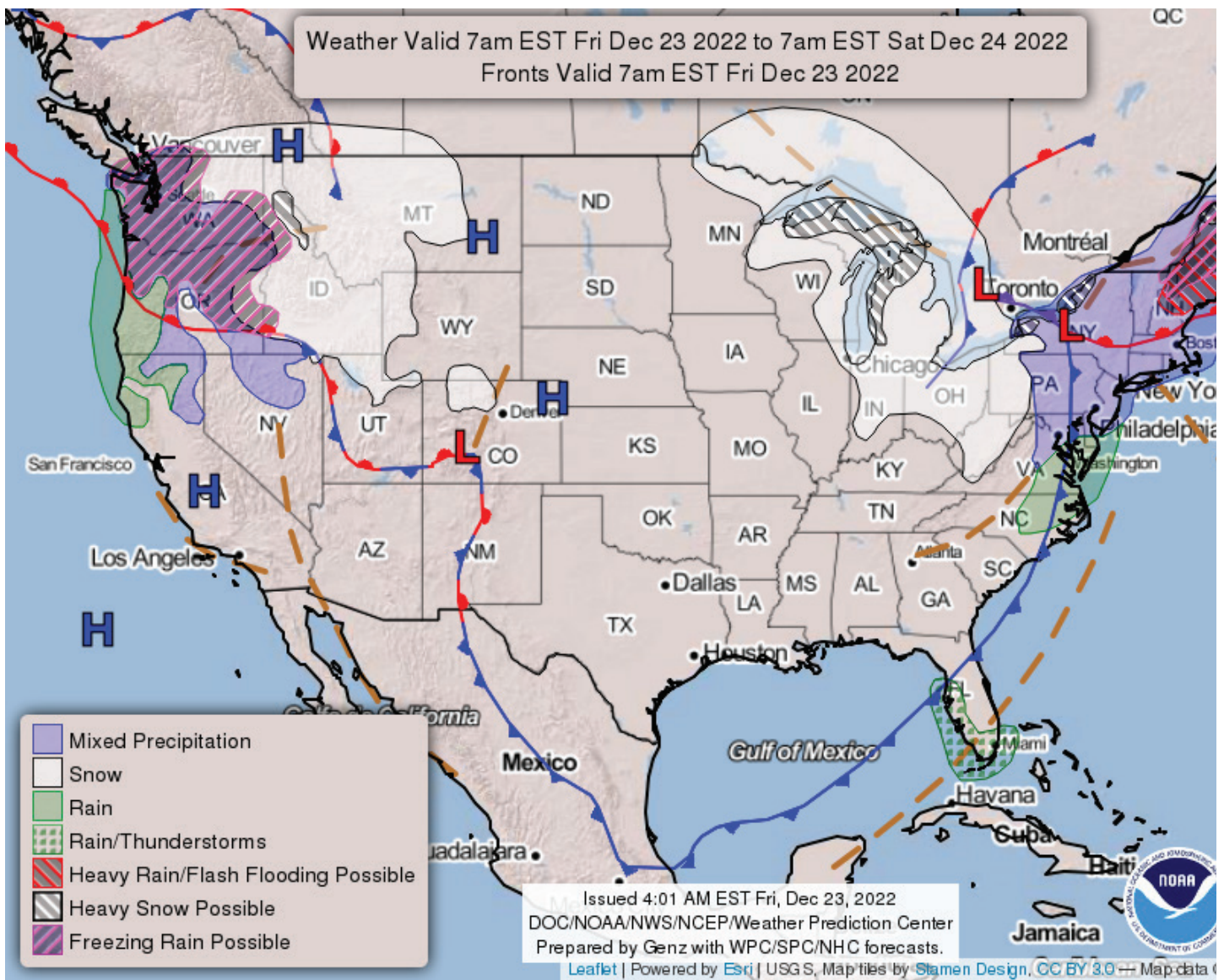
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: -10.5 °F at 2:15 PM
Low Temp: -19.5 °F at 8:30 AM
Wind: 29 mph at 2:45 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 54 in 1893
Record Low: -34 in 1983
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 6°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.44
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85
Average Precip to date: 21.65
Precip Year to Date: 19.35
Sunset Tonight: 4:54:44 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:49 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1811 - A cold storm hit Long Island sound with a foot of snow, gale force winds, and temperatures near zero. During the storm many ships were wrecked, and in some cases entire crews perished. (David Ludlum)

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1955 - The barometric pressure dipped to 28.97 inches (981 millibars) at Boise ID, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A major winter storm struck Colorado producing heavy snow and blizzard conditions. A record two feet of snow was reported at Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was shut down for 33 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow fell in the foothills surrounding Denver. The storm hurt the ski industry as skiers were unable to make it out of Denver to the slopes, and the closed airport became a campground for vacationers. (23rd-25th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1983 - The temperature plunged to 50 degrees below zero at Williston ND to equal their all-time record. Minneapolis MN reported an afternoon high of 17 degrees below zero, and that evening strong northerly winds produced wind chill readings of 100 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A winter storm brought heavy snow to the Central Rockies, and also spread a blanket of snow across the Middle Missouri Valley in time for Christmas. Snow and high winds created near blizzard conditions in Wyoming. Snowfall totals in Wyoming ranged up to 25 inches at Casper, with four feet of snow reported at the Hogadon Ski Resort on Casper Mountain. The Wolf Creek Ski Resort in Colorado received 26 inches of snow. Totals in the Middle Missouri Valley ranged up to 16 inches at Alpena SD, with 14 inches at Harrison NE. Strong winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. Canyon winds gusting to 100 mph created ground blizzards in Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1998: A major ice storm struck central and southeast Virginia and much of North Carolina beginning on Wednesday, December 23, and lasting until Christmas Day morning. Icy conditions caused injuries from slips and falls and numerous vehicle accidents. Ice accumulations of up to an inch brought down trees and power lines. Outages were so widespread with 400,000 customers were without power on Christmas Eve. Some people were without power for up to ten days.

1988 - Low pressure in the Upper Midwest produced strong and gusty winds across the Great Lakes Region and the Ohio Valley. Winds in Ohio gusted to 47 mph at Cincinnati, and reached 51 mph at Cleveland. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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1989 - An historic arctic outbreak spread to the Gulf Coast Region, and a total of 122 cities across the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Forty-one of those cities reported record lows for the month of December, with some cities breaking December records established the previous morning. Morning lows of 11 degrees at New Orleans LA and Lake Charles LA, 4 degrees below zero at San Angelo TX, and 26 degrees below zero at Topeka KS, established all-time records for those four locations. Yankton SD was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 31 degrees below zero. A storm system moving across the Florida peninsula and along the Southern Atlantic Coast produced high winds and record snows along the Carolina coast. Snowfall totals of 15 inches at Wilmington NC and 13.3 inches at Cape Hatteras NC were all-time records for those two locations.

2009 - Severe storms and heavy rainfall were associated with the same storm that brought blizzard conditions to the central parts of the U.S. on December 23rd and 24th. At least one death in Louisiana was blamed on the heavy rainfall and storms. There were 35 preliminary tornado reports and 34 hail and wind reports along the Gulf Coast over the 2-day period. The 10-year average number of tornadoes across the country in December is 36. (NCDC)

The Black Hills Remarkable Temperature Change of January 22, 1943

The Black Hills area can experience spectacular temperature variations. Day-to-day changes occur as cold and warm fronts cross the northern Plains. However, temperature ranges across the area at a given time can be just as great. They happen rapidly as the wind direction changes, most notably the warming Chinook winds that have given the Black Hills the reputation as the "Banana Belt" of the Midwest. Other temperature differences are caused by inversions, when warm air flows over a shallow pool of cold air. Because the Black Hills rise above the plains like an island in a body of water, they are in the warm air layer.

The most notable temperature fluctuations occurred on January 22, 1943 when temperatures rose and fell almost 50 degrees in a few minutes. This phenomenon was caused when a frontal boundary separating extremely cold Arctic air from warmer Pacific air rolled like an ocean tide along the northern and eastern slopes of the Black Hills.

In mid-January 1943, Arctic air pushed southward from Canada, bringing extremely cold temperatures across the central United States. By the morning of January 19, temperatures were well below zero as far south as Kansas and in the single digits to teens across Texas. On January 20, warmer air started to spread eastward from the Pacific over the Rockies while lows ranged from -20 to -30 degrees across the Dakotas (see map below). The boundary separating this warmer air from the frigid air was near the front range of the Rocky Mountains and through Nebraska, with Casper WY at 22 degrees while Rapid City was -20 degrees. During the day, the warm air aloft reached the higher elevations of the Black Hills. Temperatures warmed into the 30s at Custer and Lead while highs remained below zero in downtown Rapid City, the Rapid City Airport (now Ellsworth Air Force Base), and Spearfish. The following day, temperatures reached the 40s in the Hills but struggled to get into the single digits above zero on the plains as the front advanced to the northeast.

Early morning temperatures on January 22 were already above freezing in the higher elevations of the Black Hills but still below zero along the foothills. Shortly after daybreak, the front moved northeast—down the slopes of the Black Hills—and temperatures warmed rapidly. Later in the morning, the front retreated to the southwest and temperatures plummeted just as quickly. The oscillations occurred several times during the morning; the front pushed east of Rapid City during the afternoon, allowing the airport to reach 50 degrees. It finally shifted south again during the late afternoon, and the cold air returned to the foothills.

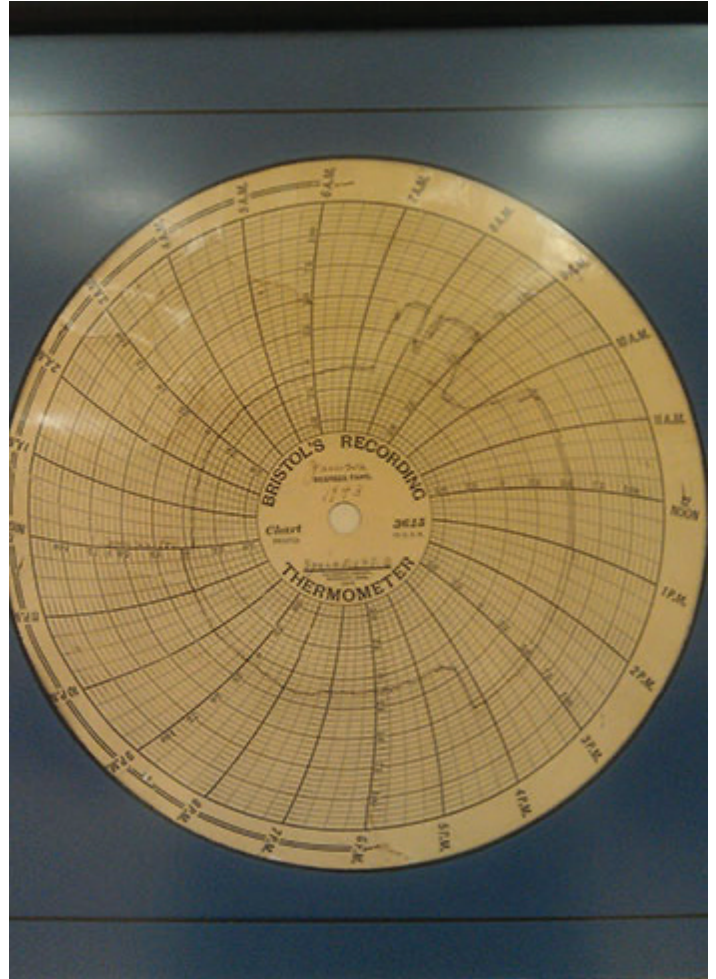
In Spearfish, the temperature rose from -4 at 7:32 a.m. to 45 degrees—a rise of 49 degrees—in just two minutes. A couple of hours later, it plunged from 54 back to -4 degrees—a change of 58 degrees in 27 minutes. In downtown Rapid City, the temperature had warmed to +5 degrees by 9:20 a.m., then it quickly warmed to 54 degrees by 9:40 am—a difference of 49 degrees in 20 minutes.

The drastic temperature changes were logged on recording thermometers at the Montana-Dakota Utilities Company offices in both downtown Rapid City (then at 725 St. Joseph Street) and Spearfish. A picture

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of the instrument with a replica of the January 22, 1943 chart is shown below along with a picture of the actual temperature recording chart.



The recording thermometer and temperature chart from Spearfish on January 22, 1943

(photos courtesy of Montana-Dakota Utilities Company)

The change in temperature was noticeable as people rounded street corners. Motorists were unable to see out their windshields when thick frost forms as they encountered the front and plate glass windows cracked.

This event, which the Rapid City Daily Journal described as "crazily deviating temperatures" and "freakish warmth", received national media coverage. It was featured in "Ripley's Believe it or Not" and "Strange as it Seems" cartoons printed in newspapers across the country.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE ANGEL'S VISIT TO MARY

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think of what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And though the angel left her, she was not alone.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your presence and the peace and protection that is ours when we are obedient to Your voice. Give us Your courage to be faithful to Your plan to fulfill Your purpose for our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:26-38 Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus.



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

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Belle Fourche vs. Hot Springs, ccd.

Faith vs. Dupree, ccd.

Gayville-Volin vs. Canistota, ccd.

Watertown vs. Mitchell, ccd.

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Belle Fourche vs. Hot Springs, ccd.

Brandon Valley vs. Tea Area, ccd.

Bridgewater-Emery vs. Freeman Academy/Marion, ccd.

Canistota vs. Gayville-Volin, ccd.

Carter County, Mont. vs. Bison, ccd.

Centerville vs. Mitchell Christian, ccd.

Deubrook vs. Chester, ccd.

Deuel vs. Britton-Hecla, ccd.

Estelline/Hendricks vs. Wilmot, ccd.

Highmore-Harrold vs. Faulkton, ccd.

Milbank vs. Hamlin, ccd.

Mitchell vs. Watertown, ccd.

Philip vs. Kadoka Area, ccd.

Sisseton vs. Lisbon, N.D., ccd.

Spearfish vs. Rapid City Stevens, ccd.

Webster vs. Tiospa Zina Tribal, ccd.

Wolsey-Wessington vs. Sully Buttes, ccd.

Yankton vs. Aberdeen Central, ccd.

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

Noem activates National Guard to haul firewood to tribe

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem late Thursday declared an emergency to respond to the winter storm and activated the state's National Guard to haul firewood from the Black Hills Forest Service to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

Rosebud Sioux Tribe emergency manager Robert Oliver said Thursday that tribal authorities have been working to clear roads to deliver propane and firewood to homes, but face a relentless wind that has created drifts over 10 feet in some places. The tribe has requested assistance and Noem's office said it has been working with other tribal governments, as well as local officials across the state, to respond to the frigid temperatures and blizzard-like conditions.

"Under the direction of the Office of Emergency Management, we will continue to help all of South Dakota's communities get through these storms, together," Noem said in a statement.

Noem said other National Guard missions might be necessary as the state's emergency management office coordinates with tribal and local governments.

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Noem appoints new health secretary

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Thursday appointed the owner of a South Dakota health clinic company to lead the state's Department of Health following the retirement of the previous secretary of health earlier this week.

The Republican governor named Melissa Magstadt, who also served two terms as a Republican in the state House of Representatives, as her next health secretary. Noem's office on Monday announced the previous secretary, Joan Adam, was retiring amid criticism from conservatives that led to Noem canceling a community health care grant to an organization that advocates for transgender people.

Magstadt is an advanced practice registered nurse and owns Quick Care SD, which runs four urgent care clinics in the eastern part of the state. She also owns SG Essentials, which sells skin care products.

"Melissa has proven her ability to provide innovative and cost-effective healthcare to the people of South Dakota," Noem said in a statement. "She will bring a fresh perspective to the department.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. December 20, 2022.

Editorial: Cold Weather And Some Cold Realities

Today (Wednesday) marks the official arrival of winter in the Northern Hemisphere, although it sure seems that the snow, the bitter winds and Arctic misery are already here to greet the season.

It's been a tough time in this region the past several days leading up to the winter solstice, with last week's storm interrupting life around the area. To the west and north, the snow was heavier — in some cases, FAR heavier — making things much more difficult.

What's coming at us now, according to forecasts, is a bulldozer of bitter cold air from Siberia, where they have been enduring the coldest winter since 1948, according to one Canadian media outlet. The cold air rushing toward us is expected to plunge deep to the south, potentially bringing single-digit wind chills to Florida, of all places. (Needless to say, that doesn't bode well for us.) All this recalls the February 2021 polar vortex that practically froze the central U.S. and delivered death and damage deep into Texas.

Also, as of this writing, there's a winter storm watch posted for a broad swath of the region, with a chance of snow, cold and wind. Since the air figures to be cold, the snow will be powdery dry and could be blown around quite easily.

All this is something area residents really need to take seriously the next several days.

The warning is worth mentioning because it might be a little too easy to do otherwise. Last week's storm was a long, slow slog, and it put a crimp in a lot of plans. Now, with Christmas looming this weekend, some people might get the urge to push the envelope in terms of shopping and travel.

It also merits noting because the recent weather systems have been relatively atypical to what we have been seeing the past few years. We've grown accustomed to fast-moving weather systems with hazardous weather alerts lasting only for several hours, not days. But last week's storm lumbered across the region from Monday into early Saturday, causing considerable disruption. The next storm watch covers two days, which again suggests slow movement, or at least lingering issues.

And that holiday urge to get out and get moving — to go from here to wherever your plans have you headed — may cause some people to hit the road too soon. If so, be very wary: Blowing snow and bitter cold can be a lethal combination.

Even if you're not traveling, it's important to take the cold seriously. It's also important to monitor carbon monoxide levels in your home and to keep an eye on any portable heating devices you may use.

All these issues seem obvious, but we've seen too many times that the obvious can sneak up on you if you aren't vigilant.

And the next few days will demand a great deal of vigilance. Stay warm and stay safe.

END

An inflation measure watched by the Fed eases to 5.5%

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A measure of inflation closely watched by the Federal Reserve slowed last month, another sign that a long surge in consumer prices seems to be easing.

Friday's report from the Commerce Department showed that prices rose 5.5% in November from a year earlier, down from a revised 6.1% increase in October and the smallest gain since October 2021. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation was up 4.7% over the previous year. That was also the smallest increase since October 2021.

On a month-to-month basis, prices rose 0.1% from October to November after rising 0.4% the previous month. Core prices rose 0.2%.

Inflation, which began surging a year and a half ago as the economy bounced back from 2020's coronavirus recession, still remains well above the 2% year-over-year growth the Fed wants to see.

The central bank has raised its benchmark interest rate seven times since March in an attempt to bring consumer prices under control.

Higher prices and borrowing costs may be taking a toll on American consumers. Their spending rose just 0.1% from October to November and didn't rise at all after adjusting for higher prices.

"We expect a deceleration in household spending as the Fed hikes rates further in 2023," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, wrote in a research note.

Americans' after-tax income, however, rose 0.3% in November even after accounting for inflation.

The Fed is believed to monitor the Commerce Department's inflation gauge that was issued Friday, called the personal consumption expenditures price index, even more closely than it does the Labor Department's better-known consumer price index. CPI rose 7.1% in November from 12 months earlier, down from June's 9.1% year-over-year increase, which had been the biggest such jump in four decades.

The PCE index tends to show a lower inflation rate than CPI. In part, that is because rents, which have soared, carry double the weight in the CPI that they do in the PCE.

The PCE price index also seeks to account for changes in how people shop when inflation jumps. As a result, it can capture, for example, when consumers switch from pricey national brands to cheaper store brands.

Greece: EU's external border is hardening, attitudes are too

By DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

LYKOFI, Greece (AP) — Accompanied by a cloud of mosquitos, Police Capt. Konstantinos Tsolakidis and three other border guards set out on a boat patrol along the Evros River that forms a natural frontier between Greece and Turkey.

The route takes them through a maze formed by tall reeds, past clusters of flamingos and boat trippers visiting a nature reserve where the river fans out to meet the Mediterranean.

The Evros — called the Meric River in Turkey — runs through one of the remotest parts of Europe. It's also becoming one of its most militarized as Greece and the wider European Union work on ways to prevent migrants from entering the country from Turkey.

In 2023, Greece plans to triple the length of a steel border wall. The five-meter (16-foot) high structure, made with sturdy steel columns, has foundation supports up to 10 meters deep and is topped with razor wire and an anti-grip metal scaling barrier.

In army-controlled areas on the Greek side of the border, the EU is funding and testing an advanced surveillance network that uses machine-learning software and an array of fixed and mobile cameras and sensors to detect migrants trying to cross the border.

Critics of the measures argue that Greece is toughening authoritarian policies against migrants and asylum-seekers, operating in the shadows in border areas that are under military control and where outside civilian monitors are denied access. A visit by Associated Press journalists to the Greek-Turkish border area took place under military and police supervision.

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Police and border residents say they are just happy that the wall is working.

"It's impossible to penetrate," says Tsolakidis, who supervises patrols along a southern section of the border. "It's been built in areas along the Evros where crossings were most frequent. And the deterrence capacity is 100%."

In a post-pandemic surge of activity, more than 250,000 migrant crossings have been prevented this year at the land border between Greece and Turkey through late November, according to Greek authorities. During the same period, more than 5,000 people were detained after making it across the river.

Border guards, who use sniffer dogs, loudspeakers and powerful spotlights on patrols, say multiple incidents involving up to 1,000 migrants aren't uncommon in a single day during the summer and early fall when water levels along the Evros hit an annual low.

Small islets, some straddling the midpoint of the river where the border technically lies, seasonally reappear, making crossings easier.

Completed in 2021, the wall currently spans 27 kilometers (17 miles) in three separate sections but is considered to be effective over an additional 10 kilometers (six miles) because of ground conditions. Authorities plan to add up to another 100 kilometers (60 miles) of the steel barrier to cover most of the 192-kilometer (120-mile) land border.

When wall building started at the border a decade ago, it was met with heated political debate and public demonstrations backed by left-wing parties and Greek human rights groups.

Reaction this time around has been muted.

With little discussion, parliament recently passed an emergency amendment sanctioning the extension, with rules for commercial tenders and cost control safeguards both waived through June 30, 2023.

A poll published by private Antenna television found that nearly two thirds of Greek voters support tougher measures to control migration, with just 8.1% arguing that policing needs to be relaxed. Backing for the tougher measures was reported across party lines, and includes more than 60% of voters from the left-wing main opposition party — which officially opposes the wall extension.

The October survey was conducted by the Marc polling company for the private Greek channel.

At one newly built section of the wall, buds of cotton from nearby farms are caught in the razor wire, while wild goats, cut off from their usual grazing grounds, scour the riverbank for something to eat.

A few hundred meters westward, 41-year-old farm worker Stavros Lazaridis tosses bales of hay onto a truck. He says the extension can't come fast enough.

"Before the wall went up, we had a lot of trouble. More than 200 or 300 (migrants) could cross through the village in a single day. It was out of control," he said.

The local police station has retrieved pickup trucks stolen by smugglers in border villages and abandoned near a bus station in the northern Greek port city of Thessaloniki. Piles of clothes, dumped by migrants traveling with just a small backpack, are often found near highways in the area.

Border village residents, Lazaridis says, used to be sympathetic to migrants, many of whom are fleeing wars in the Middle East to seek asylum in Europe, but they have grown tired of the nightly disruptions.

"There are old people who live in these villages, many living by themselves, and they are scared to leave their homes," he said. "It's quiet here now, but further north where there's no (wall). things are still crazy."

Polling data suggests residents of other EU frontier states, including Poland and the Baltic nations, have also become more security conscious as threats like Russia's war in Ukraine draw closer to the bloc's external borders.

And a flareup in a spat between Greece and Turkey over maritime boundaries and drilling rights has darkened disputes over migration.

Greece has made a series of international complaints after border police in October found 92 male migrants, stripped of their clothing, and accused Turkish authorities of deliberately pushing them over the border.

Turkey has repeatedly accused Greece of carrying out clandestine deportations, known as pushbacks, of potential asylum-seekers, and putting their lives at risk.

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Athens is also under fire from major human rights groups, United Nations and EU refugee agencies, and even a government advisory panel that says hundreds of credible accounts have been gathered suggesting that often-violent pushbacks have been occurring at the Greek-Turkish border for up to 20 years.

The U.N. and EU agencies are demanding the creation of an independent border monitoring body, a request that Athens has so far failed to act upon.

Disputes with countries bordering the EU, and the often legitimate security concerns they generate, have reduced attention on migrants in need of international protection and are tempting European governments to adopt hard-line policies, argues Begum Basdas at the Center for Fundamental Rights at the Hertie School in Berlin.

"The militarization of migration is disabling us from seeing the issue as a human rights concern ... and what is really worrying me is the creeping in of authoritarianism through migration management in the European Union," Basdas said.

"People are not really critical of the securitization or wall building at the borders because they don't really see the connection between migration and the decay of democratic values in their own environment, in their own rights," she said.

"But, you know, those walls are literally being built around us."

Wall Street points modestly higher ahead of inflation report

By ELAINE KURTENBACH and MATT OTT AP Business Writers

Wall Street pointed slightly higher in premarket trading Friday as investors await the government's final inflation-related report of the year.

Futures for the S&P 500 rose 0.2% and futures for the Dow Jones Industrials were up 0.3%.

On tap Friday is the Commerce Department's consumer spending report for November, which includes measure of inflation that is closely monitored by the Federal Reserve. The report for October showed that inflation eased somewhat, with prices rising 6% in October from a year earlier. That was the smallest increase since November 2021.

Analysts surveyed by data firm FactSet expect that number to have fallen further, to 5.5% in November. That would be good news for American consumers, who have been squeezed by higher prices for just about everything for the past year-and-a-half.

The Fed is believed to monitor the inflation gauge in the consumer spending report, called the personal consumption expenditures price index, even more closely than it does the government's better-known consumer price index. But whether a projected half-percentage point decline would move Fed policymakers to soften their stance on future rate hikes remains to be seen.

Last week, 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. 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. That has many economists and investors expecting the U.S. economy to fall into recession in 2023.

Japan reported its core inflation rate, excluding volatile fresh foods, rose to 3.7% in November, the highest level since 1981, as surging costs for oil and other commodities added to upward price pressures in the world's third-largest economy.

While the rate was much lower than in the U.S. and most major European and emerging economies, it adds to pressure on the Bank of Japan to adjust its own policies that have kept interest rates ultra-low to spur growth. For Japan, deflation — falling prices — rather than inflation has been the key concern for most of the past few decades. Recession in coming months remains the greater concern, economists say.

"Inflation edged up in November and will peak at around 4% around the turn of the year, but we expect it to fall back below the Bank of Japan's 2% target by mid-2023," Capital Economics economist Marcel Thieliant said in a report.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 index lost 1% to 26,242.58 and the Hang Seng in Hong Kong shed 0.5% to 19,578.44.

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The Shanghai Composite index was unchanged, at 3,054.52 and Australia's S&P/ASX 200 declined 0.7% to 7,099.70.

In Seoul, the Kospi dropped 1.4% to 2,323.09. Shares also fell in Bangkok, Mumbai and Taiwan.

In Europe, London's FTSE 100 was flat, while Frankfurt's DAX rose 0.3%. The CAC 40 in Paris dipped 0.1%.

In other trading Friday, U.S. benchmark crude oil rose \$1.78 to \$79.27 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It fell 80 cents to \$77.49 per barrel on Thursday.

Brent crude oil, the pricing basis for international trading, advanced \$1.61 to \$83.28 per barrel.

The U.S. dollar rose to 132.66 Japanese yen from 132.38 yen. The euro strengthened to \$1.0622 from \$1.0597.

The S&P 500 fell 1.4% on Thursday after having been down as much as 2.9% earlier in the day. It closed at 3,822.39. The pullback brings Wall Street's main measure of health back to a loss of nearly 20% for the year.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 1% to 33,027.49 and the Nasdaq closed 2.2% lower, at 10,476.12. The Russell 2000 index dropped 1.3% to 1,754.09.

3 dead, 3 wounded in Paris shooting; suspect arrested

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A shooting targeting a Kurdish cultural center in a bustling Paris neighborhood Friday left three people dead and three others wounded, authorities said. A 69-year-old suspect was wounded and arrested.

The Paris prosecutor's office opened an investigation for murder and attempted murder. The Paris prosecutor said the suspect had a prior police record, including an arrest for attacking migrants living in tents, and that investigators are considering a possible racist motive for the shooting.

The shooting occurred at midday at a Kurdish cultural center and a restaurant and hairdresser nearby, according to the mayor for the 10th arrondissement, Alexandra Cordebar. Speaking to reporters at the scene, she said the "real motivation" for the shooting remains unclear.

As she spoke, a crowd nearby chanted, "Erdogan, terrorist" — referring to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — and "Turkish state, assassin."

Police cordoned off the area in the 10th arrondissement of the French capital, on a busy street with shops and restaurants near the Gare de l'Est train station. The shooting came at a time when Paris is buzzing with activity before the Christmas weekend. The Paris police department warned people to stay away from the area.

Paris Prosecutor Laure Beccuau said three people hit in the shooting have died, one is in critical condition and two others are hospitalized with less serious injuries. The attacker was also wounded in the face, she said.

She said anti-terrorism prosecutors are in contact with investigators, but haven't indicated any sign of a terrorist motive.

In 2013, three women Kurdish activists, including Sakine Cansiz — a founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK — were found shot dead at a Kurdish center in Paris. A Turkish citizen was charged with their killing, although suspicion also fell on the Turkish intelligence service.

Turkey's army has been battling against Kurdish militants affiliated with the banned PKK, in southeast Turkey as well as in northern Iraq. Turkey's military has also recently launched a series of strikes from the air and with artillery against Syrian Kurdish militant targets in northern Syria. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization in Turkey, Europe and the United States, and has led an armed insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984.

France was hit by a string of deadly attacks by Islamic extremists in 2015-2016 and remains on alert for terrorism-related violence.

Arizona lawyers: Kari Lake election loss lawsuit lacks merit

By JACQUES BILLEAUD Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Republican Kari Lake didn't offer evidence to back her claims of widespread, intentional misconduct on Election Day at her two-day trial challenging her loss to Democrat Katie Hobbs in Arizona governor's race, lawyers for the state said Thursday.

Lake also never established her claim that printer problems at Maricopa County polling places were intentional acts that would have changed the race's outcome had they not occurred, said Abha Khanna, a lawyer representing Hobbs, who ultimately won the race by just over 17,000 votes. At the trial's closing arguments Thursday, Khanna said Lake's claims were based on hearsay, speculation and theatrics. "What we got instead was just loose threads and gaping plot holes. We know now that her story was a work of fiction," Khanna said.

Kurt Olsen, one of Lake's attorneys, said officials tried to downplay the effects of the printer problems in Maricopa County. "This is about trust, your honor," Olsen said. "It's about restoring people's trust. There is not a person that's watching this thing that isn't shaking their head now."

Superior Court Judge Peter Thompson, an appointee of former Republican Gov. Jan Brewer, didn't say when he would issue a ruling.

Lake faces extremely long odds in her challenge, needing to prove not only that misconduct occurred, but also that it was intended to deny her victory and did in fact result in the wrong woman being declared the winner.

Outside the courthouse after the proceedings, Lake said her attorneys proved their case.

"We proved without a shadow of a doubt that there was malicious intent that caused disruption so great it changed the results of the election," Lake said. "We provided expert testimony. We provided experts. The other side brought in activists to try to save face. They admitted that they've known about these ballot problems."

Her lawyers focused on problems with ballot printers at some polling places in Maricopa County, home to more than 60% of voters. The defective printers produced ballots that were too light to be read by the on-site tabulators at polling places. Lines backed up in some areas amid the confusion.

County officials say everyone had a chance to vote and that all ballots were counted, adding ballots affected by printer issues were taken to more sophisticated counters at the elections department headquarters.

Lake's attorneys also claim the chain of custody for ballots was broken at an off-site facility, where a contractor scans mail ballots to prepare them for processing. The county disputes that claim.

Lake was among the most vocal Republicans this year in promoting former President Donald Trump's election falsehoods, which she made the centerpiece of her campaign. While most of the other election deniers around the country conceded after losing their races in November, Lake has not. Instead, she is asking the judge to either declare her the winner or order a revote in Maricopa County.

Her attorneys pointed to a witness who examined ballots on behalf of her campaign and discovered 14 ballots that had 19-inch images of the ballot printed on 20-inch paper, meaning the ballots wouldn't be read by a tabulator. The witness insisted someone changed those printer configurations, a claim disputed by elections officials.

County officials say the ballot images were slightly smaller as a result of a shrink-to-fit feature being selected on a printer by a tech employee who was looking for solutions to Election Day issues. They say about 1,200 ballots were affected by turning on the feature and that those ballots were duplicated so that they could be read by a tabulator. Ultimately, these ballots were counted, officials said.

Lake's last witness was Richard Baris, a pollster who conducted exit polling in Arizona and claimed technical problems at polling places had disenfranchised enough voters that it would have changed the outcome of the race in Lake's favor.

Baris claimed that 25,000 to 40,000 people who would normally have voted actually didn't cast ballots as a result of Election Day problems — and that the voters that day were more likely to support Lake.

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Baris said his estimate was primarily influenced by the number of people who started answering his exit poll but didn't finish the process.

Kenneth Mayer, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who testified on behalf of election officials, said Baris' claim was "a series of assumptions and speculation."

Thompson had previously dismissed eight of the 10 claims Lake raised in her lawsuit. Among those were Lake's allegation that Hobbs, in her capacity as secretary of state, and Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer engaged in censorship by flagging social media posts with election misinformation for possible removal by Twitter. He also dismissed her claims of discrimination against Republicans and that mail-in voting procedures are illegal.

Hobbs takes office as governor on Jan. 2.

Meanwhile, a trial is scheduled Friday in Republican Abraham Hamadeh's challenge of his narrow defeat to Democrat Kris Mayes in the Arizona attorney general's race. Hamadeh, who lost by 511 votes, alleges in his lawsuit that problems with printers in Maricopa County led to issues involving disenfranchised voters.

Massive winter storm brings frigid temps, snow and ice to US

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and JILL BLEED Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Tens of millions of Americans endured bone-chilling temperatures, blizzard conditions, power outages and canceled holiday gatherings Friday from a winter storm that forecasters said was nearly unprecedented in its scope, exposing 60% of the population to some sort of winter weather advisory or warning.

More than 200 million people — about 60% of the U.S. population — were under some form of winter weather advisory or warning on Friday, the National Weather Service said. The weather service's map "depicts one of the greatest extents of winter weather warnings and advisories ever," forecasters said in a statement Friday.

More than 3,100 flights within, into or out of the U.S. were canceled Friday, according to the tracking site FlightAware, causing more mayhem as travelers try to make it home for the holidays. More than 350,000 homes and businesses were without power Friday morning.

The huge storm stretched from border to border. In Canada, WestJet canceled all flights Friday at Toronto Pearson International Airport, beginning at 9 a.m. And in Mexico, migrants waited near the U.S. border in unusually cold temperatures as they awaited a U.S. Supreme Court decision on whether and when to lift pandemic-era restrictions that prevent many from seeking asylum.

"This is not like a snow day when you were a kid," President Joe Biden warned Thursday in the Oval Office after a briefing from federal officials. "This is serious stuff."

Forecasters are expecting a bomb cyclone — when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm — to develop near the Great Lakes. That will stir up blizzard conditions, including heavy winds and snow.

Among those with canceled flights was Ashley Sherrod, who planned to fly from Nashville, Tennessee, to Flint, Michigan, on Thursday afternoon. Sherrod was debating whether to drive or risk booking a Saturday flight that she worries will be canceled.

"My family is calling, they want me home for Christmas, but they want me to be safe, too," said Sherrod, whose bag — including the Grinch pajamas she was planning to wear to a family party — was packed and ready by the door. "Christmas is starting to, for lack of a better word, suck."

The cold also led to a high demand at homeless shelters, including in Detroit, where some shelters were at capacity Thursday.

"We are not sending anyone back into this cold," Aisha Morrell-Ferguson, a spokeswoman for COTS, a family-only shelter, told the Detroit News.

And in Portland, Oregon, officials opened four emergency shelters. In the city's downtown, Steven Venus tried to get on a light-rail train to get out of the cold after huddling on the sidewalk overnight in below-zero temperatures.

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"My toes were freezing off," he said, a sleeping bag wrapped around his head, as he paused near a flimsy tent where another homeless person was taking shelter.

Courtney Dodds, a spokeswoman for the Union Gospel Mission, said teams from her organization had been going out to try to persuade people to seek shelter.

"It can be really easy for people to doze off and fall asleep and wind up losing their lives because of the cold weather," she said.

In famously snowy Buffalo, New York, forecasters predicted a "once-in-a-generation storm" because of heavy lake-effect snow, wind gusts as high as 65 mph (105 kph), whiteouts and the potential for extensive power outages. Mayor Byron Brown urged people to stay home, and the NHL postponed the Buffalo Sabres' home game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Denver, also no stranger to winter storms, was the coldest it has been in 32 years on Thursday, when the temperature dropped to minus 24 (minus 31 Celsius) in the morning at the airport.

Identity is complex for Lebanon's Christian Palestinian camp

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

DBAYEH, Lebanon (AP) — Tucked away in the hills north of Beirut below a Maronite monastery, Lebanon's only remaining Christian-majority Palestinian camp gives few outward clues to its identity. Unlike the country's other Palestinian refugee camps, there are no flags or political slogans on display in Dbayeh camp.

Behind closed doors, it's a different story. At a recent community Christmas dinner for elderly residents, attendees wearing Santa hats danced the dabke to popular Palestinian songs like "Raise the Keffiyeh," twirling the traditional Palestinian scarves, or using napkins to simulate them. A speaker who toasted his hope of celebrating next year's Christmas in Jerusalem in a "free Palestine" prompted ululations.

The residents of the camp, founded in 1956 on land belonging to the monastery that overlooks it, have good reason to keep a low profile.

During Lebanon's 15-year civil war, the area was a stronghold of Lebanese Christian militias that battled the Palestine Liberation Organization. The other two Palestinian camps in Christian areas — Jisr al-Basha and Tel al-Zaatar — were razed during the war by the militias, their inhabitants killed or scattered.

Dbayeh was invaded in 1973 by the Lebanese army and in 1976 by the Lebanese Phalangist militia. Many residents fled. Those who stayed found themselves on the opposite side of battle lines from fellow Palestinians, most of them Muslims.

In the decades after the war ended in 1990, Dbayeh was largely forgotten by the rest of Lebanon's Palestinians.

"Because of the separation of territories...between Muslim quarters and the Christian quarters (in Lebanon), the minority that stayed in the (Dbayeh) camp was isolated completely from the other communities," said Anis Mohsen, managing editor of the Institute for Palestine Studies' quarterly Arabic journal.

Dbayeh's story is an extreme example of the wider fragmentation of Palestinian communities.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were forced from their homes during the 1948 Mideast war over Israel's creation. Today, several million Palestinian refugees and their descendants are scattered across Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as well as the West Bank and Gaza, lands Israel captured in 1967.

Palestinians are separated by geographical and political barriers, but religious differences between Christians and Muslims are not generally a source of division.

"We are one people," said Antoine Helou, a member of the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches' Affairs in Palestine and a former resident of Jisr al-Basha. "The misfortunes we have as Palestinians are bigger than thinking about this one is Muslim, this one is Christian."

But the sectarian divisions in Lebanese society made their mark on the Palestinian community.

Eighty-four-year-old retired teacher Youssef Nahme of Dbayeh, originally from the now-destroyed village of al-Bassa in today's Israel, recalled that as a young man in Lebanon, he had friends from Muslim-majority camps.

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But, he said, "after the Civil War, these connections were disturbed. Not because they don't like to visit us or we don't like to visit them, but because (of) Lebanese society."

Eid Haddad, 58, fled Dbayeh with his family after his brother was killed by Phalangist fighters and after the 1976 invasion of the camp. He said it was difficult to fit in anywhere.

"In the Christian area we were rejected because we are Palestinians, and in...the Muslim area, we were rejected because we are Christians," he said.

Some of the Dbayeh residents who fled, like Nahme and his wife, returned after the fighting ended. Others, like Haddad, never came back. Today he lives in Denmark.

"I wish I could go back, but every time I think about it, all (the memories) come back," he said.

Today, the camp is home to a population of about 2,000, a mix of Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrian refugees. Wissam Kassis, head of a civil committee that serves as a governing body of sorts, said of about 530 families living in the camp, some 230 are Palestinian.

Palestinian residents said they maintain good relations with their Lebanese neighbors. Many have intermarried and some have been granted Lebanese citizenship. But some Lebanese continue to blame the Palestinians for the country's civil war. Palestinians in Lebanon are barred from owning property and from working in many professions.

"People say, 'Go back to Palestine.' I say, 'Send us back,'" said Therese Semaan, who lives in the two-room house her family built, and then rebuilt in 1990, after it was bombed during fighting between rival Christian Lebanese factions.

Still, Semaan said, "We're living better than the other camps."

The camp receives limited services from the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, which was set up decades ago to assist Palestinian refugees. The agency runs a clinic and cleans the streets but does not operate a school in the camp. An UNRWA school in the nearby Beirut suburb of Bourj Hammoud was closed in 2013 due to low enrollment — a sore point among locals.

Until recently, the relationship with Palestinian officials was even more limited. It was only in 2016 that Dbayeh formed its own committee to serve as a go-between with the U.N. agency and the Palestinian embassy and political factions.

The factions themselves do not have an active presence in Dbayeh, Kassis said, and camp residents keep their political activities low-key.

"For example, if there is bombing (by Israeli forces) in Gaza, maximum we do a prayer vigil," he said. "We don't go out and protest in an aggressive way."

Many Muslim Palestinians in Lebanon are either unaware of the camp or view its residents with suspicion, believing them to be aligned with the right-wing Christian Lebanese parties that took control of the area during the war. Kassis acknowledged that in some cases that is true, but said it is a small minority.

"There are people who love Palestine very much and there are people who don't, but it's a small percentage" of people who have aligned themselves with the other side, he said. "We are fighting to create more of a feeling of belonging."

In one new initiative, youth athletes from Dbayeh play basketball and soccer alongside those from other Palestinian camps. The games have led to renewed ties, Kassis said.

Community groups from other camps have begun to come to Dbayeh, fixing streets and distributing aid and Christmas gifts.

Kholoud Hussein of the Najda Association NGO, from the Bourj al-Barajneh camp south of Beirut, coordinated a series of projects in Dbayeh this year. "A lot of people in other camps didn't know about Dbayeh" she said, but now they are starting to.

The recognition goes both ways. Eighteen-year-old Rita al-Moussa of Dbayeh speaks with a Lebanese accent, studied in Lebanese schools and has Lebanese friends. Growing up, she felt little connection to her Palestinian roots, but now she plays soccer with a group of young women from Beirut's Shatila and Mar Elias camps.

As a result, she said, "we have become closer to the other Palestinian camps."

Ukraine president back in Kyiv, Russia keeps up attacks

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sounded another defiant note on his return to his nation's capital Friday following his wartime visit to the United States, saying his forces are "working toward victory" even as Russia warned that there would be no end to the war until it achieved its military aims.

Zelenskyy posted on his Telegram account that he's in his Kyiv office following his U.S. trip that secured a new \$1.8 billion military aid package, and pledged that "we'll overcome everything." The Ukrainian president also thanked the Netherlands for pledging up to 2.5 billion euros (\$2.65 billion) for 2023, to help pay for military equipment and rebuild critical infrastructure.

Zelenskyy's return comes amid relentless Russian artillery, rocket and mortar fire as well as airstrikes on the eastern and southern fronts and elsewhere in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the war would end at the negotiating table once the "special military operation" achieves "the goals that the Russian Federation has set," adding that "a significant headway has been made on demilitarization of Ukraine."

The Kremlin spokesman said no reported Ukrainian peace plan can succeed without taking into account "the realities of today that can't be ignored" — a reference to Moscow's demand that Ukraine recognize Russia's sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed in 2014, as well as other territorial gains.

At least five civilians were killed and 18 others were wounded in Russian attacks on eight regions in Ukraine's south and east in the past 24 hours, according to the deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office.

In a regular Telegram update, Kyrylo Tymoshenko said Russian missiles destroyed a boarding school in the eastern city of Kramatorsk, home of the Ukrainian army's local headquarters.

The Ukrainian military said Russian forces fired multiple rocket launchers "more than 70 times" across Ukrainian territory overnight, while fierce battles raged around the city of Bakhmut in the eastern Donetsk region.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces said Bakhmut and Lyman in the neighboring Luhansk region as well as the front line between the Luhansk and Kharkiv regions bore the brunt of the Russian strikes, but didn't specify to what degree.

As many as 61 Russian rocket, artillery and mortar fire attacks were launched in the Kherson region over the past 24 hours. Kherson regional Gov. Yaroslav Yanushevych posted on Telegram that Russian forces attacked from dug-in positions on the right bank of the Dnieper river, hitting educational institutions, apartment blocks and private homes.

In the eastern Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions, Ukraine's military said Russia launched six missile strikes and as many air attacks on civilian targets while Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks on or near 19 settlements in the north and east.

Russian shelling overnight also struck a district hospital in the northeastern city of Volchansk, Kharkiv region, wounding five people, according to local Gov. Oleh Syniehubov. Syniehubov posted on Telegram that the four men and one woman were all in "moderate condition."

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian military said several blasts tore through factory buildings housing Russian troops in the occupied city of Tokmak in the southern Zaporizhzhia region late on Thursday, sparking a fire. The Center for Strategic Communications of the Armed Forces of Ukraine didn't immediately report on casualties or who was behind the blasts.

Earlier Friday, the Ukrainian mayor of the southern city of Melitopol said that a car used by Russian occupation forces exploded, although it's unclear if anyone was hurt.

The reports came a day after a car bomb killed the Russia-appointed head of the village of Lyubymivka in the neighboring Kherson region, according to Russian and Ukrainian news reports. Ukrainian guerrillas have for months operated behind Russian lines in Ukraine's occupied south and east, targeting Kremlin-installed officials, institutions and key infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.

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Kremlin spokesman Peskov said Russian President Vladimir Putin would on Friday visit a weapons factory in Tula, about 150 kilometers (90 miles) south of Moscow, and chair a meeting on the country's arms industry there.

Jan. 6 report: Trump 'lit that fire' of Capitol insurrection

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, ERIC TUCKER, FARNOUSH AMIRI, JILL COLVIN, MICHAEL BALSAMO and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Jan. 6 committee's final report asserts that Donald Trump criminally engaged in a "multi-part conspiracy" to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 presidential election and failed to act to stop his supporters from attacking the Capitol, concluding an extraordinary 18-month investigation into the former president and the violent insurrection two years ago.

Trump "lit that fire," the committee's chairman, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, writes.

The 814-page report released late Thursday comes after the panel interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses, held 10 hearings and obtained more than a million pages of documents. The witnesses — ranging from many of Trump's closest aides to law enforcement to some of the rioters themselves — detailed Trump's "premeditated" actions in the weeks ahead of the attack and how his wide-ranging efforts to overturn his defeat directly influenced those who brutally pushed past the police and smashed through the windows and doors of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The central cause was "one man," the report says: Trump.

The insurrection gravely threatened democracy and "put the lives of American lawmakers at risk," the bipartisan nine-member panel concluded, offering so far the most definitive account of a dark chapter in modern American history. It functions not only as a compendium of the most dramatic moments of testimony from months of hearings, but also as a document meant to be preserved for future generations.

In a foreword to the report, outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the findings should be a "clarion call to all Americans: to vigilantly guard our Democracy and to give our vote only to those dutiful in their defense of our Constitution."

The report's eight chapters tell the story largely as the panel's hearings did this summer — describing the many facets of the remarkable plan that Trump and his advisers devised to try and void President Joe Biden's victory. The lawmakers describe the former president's pressure on states, federal officials, lawmakers and Vice President Mike Pence to game the system or break the law.

In the two months between the election and the insurrection, the report says, "President Trump or his inner circle engaged in at least 200 apparent acts of public or private outreach, pressure, or condemnation, targeting either State legislators or State or local election administrators, to overturn State election results."

Trump's repeated, false claims of widespread voter fraud resonated with his supporters, the committee said, and were amplified on social media, building on the distrust of government he had fostered for his four years in office. And he did little to stop them when they resorted to violence and stormed the Capitol, interrupting the certification of Biden's victory.

The massive, damning report comes as Trump is running again for the presidency and also facing multiple federal investigations, including probes of his role in the insurrection and the presence of classified documents at his Florida estate. This week is particularly fraught for him, as a House committee said it will release his tax returns after he has fought for years to keep them private. And Trump has been blamed by Republicans for a worse-than-expected showing in the midterm elections, leaving him in his most politically vulnerable state since he was elected in 2016.

In a series of policy recommendations, the seven Democrats and two Republicans on the committee suggest that Trump should be barred from future office, noting that the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution holds that anyone who has taken an oath to uphold the Constitution can be prevented from holding office for engaging in insurrection or rebellion.

"He is unfit for any office," writes the committee's vice chairwoman, Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming.

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Posting on his social media site, Trump called the report "highly partisan" and falsely claimed it didn't include his statement on Jan. 6 that his supporters should protest "peacefully and patriotically." The committee did include that statement, though, and noted that he followed that comment with election falsehoods and charged language exhorting the crowd to "fight like hell."

The report details a multitude of failings by law enforcement and intelligence agencies, noting that many of the rioters came with weapons and had openly planned for violence online. "The failure to sufficiently share and act upon that intelligence jeopardized the lives of the police officers defending the Capitol and everyone in it," the report says.

At the same time, the committee makes an emphatic point that security failures are not the primary cause for the insurrection.

"The President of the United States inciting a mob to march on the Capitol and impede the work of Congress is not a scenario our intelligence and law enforcement communities envisioned for this country," Thompson wrote.

"Donald Trump lit that fire," Thompson writes. "But in the weeks beforehand, the kindling he ultimately ignited was amassed in plain sight."

The report details Trump's inaction as his loyalists were storming the building, detailing the hours when he watched the violence on television but did nothing to stop it.

A White House photographer snapped a picture of Trump at 1:21 p.m., learning of the riot from the employee after he returned to the White House after his speech — and after his own security officials had rebuffed his efforts to go to the Capitol himself. "By that time, if not sooner, he had been made aware of the violent riot," the report states.

In total, 187 minutes elapsed between the time Trump finished his speech at the Ellipse and his first effort to get the rioters to disperse, through an eventual video message in which he asked his supporters to go home even as he reassured them, "We love you, you're very special."

That inaction was a "dereliction of duty," the report says, noting that Trump had more power than any other person as the nation's commander-in-chief. "He willfully remained idle even as others, including his own Vice President, acted."

During those hours, Pence huddled in the Capitol, begging security officials for a quicker National Guard response as rioters outside called for his hanging because he would not illegally try to thwart Biden's win. And inside the White House, dozens of staffers and associates pleaded with Trump to make a forceful statement.

But he did not.

"We all look like domestic terrorists now," longtime aide Hope Hicks texted Julie Radford, who served as Ivanka Trump's chief of staff, in the aftermath.

The report says "virtually everyone on the White House staff" interviewed by the committee condemned a tweet by Trump at 2:24 p.m. that day — just as the rioters were first breaking into the Capitol — that Vice President Mike Pence "didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution."

"Attacking the VP? Wtf is wrong with him," Hicks texted another colleague that evening.

The investigation's release is a final act for House Democrats who are ceding power to Republicans in less than two weeks, and have spent much of their four years in power investigating Trump. Democrats impeached Trump twice, the second time a week after the insurrection. He was acquitted by the Senate both times. Other Democratic-led probes investigated his finances, his businesses, his foreign ties and his family.

On Monday, the panel officially passed their investigation to the Justice Department, recommending the department investigate the former president on four crimes, including aiding an insurrection. While the criminal referrals have no legal standing, they are a final statement from the committee after its extensive, year-and-a-half-long probe.

The committee has also begun to release hundreds of transcripts of its interviews. On Thursday, the panel

released transcripts of two closed-door interviews with former White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson, who testified in person at one of the televised hearings over the summer and described in vivid detail Trump's actions and inaction inside the White House.

In the two interviews, both conducted after her June appearance at the hearing, Hutchinson described how many of Trump's allies, including her lawyer, pressured her not to say too much in her committee interviews.

N. Korea fires ballistic missiles after US-S. Korea drills

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Friday, its latest weapons demonstration that came days after U.S. and South Korean warplanes conducted joint drills that North Korea views as an invasion rehearsal.

North Korea has conducted an unprecedented number of missile tests this year in what some experts call an attempt to bolster its weapons capability and pressure its rivals to make concessions such as sanctions relief in future negotiations. Recently, the North also claimed to have performed major tests needed to acquire its first spy satellite and a more mobile intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

South Korea's military detected the two missile launches from North Korea's capital region at around 4:32 p.m. on Friday. Japan said it also confirmed at least one missile launch by North Korea.

It wasn't immediately clear exactly what kinds of missiles North Korea fired. South Korea's military said the missiles traveled about 250 kilometers (155 miles) and 350 kilometers (220 miles) respectively before landing in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

Japanese Vice Defense Minister Toshiro Ino said that one missile detected by Japan flew as far as 300 kilometers (180 miles) at a maximum altitude of 50 kilometers (30 miles). He said that missile might have showed an "irregular" trajectory, a possible reference to North Korea's highly maneuverable, nuclear-capable KN-23 missile, which was modeled on Russia's Iskander missile.

South Korea's military called the launches "a grave provocation" that hurts international peace. It said South Korea will maintain a firm readiness and closely monitor North Korean moves in coordination with the United States. Ino also accused North Korea of significantly raising tensions with repeated weapons tests.

The launches could be a response to the U.S.-South Korean aerial military exercises near the Korean Peninsula on Tuesday, as North Korea has said its torrid run of testing activities in past months were meant as a warning over its rivals' previous combined drills. Washington and Seoul have said their drills are defensive in nature, but North Korea calls them practice for an invasion.

The latest U.S.-South Korean drills drew B-52 nuclear-capable bombers and F-22 stealth fighter jets from the United States and other advanced warplanes from South Korea. The training was part of a bilateral agreement on boosting a U.S. commitment to defend its Asian ally with all available military capabilities, including nuclear, according to South Korea's Defense Ministry.

The F-22 jets were supposed to stay in South Korea for more joint drills this week with the South Korean air force, but the U.S. aircraft eventually returned to their base in Japan due to weather conditions, South Korean defense officials said.

The aerial drills came after North Korea said it used old missiles as launch vehicles to test cameras and other systems on Sunday for the development of its first military reconnaissance satellite. Its state media also published low-resolution photos of South Korean cities as viewed from space.

Some civilian experts in South Korea said the photos were too crude for surveillance purposes and that the launches were likely a cover for tests of North Korea's missile technology. South Korea's military has maintained North Korea fired two medium-range ballistic missiles.

Such assessments have infuriated North Korea, with the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un issuing crude insults of unidentified South Korean experts. Kim Yo Jong said there was no reason to use an expensive, high-resolution camera for a single-shot test.

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Kim Yo Jong also scoffed at South Korea's previous assessment that North Korea still has technological hurdles to overcome to acquire functioning ICBMs that can launch nuclear strikes on the U.S. homeland — such as the ability to protect its warheads from the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry.

To prove the North's ICBM capability, she suggested that North Korea might carry out a standard-trajectory ICBM launch. All of the North's previous ICBM launches were made at a steep angle to avoid neighboring countries. A normal-angle ICBM launch could sharply inflame regional animosities and trigger a strong response from the U.S. as the weapon would fly toward the Pacific Ocean.

A spy satellite and a solid-fueled ICBM are among the high-tech weapons systems that Kim Jong Un has vowed to introduce to cope with what he calls U.S. hostility. Other weapons systems he wants to procure include missiles with multi-warheads, underwater-launched nuclear missiles, nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles.

Last week, North Korea tested a "high-thrust solid-fuel motor" that experts say would be used for a solid-fueled missile, which is more agile and harder to detect before launches than liquid-fueled weapons.

China sanctions 2 US citizens over action on Tibet

BEIJING (AP) — China has sanctioned two U.S. citizens in retaliation for action taken by Washington over human rights abuses in Tibet, the government said Friday, amid a continuing standoff between the sides over Beijing's treatment of religious and ethnic minorities.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Todd Stein and Miles Yu Maochun, along with their close family members, would be banned from entering China.

Any assets they had in China would be frozen and they would be barred from contact with people or organizations within China.

The notice said the measures were in response to the U.S. sanctioning two Chinese citizens "under the excuse of the 'Tibet human rights' issue."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said China was responding to what it considered a violation of the "basic norms of international relations" and that Stein and Yu "behaved egregiously on Tibet and other China-related issues."

"We would like to stress once again that Tibetan affairs are purely an internal affair of China, and the U.S. has no right to interfere in it, and that gross interference in China's internal affairs will be met with strong countermeasures from China," Mao told reporters at a daily briefing.

"We urge the U.S. to withdraw the so-called sanctions and stop interfering in Tibetan affairs and China's internal affairs," the spokesperson said.

Neither Stein nor Yu could immediately be reached for comment.

On Dec. 9, the U.S. imposed sanctions on Wu Yingjie, the top official in Tibet from 2016 to 2021, and Zhang Hongbo, the region's police chief since 2018.

"Our actions further aim to disrupt and deter the People's Republic of China's (PRC) arbitrary detention and physical abuse of members of religious minority groups in the Tibetan Autonomous Region," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in announcing the sanctions.

An accompanying Treasury Department notice said Wu had been responsible for "stability policies" in Tibet whose implementation involved "serious human rights abuse, including extrajudicial killings, physical abuse, arbitrary arrests, and mass detentions."

It said that during Zhang's tenure, police have been engaged in serious human rights abuses, including "torture, physical abuse, and killings of prisoners, which included those arrested on religious and political grounds."

The Chinese announcement gave no specific accusations against Stein and Yu.

Stein has been deputy staff director at the Congressional-Executive Commission on China since 2021 and previously served as senior advisor to Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Sarah Sewall, including serving as her lead staffer on Tibetan issues. Previously, he was director of government relations at the monitoring group International Campaign for Tibet.

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The Chinese-born Yu is a senior academic who taught at the U.S. Naval Academy and a noted critic of the regime of Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping. He served as key China adviser under former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

China in recent years has passed legislation mandating tit-for-tat sanctions against foreign individuals from the U.S., the EU and other countries over perceived slights against its national interests. Washington and others have compiled a long list of Chinese officials barred from visiting or engaging in transactions with their financial institutions ranging from the leader of the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong to local officials accused of human rights abuses.

China claims Tibet has been part of its territory for centuries, although backers of the exiled Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama say it was functionally independent for most of that time.

Communist forces invaded in 1950 and China has ruled the Himalayan region with an iron fist ever since, imposing ever stricter surveillance and travel restrictions since the last uprising against Beijing's rule in 2008. Lengthy prison sentences in dire conditions are imposed for acts of defiance, including defending the region's unique language and Buddhist culture from attempts at assimilation.

China has also been accused of detaining hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in reeducation camps as part of a campaign to wipe out their native language and culture, including through forced adoptions and sterilizations. China denies such charges, saying it has only been fighting terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.

'A very hard road ahead' for China as COVID-19 cases spiral

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL, HUIZHONG WU and DAKE KANG Associated Press

BAZHOU, China (AP) — Nearly three years after it was first identified in China, the coronavirus is now spreading through the vast country. Experts predict difficult months ahead for its 1.4 billion people.

China's unyielding "zero-COVID" approach, which aimed to isolate all infected people, bought it years to prepare for the disease. But an abrupt reopening, which was announced without warning on Dec. 7 in the wake of anti-lockdown protests, has caught the nation under-vaccinated and short on hospital capacity.

Experts have forecast between a million and 2 million deaths next year. Predicting deaths has proven tricky throughout the pandemic, since it is influenced by varied factors and China presents an especially complicated case because of opaque information sharing.

It's not clear exactly how large the current outbreak is, as China has reduced testing and stopped reporting most mild cases. But in cities and towns around Baoding and Langfang, in Hebei province, an area that was among the first to face an unchecked outbreak, Associated Press reporters saw hospital intensive care units overwhelmed by patients, and ambulances being turned away. Across the country, widespread reports of absences from work, shortages of fever-reducing medicine, and staff working overtime at crematoria suggest the virus is widespread.

China belongs to a small club of countries that managed to stop most domestic transmission of the virus in 2020, but it's the last to end restrictions. Experiences of ending vary: Singapore and New Zealand achieved high vaccination rates and bolstered medical systems during restrictions, and reopened relatively smoothly. Hong Kong, where omicron overcame defenses while many elderly people were unvaccinated, suffered a disruptive COVID-19 wave in 2022. Nearly 11,000 people died of the illness this year in the city of 7.4 million, with 95% of them older than 60, according to Hong Kong's department of health. Data from the city showed a 15% fatality rate for those older than 80 and unvaccinated, said Jin Dong-yan, a virology expert at Hong Kong University.

AN UNDER-VACCINATED POPULATION

China has higher vaccination rates than Hong Kong did at the time of its omicron outbreak, but many people are vulnerable to infection, especially the elderly.

The country has exclusively used domestically made vaccines, which rely on older technology than the mRNA vaccines used elsewhere that have shown the best protection against infection.

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A study conducted in Hong Kong, which has administered both an mRNA vaccine and Sinovac's CoronaVac, suggested that CoronaVac requires a third shot to provide comparable protection, especially for the elderly. An ordinary course of the vaccine is two shots, with an optional booster later.

Most people vaccinated in China have received either CoronaVac or a similar vaccine produced by SinoPharm, but the country has administered at least five other vaccines. Comparable real-world data isn't available for these vaccines.

While China counts 90% of its population vaccinated, only around 60% have received a booster. Older people are especially likely to have not had a booster vaccine. Over 9 million people older than 80 have not had the third vaccine, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency.

Vaccination rates have increased over 10-fold, to over a million doses administered a day, since the start of the month. But Dr. Gagandeep Kang, who studies viruses at India's Christian Medical College in Vellore said prioritizing the elderly would be key. Unlike other countries, China prioritized vaccinating the more mobile young to prevent the virus from spreading, said Ray Yip, the founding director of the U.S. CDC office in China. A campaign targeting those older than 60 started in December, but it is unclear how successful it has been.

They "did not pay enough attention to assure everyone gets full vaccine protection," Yip said. "How well do they perform this particular catch up effort might determine some of the outcome."

OVERWHELMED HOSPITALS

Around Baoding and Langfang, hospitals have run out of intensive care beds and staff as severe cases surge. Patients lay on the floor, while others drove from hospital to hospital searching for beds for relatives Wednesday.

The National Health Commission said China had 10 intensive care beds for every 100,000 people on Dec. 9, a total of 138,000 beds, up from 4 for every 100,000 people on Nov. 22. That means the reported number of beds more than doubled in just under three weeks. But this number "might be wrong," said Yu Changping, a doctor at the Department of Respiratory Medicine of People's Hospital of Wuhan University. "It is impossible that the number could have jumped sharply within such a short time," Yu said.

Even taken at face value, the increase in intensive care beds doesn't mean the health system is prepared for a surge in cases since the pressure point, as seen globally, is often the availability of specialized doctors and nurses who can treat patients who need intensive care, said Chen. China only has 80,050 doctors and 220,000 nurses for its critical care facilities, and another 177,700 nurses who the National Health Commission says could potentially work in those units.

"If you look at intensive care unit beds, China is... in a great shortage," he said.

Yu said he's seen growing numbers of COVID-19 patients in recent weeks, and that almost all the doctors in the department have been infected. "We're under pressure because we are receiving a large number of patients within a short time," said Yu.

China has also not announced a clear triage plan, a system where hospitals prioritize giving treatments to the very sick to ration limited resources. Moreover, China's health system is focused on large hospitals, which typically treat even the mildly ill, said Chen.

Potential shortages would depend on how quickly cases increase, and if those with mild symptoms don't stay at home to ration resources for the very sick hospitals could still get overwhelmed, said Chen.

"That could easily crash the system," he said.

To try to protect its health system, Beijing has converted temporary hospitals and centralized quarantine facilities to increase the number of fever clinics from 94 to 1,263. But rural areas may suffer, as the vast majority of China's ICU beds are in its cities.

The use of digital tools and telemedicine may offer some breathing room to hospitals: Over a third of hospitals use some form of telemedicine, and around 31% used digital tools in their health care, found a nationwide survey of 120 public and private hospital executives in urban areas conducted by LEK Consulting in Shanghai.

China approved Pfizer's drug Paxlovid for COVID-19 earlier this year, and two domestic therapies: an

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antiviral used for AIDS made by Genuine Biotech that has been repurposed for COVID-19 and a cocktail of virus-blocking antibodies made by BriiBio. But it is unclear how widely available these drugs are.

HOW BAD WILL IT GET?

Scientists aren't sure, since mortality depends on factors like vaccination rates, how people behave and efforts to bolster hospitals.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in Seattle predicts deaths could reach a million by the end of 2023 if the virus spreads unchecked. But Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the institute, said the government would likely be able to reduce this toll with renewed social distancing measures.

Another study, from Hong Kong University, also predicts nearly a million deaths in a scenario in which the virus spreads throughout the country and authorities can't provide vaccine boosters and antiviral treatments. Bill Hanage, co-director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health estimated 2 million deaths in a Dec. 14 call with reporters.

"China has got a very, very hard road ahead of it in the coming months," Hanage said. "But in the absence of vaccination, it would be much, much worse."

Will a surge in China spill over into the rest of the world? Neighboring India has asked its state governments to remain alert, and not let genomic sequencing efforts wane. Jeremy Luban of University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School said large surges in infections increase the potential for a more dangerous mutation to arise. Luban has seen "no specific reason to be concerned" about any alarming variants already simmering in China, "except for the fact that a lot of infections are bad."

Luban added: "The more the rate of transmission could be controlled in China the better."

Sex-abuse video victimizes child long after abuser is gone

By MICHAEL REZENDES and HELEN WIEFFERING Associated Press

The video of a man raping his 9-year-old daughter was discovered in New Zealand in 2016 and triggered a global search for the little girl.

Investigators contacted Interpol and the pursuit eventually included the FBI, the U.S. State Department and the Department of Homeland Security. Months later, investigators raided the Bisbee, Arizona, home of Paul Adams, arrested him and rescued the girl in the video along with her five siblings.

While Adams can no longer physically hurt his daughter — he died by suicide in custody — the videos live on, downloaded and uploaded by child pornographers across the U.S. and around the globe, growing ever more popular even as police, prosecutors and internet companies chase behind in a futile effort to remove the images.

The number of times the Adams video has been seen soared from fewer than 100 in 2017 to 4,500 in 2021, according to data provided to The Associated Press with the permission of the girl and her adoptive mother, Nancy Salminen. The tally was produced by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a nonprofit that tracks child pornography on the internet and works with law enforcement agencies throughout the world.

"That's the horrendous part about it," Salminen said. "You can't just say that's in the past and shut the door and move on. She will never be able to turn her back on what's happened."

The ongoing victimization of the child could have been avoided.

Six years before the video surfaced in Auckland, Adams, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known as the Mormon church, confessed to his bishop that he abused his daughter, identified by the AP as MJ.

But a prominent church lawyer told the bishop to keep the abuse secret. And as a result, MJ was brutalized for seven more years. Today, she continues to be victimized almost daily in a different way, as the video, and others Adams took, circulate on the internet. Details of the Mormon officials' cover-up of the Adams rapes were reported in an AP investigation in August.

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The data provided to the AP also shows that police in the U.S. referred the Adams video, or portions of it, to NCMEC for identification 1,850 times since it was discovered, contributing to nearly 800 arrests on federal child pornography charges last year alone.

Those arrested comprise a coast-to-coast catalog of men — women rarely traffic in child pornography, the data shows — that defies economic or geographic boundaries. A random sampling includes:

— Kurt Sheldon, 31, a librarian in Putnam County, Florida, was arrested in September 2020 for possession of child pornography and using Snapchat to solicit pornography from a 12-year-old girl. Sheldon was sentenced to nearly 22 years in federal prison.

— Joseph Mollick, 58, a physician affiliated with the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center was arrested in October 2021. Federal officials charged him with using the social media application Kik to upload 2,000 child pornography videos and images. Mollick pleaded not guilty.

— Jared Faircloth, 24, a U.S. Air Force airman, was arrested in October 2021 in Cream Ridge, New Jersey, for downloading more than 2,800 child sex abuse videos and images through the BitTorrent network. Faircloth pleaded guilty to federal charges and is awaiting sentencing.

— Harold "HL" Moody, Jr., 39, a former communications director for the Arkansas Democratic party, was arrested in November 2018 for distributing child pornography in online chatrooms. The Little Rock resident pleaded guilty to federal charges and is awaiting sentencing.

LIMITS OF COMPUTER SLEUTHING

The seeming immortality of the Adams video underscores the limits of computer sleuthing by a global network of investigators racing to stop internet child pornography, and it reveals how advances in data storage and video technology have outpaced efforts to stop it.

Permanently removing the images from the open internet is nearly impossible, child sex abuse experts say, because pornographers throughout the world are constantly downloading the images, storing them and reposting them.

"That's what makes the whole crime type so abhorrent," said Simon Peterson, the New Zealand customs agent who discovered the Adams video, during an interview with the AP. Victims of online child pornography, he said, "have to wake up every morning knowing that there's imagery of those terrible times in their lives still out there, and that people are accessing it for their own gratification."

The Adams case has also highlighted a glaring loophole in state child sex abuse reporting laws. Adams, a member of the Mormon church, confessed he was abusing his daughter to his Bishop, John Herrod, in 2010. In Arizona, clergy are among the professionals required to report child sexual abuse to police or child welfare officials.

But when the bishop called the church's "help line" for advice, Merrill Nelson, a lawyer representing the church, directed him to withhold the information from police and child welfare officials.

According to legal documents, Nelson, who was also a Utah legislator, pointed to an exception in the state's mandatory child sex abuse reporting law that allows clergy to keep information revealed during a confession to themselves. The so-called clergy-penitent privilege is on the books in 33 states, the AP found.

Behind this veil of church secrecy, Adams continued molesting MJ and, five years later, started raping her younger sister as well, beginning when she was just 6 weeks old. He was also taking videos and photographs of the abuse and posting them to the internet, including the nine-minute video that was eventually his undoing.

A WORLDWIDE QUEST

It was November 2016 when Peterson and his team of agents in Auckland raided the home of a 47-year-old farm worker whom they'd been watching online for months.

"He knew what we were there for," Peterson recalled. "And by the end of the morning we'd arrested him, interviewed him and charged him for exporting and possessing child sexual abuse material."

For weeks the investigators pored over the computers and cell phones they had seized in the raid, and shortly before Christmas, Peterson found the Adams video, which the farmworker had downloaded from an internet site based in Russia.

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Agents who chase child pornographers often see the same images over and over. But Peterson said the Adams video was different. After running it through a New Zealand database of seized child pornography, and a second database maintained by Interpol, the organization that helps law enforcement agencies work across countries, Peterson suspected the video might be new, and the child depicted might still be in danger.

He could also see obvious clues that could help identify the rapist and his victim.

"We could see both their faces for a start," Peterson said. "And they were talking throughout it, as well. We could tell from the accent if it wasn't Canadian, it was American. So we could narrow it down pretty quickly."

Interpol sent the video to NCMEC, which acts as a clearinghouse for agencies investigating child pornography throughout the world. Computer analysts there isolated several images of Adams' face and sent them to Homeland Security Investigations, which in turn sent them to the FBI, where analysts tried unsuccessfully to identify them with facial recognition technology, according to summaries of the case compiled by the U.S. Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security.

The FBI's Operation Rescue Me then turned to the State Department to compare the images to those in a database of visa and passport photos and found eight potential matches. Investigators finally zeroed in on Adams and his daughter through his wife's Facebook page. They were also able to determine that the video was made on June 20, 2015, and that Adams was a U.S. Border Patrol employee who had that day off, so he was free to create the video at home.

On Feb. 8, 2017, about six weeks after Peterson discovered the video in New Zealand, Homeland Security agents arrested Adams on the job at the Naco, Arizona, border crossing while federal agents raided his home, seized electronic devices and rescued his six children.

"It was quite emotional," Peterson said. "We don't get success often."

A GLOBAL GLUT OF CHILD PORN

Over the last several years, sightings of child sexual abuse material on the internet have skyrocketed.

Under federal law, every internet platform based in the United States is required to report discoveries of child pornography on their social media pages to NCMEC's Cyber Tipline. Last year, the organization received 29 million reports, up from 21 million in 2020, and 18 million in 2019 — a 61% increase over just two years.

The vast majority of these reports stem from child pornography posted on the open internet and do not account for additional child porn posted to the dark web, where producers and consumers of child sexual abuse material — or CSAM — operate with near complete anonymity.

"It's nearly impossible to fully estimate and scope how much CSAM is on the internet, whether that's open web, P2P (peer-to-peer) file sharing or the dark net," said John Shehan, vice president of NCMEC's Exploited Children Division.

But investigators agree that the surge in reports by companies with open internet platforms such as Facebook indicates an enormous increase in the volume of child sexual abuse material on the internet. These investigators attribute the increase to advances in technology that have made it easier and less expensive for amateurs to take pornographic videos with their cellphones and to store vast amounts child pornography at minimal cost on remote servers or external hard drives.

Erin Burke, the Homeland Security section chief for the agency's Cyber Crimes Center, said it's common for investigators to find child pornographers with "terabytes of files." A single terabyte is enough space to hold hundreds of hours of video and can be stored on a remote server for as little as \$25 a month, or on an external hard drive that can cost less than \$100.

Investigators also attribute the sharp rise in internet child pornography to the worldwide travel restrictions imposed during the coronavirus pandemic.

Unable to visit countries where child prostitution proliferates, some pornographers resorted to a practice known as "sextortion," in which an online perpetrator lures a child into sending compromising selfies. If the child later refuses to produce more explicit images, the perpetrator threatens to post the selfies the

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child initially created to the child's social media contacts, which typically include family members.

"That's one of the bad outcomes of COVID," Burke said. "It was bound to happen anyway but it just kind of sped up that process."

On Monday, the U.S. Justice Department issued an alert on a related scheme in which young sextortion victims are also extorted for money, citing more than 3,000 victims and multiple suicides this year.

Another chilling outcome of the pandemic, Burke said, is the advent of live streaming of child sexual abuse for audiences ranging from a handful to thousands. On platforms that offer live video chats and end-to-end encryption, viewers who pay minimal, untraceable fees may choose from a menu of child victims of varying ages, including infants, and request to see specific sex acts.

Burke said Homeland Security investigators have found that much of the live streaming originates in the Philippines and is performed for U.S. and Western European audiences. English is commonly spoken in the Southeast Asian nation and high-quality internet service is available, she said. At the same time, harsh economic conditions provide an incentive for families to participate.

"They're mostly abusing family members," Burke said. "It's not grabbing kids off the street."

As the volume of internet child sexual abuse material has soared, so too have the number of agencies working to stop it. Homeland Security and the FBI both have special units dedicated to tracking down child pornographers. Along with NCMEC, they work closely with more than 60 local branches of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program, with units spread throughout the U.S.

Internationally, Homeland Security and NCMEC work with investigators at Interpol and law enforcement agencies throughout the world, including those in the other "Five Eyes" countries — Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand — which cooperate in a range of intelligence activities.

RESTITUTION

In the six years following the discovery of the nine-minute Adams video, law enforcement agencies in the U.S. have seized thousands of images of MJ's abuse and have referred the material to NCMEC for positive identification. In turn, NCMEC has cataloged the identities of those arrested who may have possessed or trafficked the images and given the information to MJ's lawyers, who can sue each perpetrator for up to \$150,000 in restitution under federal civil law, in addition to restitution that may be available through criminal proceedings.

Lynne Cadigan, one of several attorneys representing three of the Adams children, said MJ will seek compensation from the child pornographers.

But she and Salminen, the girl's adoptive mother, lay most of the blame for the sexual abuse on officials of the Mormon church, who knew Adams molested MJ as early as 2010 and did nothing to stop it.

"She went to church with people who didn't help her and as a result thousands of people are looking at the video and there's nothing she can do about it," Cadigan said.

Two years ago, the three Adams children filed a lawsuit that accuses the church, two bishops and a third Mormon official of conspiring to keep the years of abuse by their father out of the hands of civil authorities.

As part of the lawsuit, the Arizona Court of Appeals on Dec. 15 ruled that the church does not have to turn over disciplinary records for Adams, who was excommunicated in 2013. The court also ruled that a church official who attended a disciplinary hearing could refuse to answer questions from the plaintiffs' attorneys during pretrial testimony, based on the clergy-penitent privilege. Lawyers for the three Adams children said they plan to appeal.

Attorneys for the church say the bishops who knew that Adams abused his daughter — John Herrod and Robert "Kim" Mauzy — did nothing wrong by taking a lawyer's advice and withholding the information because Adams told Herrod about the abuse during a spiritual confession, triggering the privilege.

In a statement to the AP, the church said it had no knowledge Adams was recording himself abusing his two daughters and posting the material on the internet until 2017. "The Church had no idea that these videos were being created or circulated until after Paul Adams was arrested," the statement read. "The church supports all efforts to prosecute anyone who possesses or distributes these heinous and disturbing videos."

Adams might never have stopped raping his two daughters if Peterson hadn't discovered the nine-minute

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video in New Zealand. But unlike Adams, the video may never be stopped.

"They're living with it for the rest of their lives," Peterson said. "It's on the internet. It's not going anywhere."

White House: Russia's Wagner received arms from North Korea

By AAMER MADHANI and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House said Thursday that the Wagner Group, a private Russian military company, has taken delivery of an arms shipment from North Korea to help bolster its forces as it fights side-by-side with Russian troops in Ukraine.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said U.S. intelligence officials determined that North Korea completed an initial arms shipment that included rockets and missiles last month.

"We assess that the amount of material delivered to Wagner will not change battlefield dynamics in Ukraine," Kirby said. "But we're certainly concerned that North Korea is planning to deliver more military equipment."

On Friday, North Korea again flatly denied it has shipped munitions to Russia, calling the U.S. accusation of arms transfers to Russia "the groundless theory" cooked up by "some dishonest forces."

The White House has expressed alarm about Wagner's growing involvement in the war as it has been particularly active in the eastern Donbas region. Kirby said in certain instances Russian military officials have even been "subordinate to Wagner's command."

Biden administration officials said with the arms sales to the private military group, North Korea is violating U.N. sanctions that ban Pyongyang from importing or exporting weapons.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. envoy to the United Nations, called it "despicable" that Russia, a permanent veto-wielding member of the U.N. Security Council, which imposed the sanctions, is now using weapons procured from North Korea and Iran "to pursue its war of aggression against Ukraine."

An unidentified spokesman at the North Korean Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by state media that the nation "remains unchanged in its principled stand on the issue of 'arms transaction' between (North Korea) and Russia which has never happened."

The spokesman didn't mention Thursday's U.S. assessment that North Korea sent an arms shipment to the Wagner Group. But he accused the U.S. of "criminal acts of bringing bloodshed and destruction to Ukraine" by providing it with a large amount of weapons, while repeating its support of Russia in the war.

"I would like to say that the Russian people are the bravest people with the will and ability to defend the security and territorial integrity of their country without any others' military support," he said.

Kirby said the U.S. now assesses that Wagner has some 50,000 personnel fighting in Ukraine, including 10,000 contractors and 40,000 convicts that the company has recruited from prisons.

The U.S. assesses that Wagner, owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is spending about \$100 million a month in the fight, Kirby said.

Wagner Group mercenaries have also been accused by Western countries and UN experts of numerous human rights abuses throughout Africa, including in the Central African Republic, Libya and Mali. Earlier this month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced he had designated the Wagner Group as an "entity of particular concern" for its activities in the Central African Republic.

Wagner has faced U.S. sanctions since 2017. The Commerce Department on Wednesday unveiled new export restrictions targeting Wagner in a bid to further restrict its access to technology and supplies.

The White House has repeatedly sought to spotlight intelligence findings that show Russia — struggling to maintain a steady supply of arms for its war in Ukraine and pinched by sanctions that are limiting access to key components for weapons manufacturing — has limited options to help it resupply weapons.

Russia has also turned to Iran to provide drones to use against Ukraine, and the Biden administration has expressed concern that Russia may seek to acquire additional advanced conventional weapons from Iran. The White House has previously said that Moscow turn to North Korea for artillery.

The British government also condemned Russia for Wagner arm's purchase.

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"The fact that President Putin is turning to North Korea for help is a sign of Russia's desperation and isolation," Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said in a statement. "We will work with our partners to ensure that North Korea pays a high price for supporting Russia's illegal war in Ukraine."

North Korea has sought to strengthen relations with Russia as much of Europe and the West has pulled away from Moscow.

Friday's statement was mainly meant to deny recent Japanese media reports that North Korea transported munitions to Russia by rail. The statement called the report "false" and "the most absurd red herring, which is not worth any comment or interpretation."

Some experts say North Korea may be seeking Russian fuel as well as technology transfers and supplies needed to advance its military capabilities as it pursues more sophisticated weapons systems targeting the United States and its allies.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have heightened because of concerns about North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The North has carried out a series of weapons demonstrations, while the U.S. and South Korea held stepped up joint defense exercises.

Thomas-Greenfield said Wagner's purchase "contributes to instability on the Korean Peninsula by giving the DPRK funds it can use to further develop its prohibited weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs."

"Russia is not only defending the DPRK as it engages in unlawful and threatening behavior, Russia is now a partner to such behavior," Thomas-Greenfield added.

Jan. 6 panel unveils report, describes Trump 'conspiracy'

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Jan. 6 committee's final report asserts that Donald Trump criminally engaged in a "multi-part conspiracy" to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 presidential election and failed to act to stop his supporters from attacking the Capitol, concluding an extraordinary 18-month investigation into the former president and the violent insurrection two years ago.

The 814-page report released Thursday comes after the panel interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses, held 10 hearings and obtained millions of pages of documents. The witnesses — ranging from many of Trump's closest aides to law enforcement to some of the rioters themselves — detailed Trump's actions in the weeks ahead of the insurrection and how his wide-ranging pressure campaign to overturn his defeat directly influenced those who brutally pushed past the police and smashed through the windows and doors of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

"The central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump, who many others followed," reads the report. "None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him."

The insurrection gravely threatened democracy and "put the lives of American lawmakers at risk," the nine-member panel concluded.

In a foreword to the report, outgoing Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the findings should be a "clarion call to all Americans: to vigilantly guard our Democracy and to give our vote only to those dutiful in their defense of our Constitution."

The report's eight chapters of findings tell the story largely as the panel's hearings did this summer — describing the many facets of the remarkable plan that Trump and his advisers devised to try and void President Joe Biden's victory. The lawmakers describe his pressure on states, federal officials, lawmakers and Vice President Mike Pence to game the system or break the law.

Trump's repeated, false claims of widespread voter fraud resonated with his supporters, the committee said, and were amplified on social media, building on the distrust of government he had fostered for his four years in office. And he did little to stop them when they resorted to violence and stormed the Capitol.

The massive, damning report comes as Trump is running again for the presidency and also facing multiple federal investigations, including probes of his role in the insurrection and the presence of classified documents at his Florida estate. This week is particularly fraught for him, as a House committee is expected to

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release his tax returns after he has fought for years to keep them private. And Trump has been blamed by Republicans for a worse-than-expected showing in the midterm elections, leaving him in his most politically vulnerable state since he won the 2016 election.

It is also a final act for House Democrats who are ceding power to Republicans in less than two weeks, and have spent much of their four years in power investigating Trump. Democrats impeached Trump twice, the second time a week after the insurrection. He was acquitted by the Senate both times. Other Democratic-led probes investigated his finances, his businesses, his foreign ties and his family.

On Monday, the panel of seven Democrats and two Republicans officially passed their investigation to the Justice Department, recommending the department investigate the former president on four crimes, including aiding an insurrection. While the criminal referrals have no legal standing, they are a final statement from the committee after its extensive, year-and-a-half-long probe.

Trump has tried to discredit the report, slamming members of the committee as "thugs and scoundrels" as he has continued to falsely dispute his 2020 loss.

In response to the panel's criminal referrals, Trump said: "These folks don't get it that when they come after me, people who love freedom rally around me. It strengthens me."

The committee has also begun to release hundreds of transcripts of its interviews. On Thursday, the panel released transcripts of two closed-door interviews with former White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson, who testified in person at one of the televised hearings over the summer and described in vivid detail Trump's efforts to influence the election results and indifference toward the violence as it occurred.

In the two interviews, both conducted after her July appearance at the hearing, she described how many of Trump's allies, including her lawyer, pressured her not to say too much in her committee interviews.

Arizona to remove shipping container wall from Mexico border

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona will take down a makeshift wall made of shipping containers at the Mexico border, settling a lawsuit and political tussle with the U.S. government over trespassing on federal lands.

The Biden administration and the Republican governor entered into an agreement that Arizona will cease installing the containers in the Coronado National Forest — the only national forest along the border — according to court documents filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Phoenix.

The agreement also calls for Arizona to remove the containers that were already installed in the remote San Rafael Valley, in southeastern Cochise County, and in the Yuma area where the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has an easement on the Cocopah Indian Tribe's reservation. All this must be done by Jan. 4 without damaging any natural resources. State agencies will have to consult with U.S. Forest Service representatives.

Gov. Doug Ducey has long maintained that the shipping containers were a temporary fixture. Even before the lawsuit, he wanted the federal government to say when it would fill any remaining gaps in the permanent border wall, as it announced it would a year ago.

"For more than a year, the federal government has been touting their effort to resume construction of a permanent border barrier. Finally, after the situation on our border has turned into a full blown crisis, they've decided to act," said C.J. Karamargin, Ducey's spokesperson. "Better late than never."

"Final details are still being worked out on how much it will cost and when it will start," he told The Associated Press.

Representatives for U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not immediately return messages seeking comment Thursday.

The resolution comes two weeks before Democrat Katie Hobbs, who opposes the construction, takes over as governor.

The federal government filed a lawsuit last week against Ducey's administration on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service.

The federal government "owes it to Arizonans and all Americans to release a timeline," Ducey wrote last week, responding to news of the pending federal lawsuit.

The work placing up to 3,000 containers at a cost of \$95 million was about a third complete, but protest-

ers concerned about its impact on the environment held up work in recent days.

Meanwhile, limits on asylum seekers hoping to enter the U.S. had been set to expire Wednesday before conservative-leaning states sought the U.S. Supreme Court's help to keep them in place. The Biden administration has asked the court to lift the Trump-era restrictions, but not before Christmas. It's not clear when the court might rule on the matter.

Canadian polar bears near 'bear capital' dying at fast rate

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM Associated Press

Polar bears in Canada's Western Hudson Bay — on the southern edge of the Arctic — are continuing to die in high numbers, a new government survey of the land carnivore has found. Females and bear cubs are having an especially hard time.

Researchers surveyed Western Hudson Bay — home to Churchill, the town called 'the Polar Bear Capital of the World,' — by air in 2021 and estimated there were 618 bears, compared to the 842 in 2016, when they were last surveyed.

"The actual decline is a lot larger than I would have expected," said Andrew Derocher, a biology professor at the University of Alberta who has studied Hudson Bay polar bears for nearly four decades. Derocher was not involved in the study.

Since the 1980s, the number of bears in the region has fallen by nearly 50%, the authors found. The ice essential to their survival is disappearing.

Polar bears rely on arctic sea ice — frozen ocean water — that shrinks in the summer with warmer temperatures and forms again in the long winter. They use it to hunt, perching near holes in the thick ice to spot seals, their favorite food, coming up for air. But as the Arctic has warmed twice as fast as the rest of the world because of climate change, sea ice is cracking earlier in the year and taking longer to freeze in the fall.

That has left many polar bears that live across the Arctic with less ice on which to live, hunt and reproduce.

Polar bears are not only critical predators in the Arctic. For years, before climate change began affecting people around the globe, they were also the best-known face of climate change.

Researchers said the concentration of deaths in young bears and females in Western Hudson Bay is alarming.

"Those are the types of bears we've always predicted would be affected by changes in the environment," said Stephen Atkinson, the lead author who has studied polar bears for more than 30 years.

Young bears need energy to grow and cannot survive long periods without enough food and female bears struggle because they expend so much energy nursing and rearing offspring.

"It certainly raises issues about the ongoing viability," Derocher said. "That is the reproductive engine of the population."

The capacity for polar bears in the Western Hudson Bay to reproduce will diminish, Atkinson said, "because you simply have fewer young bears that survive and become adults."

Russia scrubs Mariupol's Ukraine identity, builds on death

By LORI HINNANT, VASILISA STEPANENKO, SARAH EL DEEB and ELIZAVETA TILNA Associated Press

Throughout Mariupol, Russian workers are tearing down bombed-out buildings at a rate of at least one a day, hauling away shattered bodies with the debris.

Russian military convoys are rumbling down the broad avenues of what is swiftly becoming a garrison city, and Russian soldiers, builders, administrators and doctors are replacing the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who have died or left.

Many of the city's Ukrainian street names are reverting to Soviet ones, with the Avenue of Peace that cuts through Mariupol to be labeled Lenin Avenue. Even the large sign that announces the name of the city at its entrance has been Russified, repainted with the red, white and blue of the Russian flag and the Russian spelling.

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Eight months after Mariupol fell into Russian hands, Russia is eradicating all vestiges of Ukraine from it – along with the evidence of war crimes buried in its buildings, such as the famed Drama Theater where demolition started Thursday. The few open schools teach a Russian curriculum, phone and television networks are Russian, the Ukrainian currency is dying out, and Mariupol is now in the Moscow time zone. On the ruins of the old Mariupol, a new Russian city is rising, with materials from at least one European company, The Associated Press found.

But the AP investigation into life in occupied Mariupol also underlines what its residents already know all too well: No matter what the Russians do, they are building upon a city of death. More than 10,000 new graves now scar Mariupol, the AP found, and the death toll might run three times higher than an early estimate of at least 25,000. The former Ukrainian city has also hollowed out, with Russian plans to demolish well over 50,000 homes, the AP calculated.

Associated Press journalists were the last international media in Mariupol to escape heavy shelling in March, before Russian forces took the city over. This is the story of what has happened since. AP reconnected with many people whose tragedies were captured in photos and video during the deadliest days of the Russian siege.

Death surrounds Mariupol in the rapidly growing cemeteries on its outskirts, and its stench lingered over the city into the autumn. It haunts the memories of survivors, both in Mariupol and in exile.

Every one of the dozens of residents the AP spoke with knew someone killed during the siege of Mariupol, which began with the Feb. 24 invasion. As many as 30 people arrive at the morgue each day in hopes of tracking down a loved one.

Lydia Erashova watched her 5-year-old son Artem and her 7-year-old niece Angelina die after a Russian shelling in March. The family hastily buried the young cousins in a makeshift grave in a yard and fled Mariupol.

They returned in July to rebury the children, only to learn while on the road that the bodies had already been dug up and taken to a warehouse. As they approached the city center, each block was bleaker than the last.

"It is horror. Wherever you look, whichever way you look," said Erashova. "Everything is black, is destroyed."

Neither she nor her sister-in-law could bear to go inside the warehouse to identify the bodies of their children. Their husbands, who are brothers, chose the tiny coffins – one pink and one blue – to be placed together in a single grave.

Erashova, who is now in Canada, said no Russian rebuilding plan could possibly bring back what Mariupol lost.

"Our lives have been taken from us. Our child was taken from us," she said. "It's so ridiculous and stupid. How do you restore a dead city where people were killed at every turn?"

RECKONING WITH DEATH

The AP investigation drew on interviews with 30 residents from Mariupol, including 13 living under Russian occupation; satellite imagery; hundreds of videos gathered from inside the city, and Russian documents showing a master plan. Taken together, they chronicle a comprehensive effort to suppress Mariupol's collective history and memory as a Ukrainian city.

Mariupol was in the crosshairs of the Kremlin from the first day of the invasion. Just 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Russian border, the city is a port on the Sea of Azov and crucial for Russian supply lines.

The city was hit relentlessly with airstrikes and artillery, its communications severed, its food and water cut off. Yet Mariupol refused to give in for 86 days. By the time the last Ukrainian fighters holed up in the Azovstal steel mill surrendered in May, Mariupol had become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

That resistance came at a high price. The thoroughness of Russia's destruction of Mariupol can still be seen today. Videos taken across the city and satellite images show that munitions have left their mark on

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nearly every building across its 166 square kilometers (64 square miles).

Large swaths of the city are devoid of color and life, with fire-blackened walls, grey demolition dust and dead trees with shredded foliage. But the worst destruction Mariupol suffered may be measured in its death toll, which will never be fully known.

An AP analysis of satellite imagery taken over the past eight months of occupation shows 8,500 new graves in the outlying Staryi Krym cemetery alone, with possibly multiple bodies beneath each mound. There are at least three other trench gravesites around the city, including one created by Ukrainians themselves at the beginning of the siege.

In all, a total at least 10,300 new graves are scattered around Mariupol, according to AP's methodology, confirmed by three forensic pathologists with expertise in mass graves. Thousands more bodies likely never even made it to the graveyard.

Back in May, when the city finally fell, the municipal government in exile estimated 25,000 people at a minimum had died. But at least three people in the city since June say the number killed is triple that or more, based on conversations with workers documenting body collection from the streets for the Russian occupation authorities.

Svitlana Chebotareva, a Mariupol resident who fled in March, said her neighbor died in a flat nearby, and the body is still there. Chebotareva returned home this autumn for just long enough to retrieve her belongings, since residents are free to come and go so long as they pass checkpoints. She said the Russians expect gratitude with their offer of a few new apartments.

"I don't know how it's possible now to give us 'candies' in exchange for destroyed homes and killed people," she said in Kyiv. "As if there's something to believe in."

ERASING A UKRAINIAN CITY

The notices are taped to peeling, pockmarked walls by the entry, and addressed to "DEAR RESIDENTS."

This is how those who remained in Mariupol learn their buildings are scheduled for imminent demolition. Often, despite shattered windows, frozen pipes and no electricity, they are still living inside because they have nowhere else to go.

In a review of hundreds of photos and video clips along with documents from occupation authorities, the AP found that more than 300 buildings in Mariupol have been or are about to be demolished. Some are individual homes, but most are multistory apartment blocks in the khrushchyovka style, launched by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in a housing crisis in the 1960s. With around 180 apartments inside or more, each building was designed to house as many families as possible.

That means in all, the demolitions will remove well over 50,000 homes, according to AP calculations.

"There is no discussion, people aren't prepared," said an activist in Mariupol, who like all inside Mariupol requested anonymity for fear of retribution. "People still live in the basements. Where they can go is unclear."

Only Russians handle the debris itself, according to another resident still in the city who works on the sites. The stated reason is to avoid accidents, he said.

But Petro Andryushchenko, an aide to Mariupol's mayor who is exiled in Dnipro, believes the real reason is to ensure that people don't see the rotting corpses being hauled away. He said many of the buildings, especially in the neighborhood around Azovstal, contain 50 to 100 bodies each that will never get a decent burial. Those deaths will go unrecorded.

110 Mytropolyska is one of the buildings on Russia's demolition list, scheduled to come down any day.

The smell of fresh-baked bread still brings Inna Nepomnyshaya, a doctor, back to her last night in March in her sixth-floor apartment there. When she saw the street price of bread in her besieged city, she decided to bake her own.

The smell warmed the air the next morning when her son-in-law arrived. It was time to leave, he insisted. Russian forces were closing in.

Nepomnyshaya was at her daughter's building when Russian tanks rolled up to her own at dusk on March 11. As AP journalists watched and recorded from the upper floor of nearby Hospital No. 2, one tank raised its gun at 110 Mytropolyska and fired.

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The shell shattered the walls of Nepomnyshaya's apartment and obliterated those of the neighbors above, below and behind her. Most of the neighbors were huddled in the basement, but two elderly women, Lyda and Nataliya, couldn't make the trip up and down the stairs.

Their bodies would be buried in the courtyard soon after. Weeks later, AP video showed the rough graves still there.

With communications to the city cut, Nepomnyshaya did not learn of the fate of her apartment until her family had escaped to Ukrainian-held territory. Like many who left Mariupol, she still speaks of the city in the present tense.

"I live in Mariupol, this is my home," she said, speaking by candlelight in a café in Dnipro, another city that had lost power. "This house was my fortress, and they took it away from me."

Also on the demolition list are the buildings on either side. One was hit by at least one airstrike on March 11; the walls of another are in ruins.

Russia is now moving into the historic city center. Russian authorities in October dismantled Mariupol's memorial to victims of the Holodomor, the Soviet-engineered famine in the 1930s that killed millions of Ukrainians, according to video posted on Russian television. They also painted over two murals commemorating victims of Russia's 2014 attack on Ukraine, images obtained by the AP show.

"They spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on things like erasing demonstrations of Ukrainian identity and very little time tending to the needs of the Mariupol people," said Michael Carpenter, U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which for years monitored eastern Ukraine. "It's really a very brutal inhuman colonial experiment unfolding before our eyes."

BUILDING A RUSSIAN CITY

As it tries to raze the remains of Ukraine, Russia has laid out a plan for a new city with a new population. At its heart will lie the historic Mariupol theater, according to the master plan first reported by the Russian site The Village in August and seen by The Associated Press.

The majestic Drama Theater became the city's main bomb shelter until twin Russian airstrikes hit on March 16. Hundreds died, an AP investigation found, and residents said the site reeked of bodies all summer. To mask the ruins, Russian authorities put up a screen so tall it can be seen from space, etching the theater's outline on the paneling in a ghostly reminder of its previous life.

On Thursday, the theater itself fell victim to the demolition campaign, according to video from the city seen by The Associated Press.

Also in the Russian documents are plans to restore the ruins of the obliterated Azovstal steel mill, the last Ukrainian holdout. The site is slated to be transformed into an industrial park by the end of next year, though there are no signs that any work has begun.

But a Russian military compound went up in record time, according to satellite imagery from Maxar Technologies that showed the vast U-shaped building with the Russian Army slogan emblazoned on the rooftop.

Russia already has constructed at least 14 new apartment buildings — a small fraction of the number coming down — and is repairing at least two of the hospitals it damaged by shelling. Video obtained by The Associated Press showed rows of pallets stacked with insulation from the Danish company Rockwool, which maintains its division in Russia despite criticism. Construction materials are not subject to sanctions.

In a statement, Rockwool's Vice President of Communications Michael Zarin said the insulation panels were distributed without the company's "knowledge or consent," and that he hopes its products help restore health care, warmth and shelter to Ukrainians.

Videos show no furniture visible in the windows of the new apartments and few people on the sidewalks outside. Only pensioners, the disabled and those affiliated with the occupation seem to be getting them, according to multiple people still in Mariupol.

One man applied to the list in September and found himself in 11,700th place. He has friends in the 2,000 range who are still waiting, like him. And an old man he knows, whose number was in the 9,000s has already moved into one of the new buildings.

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"I don't know how it happens. I won't speculate," he said.

However, the man said he has no issue with the demolition of buildings that aren't fit to live in. He is cautiously relaunching his own company in the new city.

But the plans for a Russian Mariupol depend on a population that simply no longer exists.

Thousands of Mariupol's former residents were sent to Russia with little or no choice, and thousands more fled into other areas of Ukraine. Of Mariupol's former population of around 425,000, just over a quarter stayed, according to estimates from Andryushchenko.

The Russian master plan for Mariupol calls for a population of 212,000 in 2022, and back to 425,000 by 2030. Right now, about 15,000 of the people in Mariupol are Russian troops, said Andryushchenko, who drew his estimate from information about the soldiers taking over homes and public buildings. He said Russian riot police have begun patrolling the city to head off protests over the lack of heat, electricity and water.

Videos seen by the AP showed military convoys, along with construction trucks, clogging the streets. The activist the AP spoke with also confirmed an increase in the number of soldiers since Russian forces retreated from the Kharkiv and Kherson regions.

Construction workers from Russia show no signs of leaving, and tents were visible outside the Port City mall until the winter. Doctors and city administrators also have come in from Russia, according to Russian government announcements and physicians who left the city after refusing to work for the occupation authorities.

"There is no more Russian city now than Mariupol," Dmitry Sablin, a Russian lawmaker born in Mariupol, said in an interview with Russian media in June after visiting the city.

The Kremlin is moving as swiftly as it can to ensure that those Ukrainians who stay see their future as Russians.

On Nov. 15, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Mariupol the title of "City of Military Glory" for the heroism of people he described as its defenders. On Dec. 7, Putin said his war against Ukraine had turned the Sea of Azov into "Russia's internal sea."

This suits many of those who remained behind just fine. Mariupol has always had some residents who considered themselves Russian.

"Whoever doesn't like it, doesn't come back," one woman said.

NO FUTURE IN SIGHT

Russia's occupation of Mariupol has divided families and friends into two categories: Those who stayed and those who fled. Both grapple with what Mariupol once was and will be.

When Ivan Kalinin escaped, he left behind the body of his wife Iryna and their unborn first child, both killed in the March 9 Russian airstrike on the maternity hospital. His parents and hers stayed in Mariupol.

He last saw his wife that morning when her labor began, and she sent him to fetch clothes and diapers. He learned about the airstrike at a military blockade on the way to the hospital. He and his father found her body the next day at another hospital.

"I do not even know how I survived it," he said quietly. "I was drinking every day to fall asleep."

Kalinin, who now lives in Wales, cannot imagine going home. Nor can he imagine life anywhere else.

"It is too painful for me to be there. I might return at some point — it is my hometown, after all," he said. "I fall asleep every day hoping this is a dream. And I wake up with understanding that it is a reality."

Mariupol is now torn between Russia and Ukraine. Some people who stayed are waiting for Russian citizenship just to get on with their lives. Yet the Ukrainian letter *ï*, which is not found in Russian, is appearing as graffiti around the city — a small act of defiance in a place many described as full of fear.

Nepomnyshaya, whose apartment was struck by a Russian shell, dreamed recently that she'd returned home and smelled bread. But she is not sure if she ever can or will go back.

"I believe that Mariupol will be rebuilt, that it will be Ukraine after all," she said. "But I know that this smell is just a memory."

Jurors deciding whether Tory Lanez shot Megan Thee Stallion

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Jurors began deliberations Thursday at the trial of rapper Tory Lanez, who is charged with shooting and wounding hip-hop star Megan Thee Stallion in the feet.

The jury of seven women and five men deliberated for just over three hours after hearing the last part of the defense's closing argument that began a day earlier and a brief rebuttal from Los Angeles County prosecutors.

They did not reach a verdict and will return Friday to resume talks on the three felony counts brought against the 30-year-old Canadian rapper: discharging a firearm with gross negligence, assault with a semiautomatic firearm and carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm in a vehicle. The counts could lead to up to 22 years in prison and deportation for Lanez, who has pleaded not guilty.

Megan Thee Stallion, 27, whose legal name is Megan Pete, testified that Lanez fired a handgun at the back of her feet and shouted for her to dance as she walked away from an SUV in which they had been riding in the Hollywood Hills in the summer of 2020. She needed surgery to remove bullet fragments from her feet.

In closing arguments, prosecutors emphasized the courage it took for her to come forward and the vitriol she has faced for it. They said she had no incentive to tell anything but the truth.

Lanez's lawyer alleged in his closing that the shots were actually fired by Megan's then-best-friend Kelsey Harris in a jealous fight over Lanez, who tried to stop the shooting. The attorney, George Mgderyan, alleges Megan created a more sympathetic narrative by pinning the shooting on Lanez.

Harris denied being the shooter and previously identified Lanez as the one holding the gun. Her attorney, in an email, declined to comment on her involvement.

The jury on Thursday asked for a read-back of the testimony of the only eyewitness to the shooting who was not directly involved, a man on a nearby balcony who was with his children at the time and said his concerns for their safety kept him from watching closely.

Sean Kelly was called by the defense, but both sides argued his account favored them. He said he saw muzzle flashes that appeared to come from a woman, but also said he saw a small man "firing everywhere."

Lanez — whose legal name is Daystar Peterson — began releasing mixtapes in 2009 and saw a steady rise in popularity, moving on to major-label albums. His last two reached the top 10 on Billboard's charts.

Megan Thee Stallion was already a major rising star at the time of the shooting, and her prominence has surged since. She won a Grammy for best new artist in 2021, and had No. 1 singles on the Billboard Hot 100 with her own song "Savage," featuring Beyoncé, and as a guest on Cardi B's "WAP."

Holiday travel upended as forecasters warn of 'bomb cyclone'

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and JILL BLEED Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Thousands of flights were canceled and homeless shelters were overflowing Thursday amid one of the most treacherous holiday travel seasons the U.S. has seen in decades, with temperatures plummeting 50 degrees Fahrenheit in some areas and forecasters warning of an impending "bomb cyclone" that could make conditions even worse before Christmas.

The frigid air was moving through the central United States to the east, with windchill advisories affecting about 135 million people over the coming days, weather service meteorologist Ashton Robinson Cook said Thursday. Places like Des Moines, Iowa, will feel like minus 37 degrees, making it possible to suffer frostbite in less than five minutes.

"This is not like a snow day when you were a kid," President Joe Biden warned Thursday in the Oval Office after a briefing from federal officials. "This is serious stuff."

Forecasters are expecting a bomb cyclone — when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm — to develop late Thursday and into Friday near the Great Lakes. That will stir up blizzard conditions, including heavy winds and snow, Cook said.

In South Dakota, Rosebud Sioux Tribe emergency manager Robert Oliver said tribal authorities have

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been working to clear roads to deliver propane and fire wood to homes, but face a relentless wind that has created drifts over 10 feet in some places.

"This weather and the amount of equipment we have -- we don't have enough," Oliver said, noting that rescues of people stranded in their homes had to be halted early Thursday when the hydraulic fluid in heavy equipment froze amid a 41 below zero windchill.

He said five have died in recent storms, including a blizzard from last week.

In Texas, temperatures were expected to quickly plummet Thursday, but state leaders promised there wouldn't be a repeat of the February 2021 storm that overwhelmed the state's power grid and was blamed for hundreds of deaths.

The cold weather extended to El Paso and across the border into Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where migrants have been camping outside or filling shelters as they await a decision on whether the U.S. will lift restrictions that have prevented many from seeking asylum.

Elsewhere in the U.S., authorities worried about the potential for power failures and warned people to take precautions to protect older and homeless people and livestock — and, if possible, to postpone travel. Some utilities were urging customers to turn down their thermostats to conserve energy.

"This event could be life-threatening if you are stranded," according to an online post by the National Weather Service in Minnesota, where officials reported dozens of crashes.

In Kansas City, Missouri, one person died after a vehicle overturned into an icy creek, police said.

Michigan State Police prepared to deploy additional troopers to help motorists. And along a toll road on Interstate 90 in northern Indiana, crews were braced to clear as much as a foot of snow as meteorologists warned of blizzard conditions there starting Thursday evening.

"If you're looking to get to someone's house for the holidays and you haven't left by now it could get dicey soon," said Rick Fedder, the chief operating officer of ITR Concession Co., the toll road's private operator.

The School District of Philadelphia, the largest in Pennsylvania, announced that Friday's final classes of the calendar year would be held online rather than in-person as scheduled. In Allegheny County in the western part of the state, public works spokesman Brent Wasko said officials would deploy 33 salt trucks but that pretreating the roads wasn't an option because expected rainfall Thursday night and Friday morning would wash the salt away.

More than 2,156 flights within, into or out of the U.S. had been canceled as of Thursday afternoon, according to the tracking site FlightAware. Airlines have also canceled 1,576 Friday flights. Airports in Chicago and Denver were reporting the most cancellations.

Among those with canceled flights was Ashley Sherrod, who planned to fly from Nashville to Flint, Michigan, on Thursday afternoon. Sherrod is now debating whether to drive or risk booking a Saturday flight she worries will be canceled.

"My family is calling, they want me home for Christmas, but they want me to be safe too," said Sherrod, whose bag — including the Grinch pajamas she was planning to wear to a family party — is packed and ready by the door. "Christmas is starting to, for lack of a better word, suck."

Amtrak, meanwhile, canceled service on more than 20 routes, primarily in the Midwest.

Some shelters in the Detroit area already were at capacity but still making room.

"We are not sending anyone back into this cold," Aisha Morrell-Ferguson, a spokeswoman for COTS, a family-only shelter, told the Detroit News.

And in Portland, Oregon, officials opened four emergency shelters. In the city's downtown, Steven Venus tried to get on a light-rail train to get out of the cold after huddling on the sidewalk overnight in below-zero temperatures.

"My toes were freezing off," he said, a sleeping bag wrapped around his head, as he paused near a flimsy tent where another homeless person was taking shelter.

Courtney Dodds, a spokeswoman for the Union Gospel Mission, said teams from her organization had been going out to try to convince people to seek shelter.

"It can be really easy for people to doze off and fall asleep and wind up losing their lives because of

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the cold weather.”

In Montana, temperatures fell as low as 50 below zero (minus 46 Celsius) at Elk Park, a mountain pass on the Continental Divide. Schools and several ski areas closed, and several thousand people lost power.

Near Big Sandy, Montana, rancher Rich Roth said he wasn't too concerned about his 3,500 pregnant cows weathering the cold snap, saying “they're pretty dang resilient animals.”

In Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine warned of a “unique and dangerous” situation of flash freezing Thursday night statewide. He also urged people to check on their neighbors and loved ones.

In famously snowy Buffalo, New York, forecasters predicted a “once-in-a-generation storm” because of heavy lake-effect snow, wind gusts as high as 65 mph (105 kph), whiteouts and the potential for extensive power outages. Mayor Byron Brown urged people to stay home, and the NHL postponed the Buffalo Sabres' home game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Denver, also no stranger to winter storms, was the coldest it has been in 32 years on Thursday, when the temperature dropped to minus 24 (minus 31 Celsius) in the morning at the airport.

In Charleston, South Carolina, a coastal flood warning was in effect Thursday. The area, a popular tourist destination for its mild winters, braced for strong winds and freezing temperatures.

The wintry weather extended into Canada, causing delays and cancellations earlier in the week at Vancouver International Airport. A major winter storm was expected Friday into Saturday in Toronto, where wind gusts as high as 60 mph (100 kph) were predicted to cause blowing snow and limited visibility, Environment Canada said.

Jan. 6 witness recounts pressure campaign from Trump allies

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson described to the House Jan. 6 committee a wide-ranging pressure campaign from Donald Trump's allies aimed at influencing her cooperation with Congress and stifling potentially damaging testimony about him.

In extraordinary closed-door testimony made public Thursday, Hutchinson recounted how those in the former president's circle dangled job opportunities and financial assistance as she was cooperating with the committee investigating the Capitol riot and how her own lawyer — a former ethics counsel in the Trump White House — advised her against being fully forthcoming with lawmakers and told her “the less you remember, the better.”

The nine-member committee released two never-before-seen transcripts of Hutchinson's testimony as it tries to wrap up its investigation and make its work public. The committee, which will dissolve when Republicans take over the House on Jan. 3, was also expected to release its final report Thursday.

The transcripts provide previously unknown details about what Hutchinson called the “moral struggle” — torn between the desire to speak the truth and to remain loyal to Trump — that she says she endured on the way to becoming one of the most memorable witnesses of the committee's investigation.

In a televised hearing in June, Hutchinson went public about Trump's actions on Jan. 6, 2021. She described his directive that magnetometers be removed from a rally of his supporters that day and detailed his angry — and ultimately rebuffed — demands to be taken by the Secret Service to the Capitol to join the crowd trying to disrupt the congressional certification of Democrat Joe Biden's election as president.

“In my mind this whole time I felt this moral struggle,” she said, according to the transcripts. She described a first interview with the committee in which she concealed testimony about Trump that, months later, she would deliver to a rapt hearing room.

Looking back now, she added, “It feels ridiculous, because in my heart I knew where my loyalties lied, and my loyalties lied with the truth. And I never wanted to diverge from that. You know, I never wanted or thought that I would be the witness that I have become, because I thought that more people would be willing to speak out too.”

But to hear her tell it, that testimony was never a sure thing.

Like other aides whose proximity to Trump entangled them in investigations, Hutchinson scrambled to

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find a lawyer after receiving a subpoena from the committee last year. Former White House officials and Trump allies worked to line up a lawyer for her despite her own discomfort at being represented by someone in "Trump world" — an affiliation she feared would make her "indebted to these people."

She said she was contacted in February by Stefan Passantino, a former White House ethics counsel, who told her he would be her lawyer. He said she would not have to pay for his services but demurred when she asked from where the money was coming. She later learned that it was from Trump allies.

"If you want to know at the end, we'll let you know," she described him as saying, "but we're not telling people where funding is coming from right now. Don't worry, we're taking care of you. Like, you're never going to get a bill for this, so if that's what you're worried about."

As Hutchinson prepared for her first interview with the committee later that month, she said Passantino advised her to "keep your answers short, sweet, and simple, seven words or less. The less the committee thinks you know, the better, the quicker it's going to go."

She said that when she mentioned to him having heard about an angry outburst by Trump in which he lashed out inside the presidential vehicle at Secret Service agents over their refusal to take him to the Capitol, Passantino counseled her not to delve into that account with the committee.

"No, no, no, no, no. We don't want to go there. We don't want to talk about that," she described him as saying.

Passantino, in his own statement, said that he had "represented Ms. Hutchinson honorably, ethically, and fully consistent with her sole interests as she communicated them to me."

All the while, Hutchinson told the committee, other Trump advisers appeared to be taking a keen interest in her cooperation, as well as her financial situation and job status. She said two other lawyers allied with Trump offered in May to front her money as they tried to help her find a job and offered her a job on a campaign out West. Other Trump allies reached out with potential job opportunities.

She said Ben Williamson, a friend and an aide to former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, had spoken with her the night before the second interview with the committee and told her: "Well, Mark wants me to let you know that he knows you're loyal and he knows you'll do the right thing tomorrow and that you're going to protect him and the boss. You know, he knows that we're all on the same team and we're all a family."

Williamson declined to comment Thursday.

During her first interview, she said, the committee asked Hutchinson repeatedly whether she knew anything about a kerfuffle inside the presidential SUV known as the "Beast." She was nervous and froze and said she knew nothing about it.

But that wasn't true.

During a break in the interview, a distressed Hutchinson told Passantino that "I'm (expletive). I just lied." She said Passantino did not encourage her to correct the record, instead telling her, "They don't know what you know, Cassidy. They don't know that you can recall some of these things. So you saying 'I don't recall' is an entirely acceptable response to this."

In his statement, Passantino said he believed "Hutchinson was being truthful and cooperative with the Committee throughout the several interview sessions in which I represented her."

By April, though, Hutchinson said she had resolved to break from the constraints of "Trump world." She did internet research on the Watergate saga, finding resonance in the story of Alexander Butterfield, the young Richard Nixon loyalist who became a key witness against him.

She drove to the house of Alyssa Farah, a former White House official who had had her own public split from the Trump administration, and asked her to serve as a back channel to the committee because she still had more she wanted to say.

She testified publicly in June — this time accompanied by a new lawyer — and in one of the more dramatic moments of the committee's hearings. She said she had been told that Trump had actually tried to lunge at the agent driving the SUV that took him back to the White House on Jan. 6.

Last September, she returned to the committee and privately recounted the pressure campaign. The

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information has also been shared with the Justice Department, where Jack Smith, a special counsel named by Attorney General Merrick Garland, is now conducting an investigation.

"I'm not sitting here trying to make myself out to be some hero. I know I handled things wrong. At least, I think I handled some things wrong in the first interview," she said in the interview. "You know, I hate that I had this moral struggle, because it shouldn't have existed."

FTX founder Bankman-Fried allowed \$250M bond, house arrest

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Cryptocurrency entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried walked out of a Manhattan courthouse Thursday with his parents after they agreed to sign a \$250 million bond and keep him at their California home while he awaits trial on charges that he swindled investors and looted customer deposits on his FTX trading platform.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Nicolas Roos said in federal court that Bankman-Fried, 30, "perpetrated a fraud of epic proportions." Roos proposed strict bail terms including the \$250 million bond — which he said is believed to be the largest federal pretrial bond ever — and house arrest at his parents' home in Palo Alto.

An important reason for allowing bail was that Bankman-Fried, who had been jailed in the Bahamas, agreed to be extradited to the U.S., Roos said.

Reunited with his parents and lawyers inside the courthouse, an apparently silent Bankman-Fried shook the hands of a supporter before heading out the door, where photographers and video crews rushed him until he left in a car.

Magistrate Judge Gabriel W. Gorenstein agreed to the bond and house arrest, though he required that an electronic monitoring bracelet be affixed to Bankman-Fried before he left the courthouse. Roos had recommended it be attached Friday in California.

Bankman-Fried was shackled at the ankles when he entered the courtroom in a suit and tie to take a seat between his attorneys. He did not speak during the hearing except to answer the judge. Near its end, he was asked by Gorenstein whether he understood he would face arrest and owe \$250 million if he chose to flee.

"Yes, I do," Bankman-Fried answered.

Soon afterward, the hearing ended and Bankman-Fried, his hands in his front pants pockets, was led out by two U.S. marshals. His next court date was scheduled for Jan. 3, when he is to appear before the judge who will preside over the case.

His bail conditions also require that he not open any new lines of credit, start a business or enter financial transactions larger than \$1,000 without the approval of the government or the court.

The bond was to be secured by the equity in his parents' home and the signature of them and two other financially responsible people with considerable assets, Roos said. The bail was described as a "personal recognizance bond," meaning the collateral did not need to meet the bail amount.

Bankman-Fried, arrested in the Bahamas last week, was flown to New York late Wednesday after deciding not to challenge his extradition.

While he was in the air, the U.S. attorney in Manhattan announced that two of Bankman-Fried's closest business associates had also been charged and on Monday had secretly pleaded guilty.

Carolyn Ellison, 28, the former chief executive of Bankman-Fried's trading firm, Alameda Research, and Gary Wang, 29, who co-founded FTX, pleaded guilty to charges including wire fraud, securities fraud and commodities fraud.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said in a video statement that both were cooperating with investigators and had agreed to assist in any prosecution. He warned others who enabled the alleged fraud to come forward.

"If you participated in misconduct at FTX or Alameda, now is the time to get ahead of it," he said. "We are moving quickly, and our patience is not eternal."

Prosecutors and regulators contend that Bankman-Fried was at the center of several illegal schemes

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to use customer and investor money for personal gain. He faces the possibility of decades in prison if convicted on all counts.

In a series of interviews before his arrest, Bankman-Fried said he never intended to defraud anyone.

Bankman-Fried is charged with using money, illicitly taken from FTX customers, to enable trades at Alameda, spend lavishly on real estate and make millions of dollars in campaign contributions to U.S. politicians.

FTX, founded in 2019, rode the crypto investing phenomenon to great heights, quickly becoming one of the world's largest exchanges for digital currency. Seeking customers beyond the tech world, it hired the comic actor and writer Larry David to appear in a TV ad that ran during the Super Bowl, hyping crypto as the next big thing.

Bankman-Fried's crypto empire, however, abruptly collapsed in early November when customers pulled deposits en masse amid reports questioning some of its financial arrangements.

Senate passes \$1.7 trillion bill to fund gov't, aid Ukraine

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate passed a massive \$1.7 trillion spending bill Thursday that finances federal agencies through September and provides another significant round of military and economic aid to Ukraine one day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's dramatic address to a joint meeting of Congress.

The bill, which runs for 4,155 pages, includes about \$772.5 billion for domestic programs and \$858 billion for defense and would finance federal agencies through the fiscal year at the end of September.

The bill passed by a vote of 68-29 and now goes to the House for a final vote before it can be sent to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

"This is one of the most significant appropriations packages we have done in a very long time," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "The range of people it helps is large and deep."

Lawmakers were racing to get the bill approved before a partial government shutdown would occur at midnight Friday, and many were anxious to complete the task before a deep freeze and wintry conditions left them stranded in Washington for the holidays. Many also want to lock in government funding before a new GOP-controlled House next year could make it harder to find compromise on spending.

Senators heard from Zelenskyy about the importance of U.S. aid to his country for its war with Russia on Wednesday night. The measure provides about \$45 billion in military, economic and humanitarian assistance for the devastated nation and NATO allies, more than Biden even requested, raising total assistance so far to more than \$100 billion.

"Your money is not charity," Zelenskyy told lawmakers and Americans watching from home. "It's an investment in the global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way."

Lawmakers were in disagreement over which amendments were to be voted upon to lock in a final vote on an expedited basis. The impasses had the potential to prevent passage of the bill before the midnight Friday deadline. But negotiations overnight led to a breakthrough and senators gathered early Thursday morning to work through more than a dozen amendments before getting to a final vote.

The House won't be able to take up the bill until Friday morning, and while it is expected to pass, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said the chamber will also approve a stopgap spending resolution to ensure government services continue without interruption before the bill is signed into law.

The spending bill was supported by Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, though for different reasons.

McConnell cited the bill's nearly 10% boost in defense spending, which he says will give America's Armed Forces the funding and certainty needed to ensure the country's security.

"The world's greatest military will get the funding increase that it needs, outpacing inflation," McConnell said. "Meanwhile, non-defense, non-veterans spending will come in below the rate of inflation, for a real-dollar cut."

McConnell faced pushback from many Republicans who don't support the spending bill and resent be-

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ing forced to vote on such a massive package with so little time before a potential shutdown and the Christmas holiday.

"There has not been enough time for a single person to have read this entire bill. The bill and process ignores soaring inflation, rising interest rates and our ballooning debt of \$31 trillion," said Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky. "Enough is enough."

Eighteen Republican senators joined with Democrats in voting for the bill.

For two senators, the bill puts the finishing touches on their work in Washington. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., is retiring after serving some 48 years in the Senate and as the current chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He negotiated the bill for months with Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama, the committee's ranking Republican, who was elected to the Senate in 1986 and is also retiring.

"What a capstone to a brilliant career," Schumer said.

The bill also contains roughly \$40 billion in emergency spending in the U.S., mostly to assist communities across the country recovering from drought, hurricanes and other natural disasters.

And, of course, it includes scores of policy changes unrelated to spending that lawmakers sought to include in what is going to be the last major bill of the Congress, else they start from scratch next year in a divided Congress where Republicans will be returning to the majority in the House.

One of the most notable examples was a historic revision to federal election law that aims to prevent any future presidents or presidential candidates from trying to overturn an election. The bipartisan overhaul of the Electoral Count Act is in direct response to former President Donald Trump's efforts to convince Republican lawmakers and then-Vice President Mike Pence to object to the certification of Biden's victory on Jan. 6, 2021.

The bill also allowed Congress to follow through on some of the most consequential bills it had passed over the past two years, such as a measure aiming to boost computer chip production in the U.S. and another to expand health care services to veterans exposed to toxic burn pits. Some \$5 billion was provided help the VA implement some of the changes called for in the PACT Act, and the amount of money provided specifically for VA health care soared 22% to nearly \$119 billion.

"These benefits are deserved," Leahy said. "They were earned, and they are owed."

Adnan Syed hired by Georgetown's prison reform initiative

By BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Adnan Syed, who was released from a Maryland prison this year after his case was the focus of the true-crime podcast "Serial," has been hired by Georgetown University as a program associate for the university's Prisons and Justice Initiative, the university said.

Syed started working this month for the initiative, which advocates for others in the criminal legal system, the university tweeted Wednesday.

In his new role, Syed will support Georgetown's "Making an Exoneree" class, in which students reinvestigate decades-old wrongful convictions, create short documentaries about the cases and work to help bring innocent people home from prison, the university wrote in an online announcement.

"PJI's team and programming has so much to gain from Adnan's experience, insight, and commitment to serving incarcerated people and returning citizens," the organization tweeted.

Syed had been one of 25 incarcerated students at Georgetown's inaugural Bachelor of Liberal Arts program at the Patuxent Institute in Jessup, Maryland, during the year leading up to his release, the university said.

"To go from prison to being a Georgetown student and then to actually be on campus on a pathway to work for Georgetown at the Prisons and Justice Initiative, it's a full circle moment," Syed said in the university's announcement. "PJI changed my life. It changed my family's life. Hopefully I can have the same kind of impact on others."

Syed, 41, hopes to continue his Georgetown education and eventually go to law school.

After spending 23 years in prison, he walked out of a Baltimore courthouse in September after a judge overturned his conviction for the 1999 murder of high school student Hae Min Lee, Syed's ex-girlfriend.

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Baltimore Circuit Court Judge Melissa Phinn ordered his release at the behest of prosecutors who said they had recently uncovered new evidence.

Prosecutors said a reinvestigation of the case revealed evidence regarding the possible involvement of two alternate suspects. The two suspects may have been involved individually or together, the state's attorney's office said.

The suspects were known persons at the time of the original investigation and were not properly ruled out nor disclosed to the defense, prosecutors said.

Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby's office also cited new results from DNA testing that was conducted using a more modern technique than when evidence in the case was first tested. The recent testing excluded Syed as a suspect, prosecutors said.

Syed always maintained his innocence. His case captured the attention of millions in 2014 when the debut season of "Serial" focused on Lee's killing and raised doubts about some of the evidence prosecutors had used. The program shattered podcast-streaming and downloading records.

EXPLAINER: What's the debate over releasing Trump's taxes?

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Democratic-controlled House Ways and Means Committee on Tuesday voted to release former President Donald Trump's tax returns, raising the potential of additional revelations in the coming days related to the finances of the longtime businessman who broke political norms by refusing to voluntarily make public his returns as he sought the presidency.

Reports released by the committee, as well as Congress' nonpartisan Joint Committee on Taxation, give a glimpse into Trump's financial position before and during his presidency. Access to the tax records culminates of a yearslong legal fight that has played out everywhere from the campaign trail to the halls of Congress and the Supreme Court.

A look at the issues that have arisen from the controversy surrounding Trump's taxes:

WHY ARE THESE ISSUES COMING UP?

Since Richard Nixon — following media reports suggesting the then-president had taken questionable, large deductions on his individual tax returns — U.S. presidents and all major party nominees have voluntarily made at least summaries of their tax information available to the public.

Trump bucked that trend as a candidate, and then as president, repeatedly asserting that his taxes were "under audit" and therefore could not be released.

According to the reports released this week, an audit of Trump's 2016 taxes was not begun until April 3, 2019, more than two years into Trump's presidency. That date coincides with when Democratic Rep. Richard Neal of Massachusetts, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, asked the IRS for information related to Trump's tax returns.

The New York Times found that before Trump entered the White House, he was facing an IRS audit potentially tied to a \$72.9 million tax refund arising from \$700 million in losses he claimed in 2009. Documents released Tuesday indicate that Trump continued to collect tax benefits from those losses through 2018.

DON'T PRESIDENTS REGULARLY GET AUDITED ANYWAY?

They are supposed to. The IRS has an internal policy that mandates audits of presidents and vice presidents. Representatives for President Joe Biden and former President Barack Obama confirmed that each was audited for every year in office.

But in their report, committee Democrats said the audit process, which dates to 1977, was "dormant, at best" during the early years of the Trump administration.

Shortly after the committee voted to issue its report and make the materials public, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said that Democrats would immediately introduce legislation to codify the IRS presidential audit policy into law. On Thursday, the House passed that measure, though it has little chance of becoming law in the final days of this Congress. Still, it is seen as a starting point for future efforts to bolster oversight of the presidency.

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Some Republicans opposed to making Trump's tax information publicly available argued that doing so would set a dangerous precedent and could open up anyone's records if someone drew the ire of politicians in power. The GOP is poised to take over control of the House and its committees next month.

WHY ARE TRUMP'S TAXES DIFFERENT?

Trump is the first president in recent history to refuse to share tax information with the public. His finances are more complex than those of other presidents. Trump's network has included hundreds of businesses, pass-through entities — the income of which is reported on individual, not corporate, returns — foreign and domestic properties, contracts and complex business interests.

According to information released this week, the IRS initially assigned just one staff member to Trump's audit, which also highlights the immense funding challenges that the agency faces.

The House committee examined six years of Trump's personal returns, as well as those of eight of his businesses. The committee raised red flags about Trump's carryover losses — which could be used to avoid paying taxes — deductions tied to conservation and charitable donations, and loans to his children that could be taxable gifts.

The committee also found repeated faults with the approach by the IRS toward auditing Trump and his companies.

IRS agents in charge of the audits repeatedly failed to bring in specialists with expertise assessing the complicated structure of Trump's holdings. They frequently determined that a limited examination was warranted because Trump hired a professional accounting firm that they assumed would make sure Trump "properly reports all income and deduction items correctly."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Committee members and staff have said that it would take at least several days to make necessary redactions of sensitive information, such as Social Security numbers and contact information, before the returns are released to the public. Before Tuesday's hearing, staff members wheeled several boxes of documents into the hearing room on trolleys, indicating the volume of materials under review.

On the legislative side, there is the House-approved measure that would codify the mandatory presidential audit policy into law with more stringent requirements, including "disclosure of certain audit information and related returns in a timely manner."

The chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he will work to pass the bill.

Glass act: Scientists reveal secrets of frog transparency

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Now you see them, now you don't.

Some frogs found in South and Central America have the rare ability to turn on and off their nearly transparent appearance, researchers report Thursday in the journal *Science*.

During the day, these nocturnal frogs sleep by hanging underneath tree leaves. Their delicate, greenish transparent forms don't cast shadows, rendering them almost invisible to birds and other predators passing overhead or underneath.

But when northern glass frogs wake up and hop around in search of insects and mates, they take on an opaque reddish-brown color.

"When they're transparent, it's for their safety," said Junjie Yao, a Duke University biomedical engineer and study co-author. When they're awake, they can actively evade predators, but when they're sleeping and most vulnerable, "they have adapted to remain hidden."

Using light and ultrasound imaging technology, the researchers discovered the secret: While asleep, the frogs concentrate, or "hide," nearly 90% of their red blood cells in their liver.

Because they have transparent skin and other tissues, it's the blood circulating through their bodies that would otherwise give them away. The frogs also shrink and pack together most of their internal organs,

Yao said.

The research “beautifully explains” how “glass frogs conceal blood in the liver to maintain transparency,” said Juan Manuel Guayasamin, a frog biologist at University San Francisco of Quito, Ecuador, who was not involved in the study.

Exactly how they do this, and why it doesn’t kill them, remains a mystery. For most animals, having very little blood circulating oxygen for several hours would be deadly. And concentrating blood so tightly would result in fatal clotting. But somehow, the frogs survive.

Further research on the species could provide useful clues for the development of anti-blood clotting medications, said Carlos Taboada, a Duke University biologist and study co-author.

Only a few animals, mostly ocean dwellers, are naturally transparent, said Oxford University biologist Richard White, who was not involved in the study. “Transparency is super rare in nature, and in land animals, it’s essentially unheard of outside of the glass frog,” White said.

Those that are transparent include some fish, shrimp, jellyfish, worms and insects — none of which move large quantities of red blood through their bodies. The trick of hiding blood while sleeping appears to be unique to the frogs.

“It’s just this really amazing, dynamic form of camouflage,” said White.

Taliban minister defends ban on women’s university studies

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The minister of higher education in the Taliban government on Thursday defended his decision to ban women from universities — a decree that had triggered a global backlash.

Discussing the matter for the first time in public, Nida Mohammad Nadim said the ban issued earlier this week was necessary to prevent the mixing of genders in universities and because he believes some subjects being taught violated the principles of Islam. He said the ban was in place until further notice.

In an interview with Afghan television, Nadim pushed back against the widespread international condemnation, including from Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Nadim said that foreigners should stop interfering in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.

Earlier on Thursday, the foreign ministers of the G-7 group of states urged the Taliban to rescind the ban, warning that “gender persecution may amount to a crime against humanity.” The ministers warned after a virtual meeting that “Taliban policies designed to erase women from public life will have consequences for how our countries engage with the Taliban.” The G-7 group includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union.

A former provincial governor, police chief and military commander, Nadim was appointed minister in October by the supreme Taliban leader and previously pledged to stamp out secular schooling. Nadim opposes female education, saying it is against Islamic and Afghan values.

Other reasons he gave for the university ban were women’s failure to observe a dress code and the study of certain subjects and courses.

“We told girls to have proper hijab but they didn’t and they wore dresses like they are going to a wedding ceremony,” he said. “Girls were studying agriculture and engineering, but this didn’t match Afghan culture. Girls should learn, but not in areas that go against Islam and Afghan honor.”

He added that work was underway to fix these issues and universities would reopen for women once they were resolved. The Taliban made similar promises about high school access for girls, saying classes would resume for them once “technical issues” around uniforms and transport were sorted out, but girls remain shut out of classrooms.

The Taliban tried to fix what he claimed were problems they inherited from the previous administration since their takeover last year. He alleged that people were not following rules and that this justified the university ban.

In Afghanistan, there has been some domestic opposition to the university ban, including from several cricket players. Cricket is a hugely popular sport in the country, and players have hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.

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Another show of support for female university students came at Nangarhar Medical University. Local media reported that male students walked out in solidarity and refused to sit for exams until women's university access was reinstated.

Despite initially promising a more moderate rule respecting rights for women and minorities, the Taliban have widely implemented their interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia, since they seized power in August 2021.

They have banned girls from middle school and high school, barred women from most fields of employment and ordered them to wear head-to-toe clothing in public. Women are also banned from parks and gyms. At the same time Afghan society, while largely traditional, has increasingly embraced the education of girls and women over the past two decades.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking to reporters in Washington on Thursday, echoed international opposition to the Taliban decision to ban women from university studies. He said the Taliban will not obtain much-needed improved relations with the world if they "continue on this course."

"What they've done is to try to sentence Afghan women and girls to a dark future without opportunity," he said. "And the bottom line is that no country is going to be able to succeed, much less thrive, if it denies half its population the opportunity to contribute. And to be clear, and we're engaged with other countries on this right now. There is going to be a cost."

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Thursday that the ban was "neither Islamic nor humane." Speaking at a joint news conference with his Yemeni counterpart, he called on the Taliban to reverse their decision.

"What harm is there in women's education? What harm does it do to Afghanistan?" Cavusoglu said. "Is there an Islamic explanation? On the contrary, our religion, Islam, is not against education, on the contrary, it encourages education and science."

Saudi Arabia, which until 2019 enforced sweeping restrictions on women's travel, employment and other crucial aspects of their daily lives, including driving, also urged the Taliban to change course.

The Saudi foreign ministry expressed "astonishment and regret" at Afghan women being denied a university education. In a statement late Wednesday, the ministry said the decision was "astonishing in all Islamic countries."

Previously, Qatar, which has engaged with the Taliban authorities, also condemned the decision.

In the capital of Kabul, about two dozen women marched in the streets Thursday, chanting in Dari for freedom and equality. "All or none. Don't be afraid. We are together," they chanted.

In video obtained by The Associated Press, one woman said Taliban security forces used violence to disperse the group.

"The girls were beaten and whipped," she said. "They also brought military women with them, whipping the girls. We ran away, some girls were arrested. I don't know what will happen."

Girls have been banned from school beyond the sixth grade since the Taliban's return.

In northeastern Takhar province, teenage girls said the Taliban on Thursday forced them out of a private education training center and told them they no longer had the right to study. One student, 15-year-old Zuhail, said the girls were beaten.

Another, 19-year-old Maryam, said while crying: "This training center was our hope. What can these girls do? They were full of hope and coming here to learn. It is really a pity. (The Taliban) have taken all our hopes. They closed schools, universities, and the training center, which was very small."

NFL 'Sunday Ticket' headed to YouTube beginning next season

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Fans will have to Google it beginning next season if they want to access the NFL's "Sunday Ticket" package.

The NFL announced an agreement on Thursday for Google to distribute the package of out-of-market Sunday afternoon games on YouTube TV and YouTube Primetime Channels.

The seven-year deal is worth a little more than \$2 billion per season. The package has been on DirecTV

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since 1994. The satellite provider has paid \$1.5 billion per year on an eight-year contract that expires at the end of this season.

The NFL had been seeking \$2.5 billion per season for the package. It could still reach that total since the league retains commercial rights to bars and restaurants and is in the midst of selling those rights.

Commissioner Roger Goodell said during an interview with CNBC over the summer that the next move for "Sunday Ticket" would be to a streaming service because that would be the best option for fans.

Goodell reiterated that with Thursday's announcement.

"For a number of years we have been focused on increased digital distribution of our games and this partnership is yet another example of us looking towards the future and building the next generation of NFL fans," he said in a statement.

It is the second time in less than two years that the NFL has partnered with a streaming service to air games. The league's 11-year contract with Amazon Prime Video for Thursday night games started this season.

Besides Amazon, Apple and ESPN also expressed interest in "NFL Sunday Ticket."

"As the ways fans enjoy NFL football evolve in a changing media landscape, partnerships with innovators like YouTube will ensure that more games are available to more fans," said New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, who is also chairman of the NFL's media committee. "This partnership will grow our game for future generations and allow them to follow their favorite sport."

The NFL has had a presence on YouTube since 2015, when it launched its official NFL channel. That has increased to include channels for all 32 teams and 10 official league channels, including NFL Films, NFL Network and Mundo NFL.

NFL Network and NFL RedZone have been available to subscribers of YouTube TV since 2020.

"Through this expanded partnership with the NFL, viewers will now also be able to experience the game they love in compelling and innovative ways through YouTube TV or YouTube Primetime Channels," YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki said in a statement. "We're excited to continue our work with the NFL to make YouTube a great place for sports lovers everywhere."

Starting next season, "NFL Sunday Ticket" will be available as an add-on package on YouTube TV and standalone a la carte on YouTube Primetime Channels.

Google said in June that YouTube TV, which was launched in 2017, had surpassed 5 million accounts and was the biggest internet-based pay TV service in the U.S. That number includes users on free promotional trials.

YouTube Primetime Channels, which launched in November, is a service that allows users to subscribe and watch content from streaming services on the YouTube app.

Even with "Sunday Ticket" moving to YouTube, the price is not expected to substantially decrease due to contracts with CBS and Fox, which carry the Sunday afternoon games.

Viewers pay around \$300-\$400 a season for the package, which averages 2 million subscribers.

Jessica Henwick talks making it, diversity and Nicolas Cage

By KRYSTA FAURIA Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Just before Jessica Henwick was cast in "Game of Thrones" and "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," the then-aspiring actor had already left Los Angeles for her hometown in England.

"I ran out of money, so I went back and moved back in with my parents," she recalled.

Although she hadn't quite given up on acting, Henwick was struggling to find jobs in front of the camera. Before leaving LA, she did work as a crew member on sets — an experience she drew from for her role in Rian Johnson's "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," which debuts Friday on Netflix.

In the whodunit film boasting a star-studded ensemble cast, Henwick plays Peg, the assistant and handler to model and sweatpants line founder Birdie (Kate Hudson). But her experience as a crew member was more than just a source of inspiration for her character — it was "hugely educational" for her as an actor, Henwick said.

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"To be on a set and listen to how the director communicated with the cast and with the crew and how it worked, it was hugely insightful," she said.

Although her performance as Bugs in "The Matrix Resurrections" garnered critical praise, she still considers herself a "jobbing actor."

"I'm not just getting things handed to me," she said, though she admits working with Keanu Reeves felt like a turning point in her career as well as a personal triumph.

"I mean, what an icon. They just don't make 'em like that anymore. It's kind of sad," she said.

Reflecting on her experience with Reeves, Henwick lamented the ways in which the Hollywood landscape has shifted.

"He's from an era where it meant something to be a star or an A-lister," she said. "There are so many actors nowadays. I don't know if it's just diluted or maybe we're overexposed with social media."

Henwick had always known the chances of her making it in Hollywood were slim, which she says informed her decision to drop out of acting school after being cast as the lead in the BBC series "Spirit Warriors" in 2009.

"Maybe I got too big for my boots. I don't know. I just think that I realized you don't have to do that," she said when asked why she quit. "If I had continued going to that school, I would have been in debt."

She said she struggles with the issue of equity in acting given the high cost of training in England.

"It's definitely predisposed towards people of privilege," she said. "I know that we have some of the best teachers in the world, so I fully support how much schools charge, but it does mean that people from lower income families can't afford to go."

Henwick, whose mother is Singaporean Chinese, was also mindful of the limited opportunities for people of color in England, which she said was one of the factors that prompted her initial move to Los Angeles.

"England's main export, in terms of entertainment, is period dramas. We do it better than anyone else in the world. Shakespeare, Austen. Even at the time, the biggest show was 'Downton Abbey,'" she recalled. "I used to want to be in one of those so bad. The costumes, the language. It's poetry."

When asked how to address that lack of representation, Henwick praised "Bridgerton" executive producer Shonda Rhimes for her ability to bring diversity to the genre.

Henwick is looking forward to a more rooted and restful 2023 after years of traveling and big projects. But she said, if she has her pick in the future, she hopes to work with Nicolas Cage one day.

"I just want to see the method behind the madness," she laughed. "I also feel like I'm working my way through '90s action heroes. I've worked with Keanu. I've work with Edward (Norton). Nicolas Cage, you're next."

IRS mandatory presidential audit policy goes under spotlight

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An IRS policy governing the audits of tax returns filed by U.S. presidents is under new scrutiny after a report published by a congressional panel found the agency failed to perform the mandatory inspection of Donald Trump's returns until Congress pressed for information about the process.

The three-point policy states that individual returns for the president and the vice president are subject to mandatory review, "should always be kept in an orange folder," should be kept from the eyes of IRS employees and "should be locked in a secure drawer or cabinet when the examiner or reviewer is away from the work area."

The report released Tuesday by the Democratic majority on the House Ways and Means Committee said the process, which dates to 1977, was "dormant, at best" during the early years of the Trump administration.

By comparison, there were audits of President Joe Biden for the 2020 and 2021 tax years, said Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman. The first determined the Bidens were due an additional federal income tax refund, Bates said by emails. The second, for 2021, "found that they owed an additional \$13, which could have been waived under IRS policy but they chose to pay."

A spokesperson for former President Barack Obama said Obama was audited in each of his eight years

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in office.

Democrats in Congress are responding by introducing legislation that would codify the IRS policy into law with more stringent requirements.

Tax experts say the failure to launch the audit earlier is emblematic of a larger problem regarding the IRS' capacity to examine high-income taxpayers' returns — and a reminder of Trump as a norm-defying president.

John Koskinen, who served as IRS commissioner during both the Obama and Trump administrations, said the policy has been out of the public eye because presidents have traditionally released their tax-return summaries to the public.

"It only became an issue with a president who refused to release his tax returns," Koskinen said. "If Trump had been releasing his returns, nobody would have raised this issue."

Trump's tax returns being handed over to Congress recently is the culmination of a yearslong legal fight between Trump and Democratic lawmakers.

Steve Rosenthal, senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, said the IRS' failure to audit Trump shows that "the mandatory auditing program is broken, we cannot rely on the current system to fairly audit the president, and there's a general problem of the IRS auditing sophisticated taxpayers."

Rosenthal added: "This is a much larger problem than Donald Trump — yes, he makes bad things worse, but the situation was bad to begin with."

A new \$80 billion infusion of funds through the so-called Inflation Reduction Act is supposed to remedy the beleaguered agency's low staffing levels, outdated technology and host of other issues. Republicans who are poised to take control of the House in less than two weeks, however, have said they want to cut that funding.

Tuesday's committee report revealed that the IRS only began to audit Trump's 2016 tax filings on April 3, 2019, more than two years into Trump's presidency and just months after Democrats took control of the House. That date coincides with Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., the panel chairman, asking the IRS for information related to Trump's tax returns.

The report's findings prompted lawmakers to recommend a statutory requirement for the mandatory examination of the president's taxes, with "disclosure of certain audit information and related returns in a timely manner."

Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he will work to pass the bill through the Senate. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the chamber would "move swiftly" to advance the legislation.

The issue highlights frustration with the so-called tax gap, which is the difference between how much money is owed to the federal government and how much is paid. IRS data released in October projects that for 2017 to 2019, the estimated average gross tax gap will be \$540 billion per year.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in August, and has repeated at various speaking engagements, that the new funds allocated by Congress would be used to increase audits on high-wealth individuals, firms and complex pass-throughs.

"This is challenging work that requires a team of sophisticated revenue agents in place to spend thousands of hours poring over complicated returns, and it is also work that has huge revenue potential," she told former IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig in August.

In an application of the IRS policy on mandatory presidential audits, well-trained agents, forensic experts, tax attorneys and others would be required to oversee a presidential audit as complicated as Trump's, which included hundreds of businesses, properties and complex business interests.

The congressional report highlighted the lack of staffing and availability of experts to examine Trump's taxes. The report states that the IRS believed that accuracy of his filings was ensured because he had legal counsel and an accounting firm representing him.

The question of whether presidential tax documents should be disclosed is another matter of debate among tax experts and advocates.

Rep. Kevin Brady of Texas, the top Republican on the Ways and Means Committee, said Congress would be setting a "dangerous new precedent" by releasing the presidential records. Koskinen said that "it's a

significant serious precedent for a committee to seek returns and then release them.”

“I see two big issues here — what is the IRS going to do to ensure presidents are audited regularly, and what’s the rationale for releasing these returns,” Koskinen said.

Rosenthal said he thinks presidential returns should be publicly disclosed to ensure proper oversight.

“When this information is made public, the president is going to be more wary about cheating on their taxes and making them public — the results would put both the IRS and president on their best behavior,” he said.

Migrants flee more countries, regardless of US policies

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

TIJUANA, Mexico (AP) — In 2014, groups of unaccompanied children escaping violence in Central America overwhelmed U.S. border authorities in South Texas. In 2016, thousands of Haitians fled a devastating earthquake and stopped in Tijuana, Mexico, after walking and taking buses through up to 11 countries to the U.S. border.

In 2018, about 6,000 mostly Guatemalan and Honduran migrants fleeing violence and poverty descended on Tijuana, many of them families with young children sleeping in frigid, rain-soaked parks and streets.

A Trump-era ban on asylum, granted a brief extension by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts on Wednesday, was one of the U.S. policies affecting migrants’ decisions to leave their homes. The last eight years show how an extraordinary convergence of inequality, civil strife and natural disasters also have been prompting millions to leave Latin America, Europe and Africa. Since 2017, the United States has been the world’s top destination for asylum-seekers, according to the United Nations.

This is part of an occasional series on how the United States became the world’s top destination for asylum-seekers.

Migrants have been denied the right to seek asylum under U.S. and international law 2.5 million times since March 2020 on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19, an authority known as Title 42. It applies to all nationalities but has fallen disproportionately on people from countries that Mexico takes back, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and, more recently Venezuela, as well as Mexico. Pent-up demand is expected to drive crossings higher when asylum restrictions end.

When the pandemic hit, nationalities rarely seen at the border grew month after month, from Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia. High costs, strained diplomatic relations and other considerations complicated U.S. efforts to expel people from countries that Mexico wouldn’t take.

Cubans are fleeing their homes in the largest numbers in six decades to escape economic and political turmoil. Most fly to Nicaragua as tourists and slowly make their way to the U.S. They were the second-largest nationality at the border after Mexicans in October.

Grissell Matos Prieguez and her husband surrendered to border agents near Eagle, Pass, Texas, Oct. 30, after a 16-day journey through six countries that included buses, motorcycles and taxis and exhausting night walks through bushes and foul-smelling rivers.

“Throughout all the journey you feel like you are going to die, you don’t trust anybody, nothing,” said Matos, a 34-year-old engineer. “You live in a constant fear, or to be detained and that anything would happen.”

To pay for the trip from Santiago de Cuba, they sold everything, down to computers and bicycles, and borrowed from relatives in Florida. Their parents and grandparents stayed behind.

A recent surge that has made El Paso, Texas, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings is made up largely of Nicaraguans, whose government has quashed dissent.

Haitians who stop in South America, sometimes for years, have been a major presence, most notably when nearly 16,000 camped in the small town of Del Rio, Texas, in September 2021. The Biden administration flew many home but slowed returns amid increasingly brazen attacks by gangs that have grown

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more powerful since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse last year.

Migration is often driven by "pull factors" that draw people to a country, such as a relatively strong U.S. economy and an asylum system that takes years to decide a case, encouraging some to come even if they feel unlikely to win. But conditions at home, known as "push factors," may be as responsible for unprecedented numbers over the last year.

Looking back, Tijuana attorney and migrant advocate Soraya Vazquez says the Haitian diaspora of 2016 was a turning point.

"We began to realize that there were massive movements all over, in some places from war, in others from political situations, violence, climate change," said Vazquez, a San Diego native and former legislative aide in Mexico City. "Many things happened at once but, in the end, men and our governments are responsible."

After hosting legal workshops for Haitians in Tijuana, Vazquez helped bring chef Jose Andres' World Central Kitchen to the city's migrant shelters for four years. Seeking financial stability, she became Tijuana director of Al Otro Lado, a nonprofit group that reported \$4.1 million in revenue in 2020 and was recently named a beneficiary of MacKenzie Scott's philanthropy.

"What provoked all of this? Inequality," Vazquez said over tea in Tijuana's trendy Cacho neighborhood.

For decades, Mexicans, largely adult men, went to the U.S. to fill jobs and send money home. But in 2015, the Pew Research Center found more Mexicans returned to Mexico from the U.S. than came since the Great Recession ended.

Mexicans still made up one of three encounters with U.S. border agents during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, higher than three years ago but well below the 85% reported in 2011 and the 95% at the turn of the century. And those fleeing are increasingly families trying to escape drug-fueled violence with young children.

Like clockwork, hundreds cross the border after midnight in Yuma, Arizona, walking through Mexican shrub to surrender to U.S. agents. Many fly to the nearby city of Mexicali after entering Mexico as tourists and take a taxi to the desert. The Border Patrol releases them to the Regional Center for Border Health, a clinic that charters six buses daily to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

The health clinic had shuttled families from more than 140 countries by August, not one from Mexico, said Amanda Aguirre, its executive director.

Daniel Paz, a Peruvian who surrendered to border agents in Yuma with his wife and 10-year-old in August, had the surprise misfortune of being expelled home without a chance at asylum, unusual even after the Peruvian government began accepting two U.S. charter flights a week.

Peruvians were stopped more than 9,000 times by U.S. authorities along the Mexican border in October, roughly nine times the same period a year earlier and up from only 12 times the year before.

Paz is watching developments around Title 42 and considering another attempt after the government of Peruvian President Pedro Castillo was toppled Dec. 7.

"We'll see if I'm back in January or February," he texted Sunday from Lima. "There is no lack of desire."

Tijuana's latest newcomers are Venezuelans, about 300 of whom recently temporarily occupied a city-owned recreational center.

About 7 million Venezuelans fled since 2014, including nearly 2 million to neighboring Colombia, but only recently started coming to the United States.

Many Venezuelans gather at Mexico's asylum office that opened in Tijuana in 2019 and processed more than 3,000 applications in each of the last two years from dozens of countries, led by Haitians and Hondurans.

Jordy Castillo, 40, said he'd wanted to leave Venezuela for 15 years but didn't act until friends and family started reaching the United States last year. His three brothers were first in his circle to seek asylum there, even though they knew no one.

"They found someone who took them in and got settled," he said.

Holiday procrastinators are back in force. Blame inflation.

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By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Last year, Lucila Gomez and her husband started their holiday shopping around Thanksgiving and wrapped it up a week before Christmas, spending \$750 on tablets and clothing for their three children and relatives.

This year? Gomez is waiting until she gets her annual bonus on Friday to get started — and she's limiting her spending to \$200, sticking to World Cup themed jerseys for her 10-year-old twins and a 6-year-old.

"Last year, we were confident. We were like, 'Get them whatever they want,'" said the 49-year-old Buckeye, Arizona resident, an hourly worker in the billing department of a health company. "This year, we're waiting until we both get paid. We want to go into the New Year not owing anything."

Last minute holiday shoppers are back in force — and inflation is partly to blame.

For the first two years of the pandemic, many were buying earlier in the season, afraid of not getting what they wanted because of shortages of products or delays in deliveries. They also had more money to spend thanks to government stimulus checks and child care credits.

But this year, supply chain snags have eased and shoppers aren't as worried about availability as they are about higher prices on everything from rent to food, causing them to postpone their buying until the last minute.

Gomez, for instance, said that even though she and her husband, an electrician, each got a raise, it still wasn't enough to offset their rising expenses. In fact, she said her family moved in with her parents after their monthly rent jumped from \$1,500 to \$2,000 earlier this year. She'd hoped to save for a house, but mortgage rates keep going up.

Last minute shopping is also being encouraged by a quirk in this year's calendar, according to Brian Field, global leader of Sensormatic Solutions, which tracks store traffic. With Christmas falling on Sunday, consumers have all week to shop.

Retailers are relying on the last minute spending rush to help meet their holiday sales goals after a weaker-than-expected November.

Americans cut back sharply on retail spending last month as the holiday shopping season began with high prices and rising interest rates taking their toll on households, particularly lower-income families.

Retail sales fell 0.6% from October to November after a sharp 1.3% rise the previous month, the government said last week. Sales fell at furniture, electronics, and home and garden stores.

Americans' spending has been intact ever since inflation first spiked almost 18 months ago, but the ability of shoppers to keep spending in a period of high inflation may be beginning to ease. Inflation has retreated from the four-decade high it reached this summer but remains elevated, enough to sap the spending power of consumers.

Still, overall holiday sales should be decent, though holiday sales growth is expected to dramatically slow down from a year ago.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, is slated to release the actual results for the combined November and December period next month. The group expects holiday sales growth will slow to a range of 6% to 8%, compared with the blistering 13.5% growth of a year ago.

The last stretch of the holiday season is critical.

On average, the top 10 busiest shopping days in the U.S. — which includes Wednesday, Thursday, Friday of this week and Monday of next week — account for roughly 40% of all holiday retail traffic, according to Sensormatic. However, retailers might expect even larger numbers this year as high gas prices force consumers to consolidate their shopping trips and everyone converges over the next few days, Sensormatic said.

For those holding out for bigger discounts right before Christmas, they may be disappointed. Retailers in general have maintained the same discounts they've been offering since Black Friday. There could be some deals, however, in areas like home and furniture, according to DataWeave, which tracks prices for hundreds of thousands of items across roughly three dozen retailers, including Walmart, Target and Amazon.

DataWeave's recent data shows the average prices for furniture were discounted 23% during the second week of December, compared with 12.8% during Black Friday week. In home furnishings, average price

cuts were 17.2% compared with 11.2% for Black Friday week.

Krish Thyagarajan, president and chief operating officer at DataWeave, believes that discounts for electronics are ticking up from Black Friday levels in the last few days before Christmas, but price cuts for clothing should remain a little over 20%, more generous than the average 16% discount last year around this time.

Inflation or not, there will always be the perennial procrastinators like Evelyn T. Peregrin, who last year used COVID-19 as an excuse to delay her holiday buying since several relatives had the virus so she didn't have to buy or deliver gifts until after Christmas.

Now it's her travel expenses of about \$700 that are eating into her budget. The 28-year-old moved to Puerto Rico from New Jersey with her husband earlier this year, forcing her to scale back her holiday spending to about \$150 from last year's \$250.

"I will order probably a few things online and then end up having to go to a store last minute," she said.

In Peru, Kichwa tribe wants compensation for carbon credits

By ED DAVEY undefined

SAN MARTIN, Peru (AP) — Rolando Zumba, a gentle 59-year-old, wept, though the moment he described took place many years ago. Nothing has been the same since that day, when a park ranger took away his hunting rifles. Now where there was once self-sufficiency, hunger has stalked his village.

Zumba's story has its roots in the 2001 creation of Peru's Cordillera Azul National Park, a stretch of Peruvian Amazon rainforest in the foothills of the Andes where clouds cling to the treetops and morning mists settle over powerful rivers. His story is linked to faraway oil giants Shell and TotalEnergies, who bought carbon credits from the park.

One day while hunting in the forest now within the park, Zumba said his rifles were seized by armed guards who worked for CIMA, the Spanish acronym for the non-profit set up to protect the national park. When the park was established, Kichwa tribe members like Zumba lost unfettered access to what an Associated Press investigation has found was almost certainly their ancestral land.

Zumba's livelihood would then take another hit: a 2013 pestilence decimated his small cacao plantation and to this day he doesn't have the \$1,500 necessary to replant. Meanwhile, just 1.5 miles (2.4 kilometers) away, many millions of dollars in oil money began flowing into former tribal territory. Over the last eight years, the park's management has arranged to sell at least 28 million credits, bringing in tens of millions of dollars, revenues that Kichwa say they have not benefited from.

"Look at the conditions we live in," said Zumba's neighbor Segundo Panduro, 77, chicks charging around his feet on the mud floor of his cabin. The authorities "just bring words," he said. "You can't live off words."

Many major polluters pay tropical countries to keep rainforests standing. The trees absorb carbon and buyers get carbon credits that are supposed to cancel out their emissions, helping them meet climate commitments. But industry standards require consent from local communities, who are supposed to benefit.

An International Labour Organization (ILO) convention signed by Peru says lands traditionally used to sustain Indigenous people belong to them.

The Peruvian government and CIMA argue consent wasn't required here because the park was never Kichwa land. To evaluate the Kichwa's claims, an AP team journeyed hundreds of miles over mud roads and by boat to seven Kichwa villages.

The investigation found evidence that the villages existed in their current locations outside what is now the park long before it existed, and that people lived by hunting and planting inside the park. In Puerto Franco, a faded sign announced the village and a date — August 1970. A document from 1996 shows a teacher was sent to Puerto Franco that year. At the border of the park, an elder recognized fragments of old pottery on the ground as the kind his grandparents used to make.

Several villages kept logs of community activities going back decades, windows into life in the area long before the park was created. A record of community meetings in 1991 in Callanayacu village, where Zumba lives, detailed concern over young troublemakers and a lost pig. An entry in the diaries of Chambira community described 1996 as the "year of 6,000 tourists." Satellite images from before the park was created show rainforest clearings for all the villages in almost identical shapes as today.

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In each village visited, people older than 40 easily shared memories of hunting and gathering food in what became the park in 2001. They told of waterfalls, hot springs and ravines, and a mountain shaped like a lion's back. Others recalled their ancestors planting avocado and mango trees inside what is now the park.

All insisted they weren't consulted about the park or the offsets. Chambira's chief, Nixon Vasquez, said people initially thought the carbon project was a coal mine. In Spanish the word carbón means coal. An insect-gnawed diary in Allima Sachayuc village documented how a CIMA delegation visited in 2005 to "let them know the history of the creation" of the park.

In response, Peru's national parks authority said by email that anthropologists helped establish the park. A Kichwa community group attended a meeting to discuss it in 2001 but raised no concerns, it said.

Gonzalo Varillas, executive director of CIMA, said by email the park's formation complied with national and international human rights law. The Kichwa villages have no rights to the park, he said, and many Kichwa communities have received benefits from the park income. Sustainable enterprises were funded in four villages and schools were improved in two, he said.

A TotalEnergies spokesperson said by email there was "constructive dialogue" between the Kichwas and the Peruvian authorities, and human rights are a core company value. By email, a Shell spokesperson said responsibility lay with CIMA, but the project was independently verified.

Satvinder Juss, a human rights law professor at King's College London who has reviewed Kichwa testimony, said by email the Peruvian government had fundamentally violated the ILO Convention and a United Nations declaration, and must make urgent amends.

In recent times, Kichwa people have been organizing and getting help from groups like the Forest Peoples Programme, an organization that advocates for Indigenous land rights. Kichwa leaders have gone to court to find out how much money was raised by the credits. And at meetings with CIMA, they have demanded compensation or restitution.

Marisol García, a Kichwa activist, said Kichwa carry out barefoot patrols in the forest to confront illegal ranchers and coca growers. Yet when they report illegal tree clearing, the authorities respond that it's none of their business.

"Nobody thinks about defending the defenders of the forest," she said.

US economy grew 3.2% in Q3, an upgrade from earlier estimate

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Shrugging off rampant inflation and rising interest rates, the U.S. economy grew at an unexpectedly strong 3.2% annual pace from July through September, the government reported Thursday in a healthy upgrade from its earlier estimate of third-quarter growth.

The rise in gross domestic product — the economy's output in goods and services — marked a return to growth after consecutive drops in the January-March and April-June periods.

Still, many economists expect the economy to slow and probably slip into recession next year under the pressure of higher interest rates being engineered by the Federal Reserve to combat inflation that earlier this year reached heights not seen since the early 1980s.

Driving the third-quarter growth were strong exports and healthy consumer spending.

Investment in housing plunged at an annual rate of 27.1%, hammered by higher mortgage rates arising from the Fed's decision to raise its own benchmark rate seven times this year.

Thursday's GDP report was the Commerce Department's third and final look at the July-September quarter. The first look at the fourth quarter comes out Jan. 26. Forecasters surveyed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia expect the economy to grow again the last three months of the year — but at a slower, 1% annual rate.

In its previous estimate of third-quarter growth, issued Nov. 30, the Commerce Department had pegged July-September growth at an annual rate of 2.9%. Behind the upgrade to Thursday's 3.2% was stronger growth in consumer spending, revised up to a 2.3% annual rate from 1.7% in the November estimate.

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"Despite a rapid increase in interest rates, the economy is growing and importantly, households are still spending," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, said in a research note. "However, looking ahead, in 2023, we expect a slower growth trajectory."

Inflation, which had not been a serious problem for four decades, returned in the spring of 2021. It was set off by an unexpectedly strong recovery from the coronavirus recession of 2020, fueled by massive government stimulus. The Fed was slow to recognize the severity of the inflation problem and only began raising rates aggressively in March.

The job market has stayed resilient throughout, putting upward pressure on wages and prices. Employers have added 392,000 jobs a month so far this year, and the unemployment rate is at 3.7%, just off a half-century low.

Today in History: December 23, Japanese war leaders executed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 23, the 357th day of 2022. There are eight days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 23, 1788, Maryland passed an act to cede an area "not exceeding ten miles square" for the seat of the national government; about two-thirds of the area became the District of Columbia.

On this date:

In 1783, George Washington resigned as commander in chief of the Continental Army and retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia.

In 1823, the poem "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" was published in the Troy (New York) Sentinel; the verse, more popularly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas," was later attributed to Clement C. Moore.

In 1913, the Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese.

In 1948, former Japanese premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese war leaders were executed in Tokyo.

In 1954, the first successful human kidney transplant took place at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston as a surgical team removed a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick and implanted it in Herrick's twin brother, Richard.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1972, a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck Nicaragua; the disaster claimed some 5,000 lives.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan (ruh-TAN') and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first non-stop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1997, a federal jury in Denver convicted Terry Nichols of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing, declining to find him guilty of murder. (Nichols was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2003, a jury in Chesapeake, Virginia, sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty.

In 2016, the United States allowed the U.N. Security Council to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem as a "flagrant violation" of international law; the decision to abstain from the council's 14-0 vote was one of the biggest American rebukes of its longstanding ally in recent memory.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, Hawaii Gov. Neil Abercrombie and other dignitaries attended a memorial service for the late Sen. Daniel Inouye at Honolulu's National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. Jean Harris, the patrician girls' school headmistress who spent 12 years in prison for the 1980 killing of her longtime lover, "Scarsdale Diet" doctor Herman Tarnower, died in New Haven, Connecticut, at age 89.

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Five years ago: The top leadership of the Miss America Organization resigned amid a scandal over emails in which pageant officials had ridiculed past winners over their appearance and intellect and speculated about their sex lives. A federal judge in Seattle partially lifted a Trump administration ban on certain refugees after two groups argued that the policy kept people from some mostly Muslim countries from reuniting with family living legally in the United States.

One year ago: Kim Potter, a white suburban Minneapolis police officer who said she confused her handgun for her Taser, was convicted of manslaughter in the death of a young Black man, Daunte Wright, during a traffic stop. (Potter would be sentenced to two years in prison.) A 14-year-old girl, Valentina Orellana-Peralta, was fatally shot by Los Angeles police when officers fired on an assault suspect and a bullet went through the wall and struck the girl as she was in a clothing store dressing room; the assault suspect was also killed. Joan Didion, the revered author and essayist known for her provocative social commentary and detached, methodical literary voice, died at 87; her publisher said Didion died from complications from Parkinson's disease.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ronnie Schell is 91. Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 89. Actor Frederic Forrest is 86. Rock musician Jorma Kaukonen (YOR'-mah KOW'-kah-nen) is 82. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 79. U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark (ret.) is 78. Actor Susan Lucci is 76. Singer-musician Adrian Belew is 73. Rock musician Dave Murray (Iron Maiden) is 66. Actor Joan Severance is 64. Singer Terry Weeks is 59. Rock singer Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) is 58. The former first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, is 55. Rock musician Jamie Murphy is 47. Jazz musician Irvin Mayfield is 45. Actor Estella Warren is 44. Actor Elvy Yost is 35. Actor Anna Maria Perez de Tagle (TAG'-lee) is 32. Actor Spencer Daniels is 30. Actor Caleb Foote is 29.