

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

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.

Wednesday, Dec. 28

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, beets, peaches, dinner roll.

Community Coffee Hour at Groton UMC, 9:30 a.m.

Thursday, Dec. 29

Senior Menu: New England ham dinner, fruit cocktail, ice cream, dinner roll.

Friday, Dec. 30

Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, baked apples, whole wheat bread.

Girls Basketball hosts Waverley-South Shore (JV at 5 p.m. followed by varsity)

Saturday, Dec. 31

Wrestling Invitational at Webster, 9:30 a.m.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

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

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

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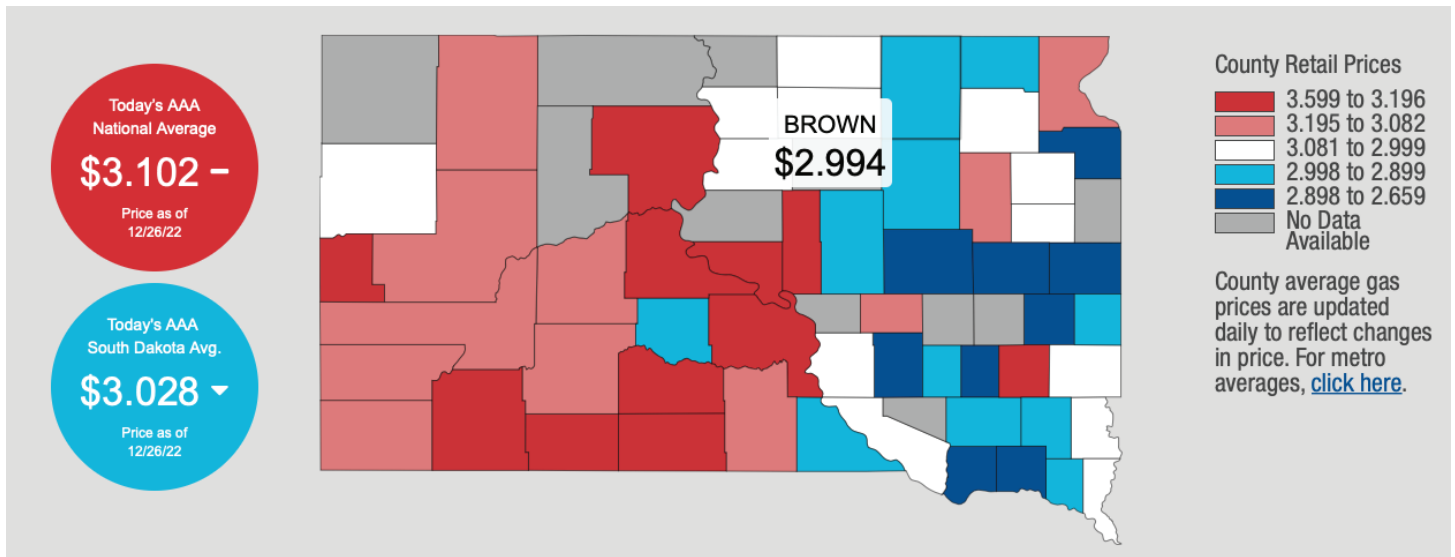
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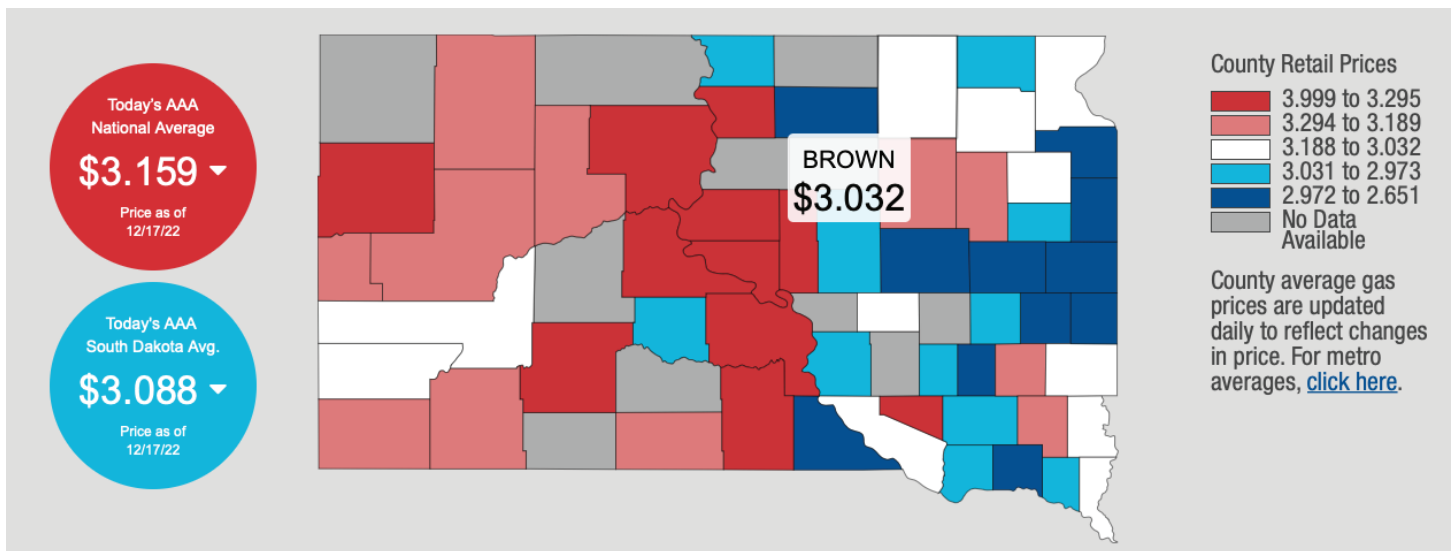
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.028	\$3.235	\$3.728	\$4.329
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.054	\$3.229	\$3.714	\$4.379
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.082	\$3.284	\$3.746	\$4.406
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.436	\$3.607	\$4.128	\$4.902
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.143	\$3.292	\$3.658	\$3.447

This Week



Last Week



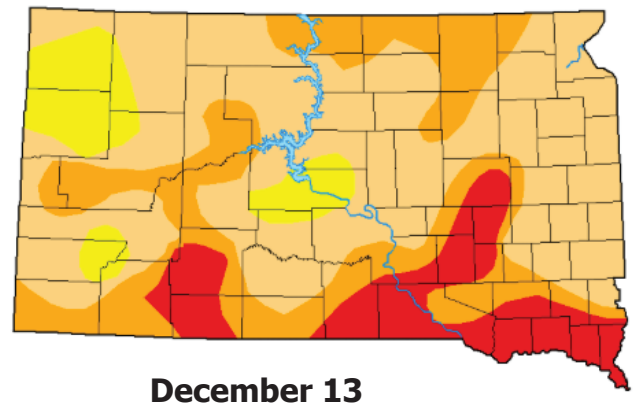
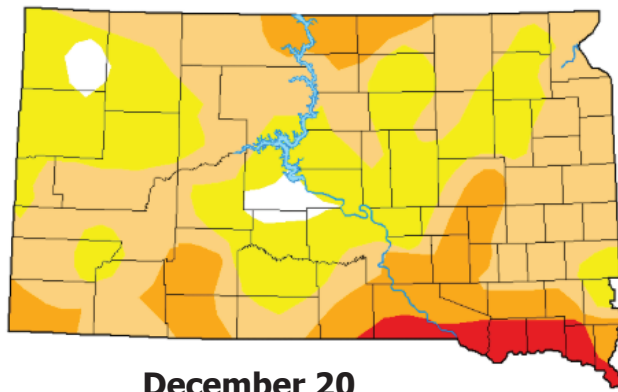
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Drought Classification

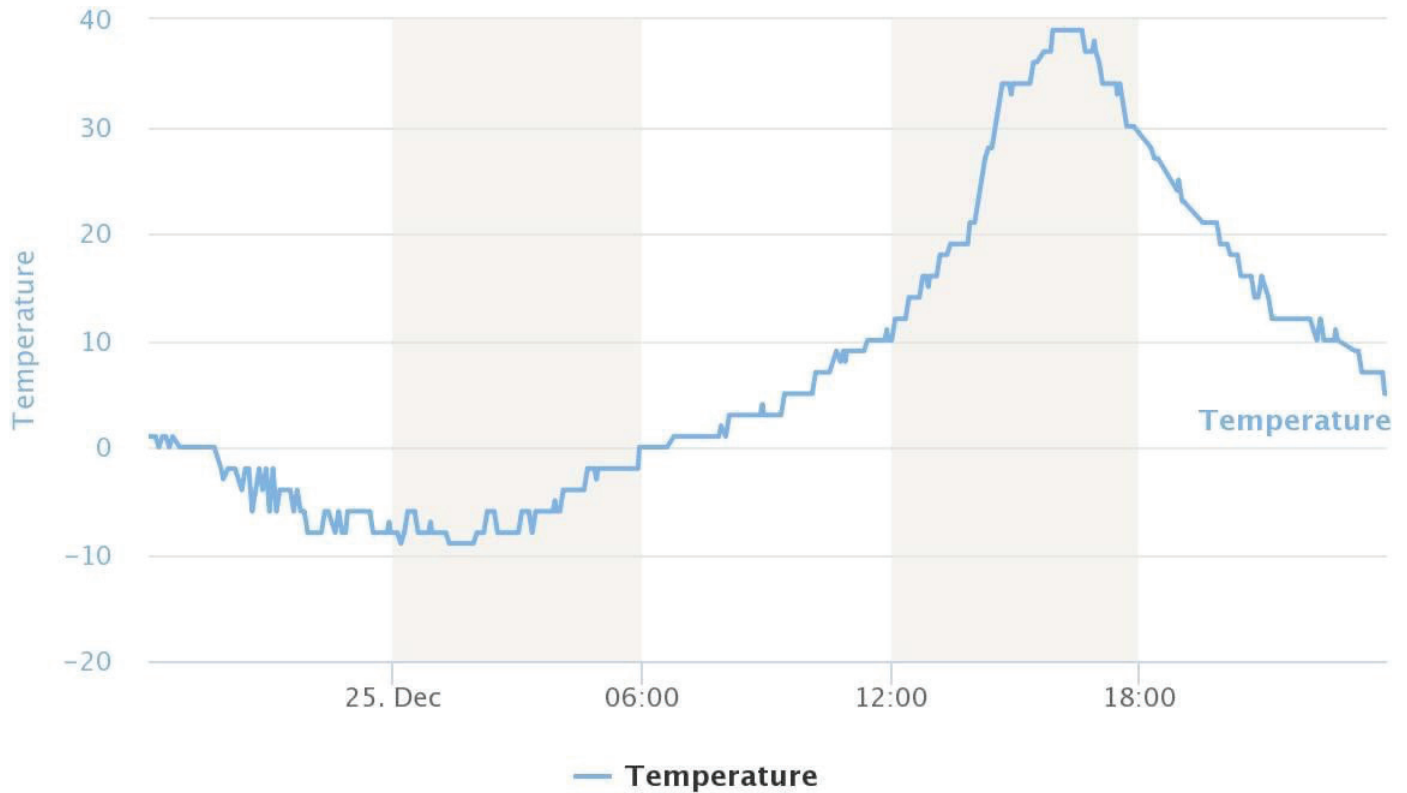


Drought Monitor



Widespread moderate to heavy rain and snow fell over parts of the High Plains region, especially the Dakotas and northern Nebraska. Due to the growing snowpack and lessened precipitation deficits, improvements were made across much of South Dakota and North Dakota, as well as in north-central and northwest Nebraska and the northeast corner of Colorado. Improvements were also made due to recent precipitation in the Kansas City metro area. Farther west in Kansas, dry weather continued this week, and long-term precipitation deficits and soil moisture deficits continued to grow, leading to a small expansion of extreme drought to the east.

Pierre sees 50 degree rise



Highcharts.com

Fun fact from the overnight shift: Pierre rose *50 degrees* yesterday, Dec 25th, from -10° F at 1:50am to 40° F at 4:20pm.

We the People

The South Dakota Humanities Council is making available a weekly column -- "We the People" -- that focuses on the U.S. Constitution. It is written by David Adler, who is president of The Alturas Institute, a non-profit organization created to promote the Constitution, gender equality, and civic education.



By David Adler

Constitutionally Speaking, A Former President May Be Prosecuted

It is unclear if the Department of Justice will charge former President Donald Trump with four crimes referred by the January 6 Committee, but there should be no doubt, constitutionally speaking, that an ex-president is subject to criminal prosecution.

Chief Justice John Marshall, presiding at the Aaron Burr treason trial in 1807, observed that a former president is returned to the citizenry. The president, Marshall stated, "is elected from the mass of the people" and "returns to the mass of the people."

No special dispensation is required to permit prosecution of a citizen. And there is no evidence whatsoever—no statements, indications, or train of discussion—that the framers of the Constitution intended or even flirted with the idea of clothing an ex-president with any immunity from prosecution. Indeed, immunity was denied to him as president.

The founders, who lived in dread fear of a strong executive, grounded in their own experience under King George III and their keen reading of history, which taught lessons of tyranny, harbored no reason to insulate officials from criminal liability merely because they were elected or appointed to office. Like all citizens, they were responsible under the law. The Supreme Court, in 1882, in *United States v. Lee*, declared: "No officer of the law may set that law at defiance with impunity. All the officers of government, from the highest to the lowest, are bound to obey it."

Pretensions of executive immunity from prosecution wither under the heat of the Impeachment Clause. Article 1, section 3 of the Constitution provides that "the Party . . . shall nevertheless be liable and subject to indictment." Former Solicitor General Robert H. Bork, long a darling of conservatives, writing on October 5, 1973, that then Vice-President Spiro Agnew could be indicted before being impeached, stated: "A civil officer could be both impeached and criminally punished even absent the Article 1, section 3 proviso." Bork's conclusion was anticipated by the Supreme Court, in 1879, in *Langford v. United States*, where Justice Samuel F. Miller wrote that "the ministers personally, like our President, may be impeached; or if the wrong amounts to a crime, they may be indicted."

The only explicit immunity in the Constitution is the limited immunity granted in Article 1, section 6, to members of Congress: "The Senators and Representatives . . . shall in all cases, except treason, felony or breach of the peace, be privileged from arrest during their attendance at the session of their respective Houses, and in going to and returning from the same."

The framers were fastidious draftsmen, and they knew very well how to provide for immunity, where they wished to grant it. It is logical to assume that where no immunity is mentioned, none exists.

Charles Pinckney, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention from South Carolina and one of the most active of the framers, declared that that no immunity was intended. Speaking in the Senate in 1800, Pinckney said that "it never was intended to give Congress any but specified privileges, and those were very limited privileges indeed." He added, "No privilege of this kind was intended for your Executive, nor any except which I have mentioned for your Legislature. The Convention well knew that no subject had been more abused than privilege."

James Wilson, second in importance to James Madison as an architect of the Constitution—a status confirmed by George Washington, who considered Wilson "to be one of the strongest men in the Convention"—assured the Pennsylvania Ratifying Convention that, "not a single privilege is annexed to the President's character. The executive power," he stated, "is better to be trusted when it has no screen."

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In his landmark Lectures on the Constitution, delivered in 1791 while serving as a Supreme Court Justice, restated the principle: "The most powerful magistrates should be amenable to the law. No one should be secure while he violates the constitution and the laws."

The legal distinction between the English King, who could do no wrong, and the American president, subject to the law at every turn. presented precisely what the framers had in mind when they discussed the rule of law. Alexander Hamilton rebuffed throughout the Federalist Papers efforts by opponents of the Constitution to draw parallels between the authority of the king and that vested in the president. In Federalist No. 68, he was constrained to rebut attacks on grants of power to the president by those, "calculating upon aversion of the people to monarchy," who portrayed the president "as the full-grown progeny of that detested parent." A king could not be indicted, but the president could.

Time will reveal whether the Department of Justice will act on the historic criminal referrals recommended by the January 6 committee. The charges are among the most serious that can be made against a sitting president. If the DOJ decides against prosecution, it won't be because of lack of authority.

Johnson Applauds TikTok Ban on Government Devices

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) applauded the final passage of the No TikTok on Government Devices Act led by U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO). This bill bans the download and use of TikTok on federal government devices.

In September, Johnson has introduced a similar bill in the U.S. House of Representatives to block TikTok on federal government devices and on military bases and installations. Johnson's Block the Tok Act would also prohibit China from accessing Americans' user data from within China.

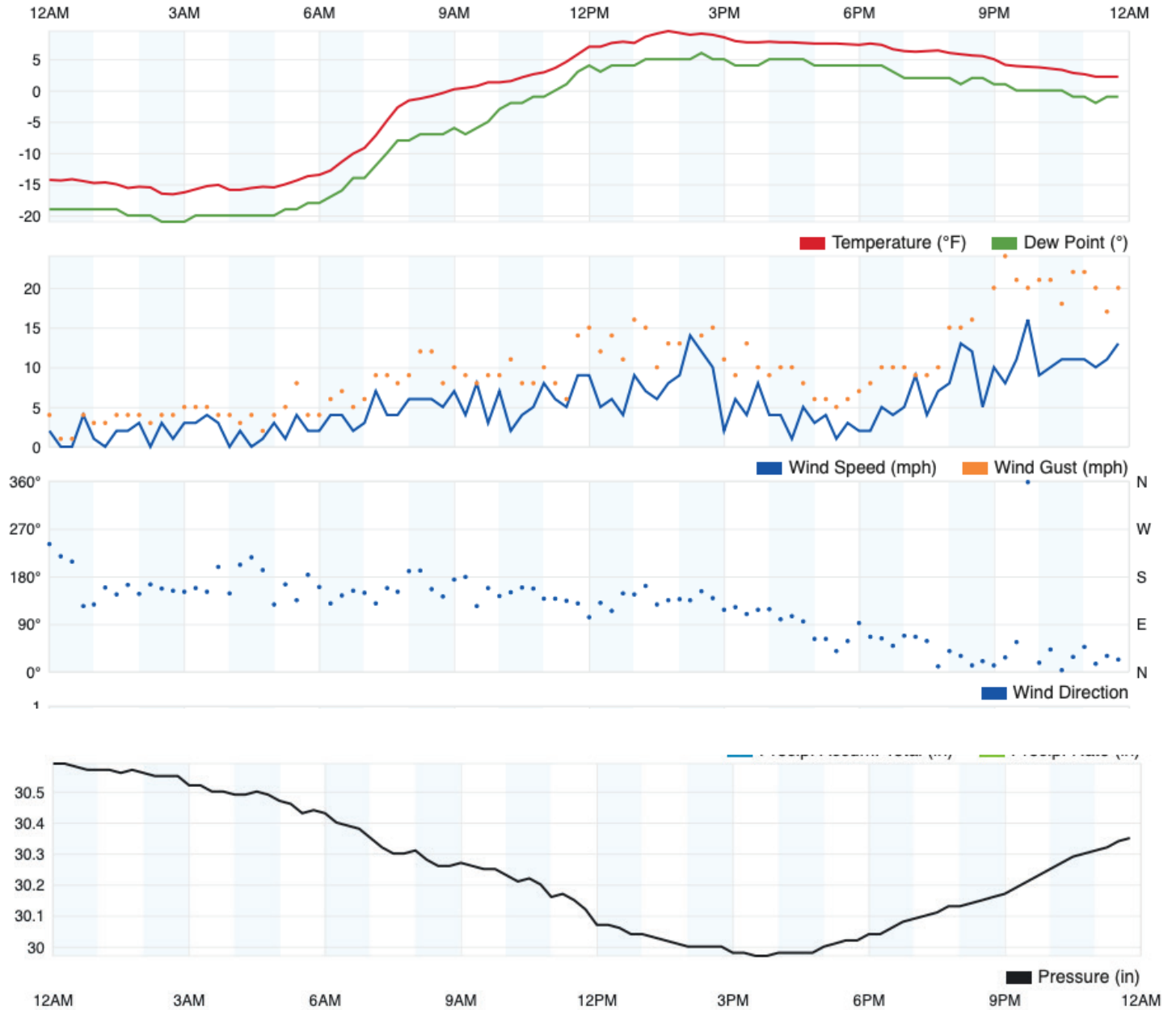
"TikTok is one of China's Trojan horses," said Johnson. "This app poses a national security threat and has safety implications for everyday Americans. I'm encouraged to see progress at both the federal and state level to prohibit TikTok on government devices, but there is still work to be done. I'm going to continue the effort to prohibit China's access to Americans' user data in the new Congress."

19 states have banned the use and download of TikTok on state government devices.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
						
Cold	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Slight Chance Wintry Mix then Slight Chance Snow
High: 7 °F	Low: 3 °F↑	High: 29 °F	Low: 19 °F	High: 31 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 30 °F

Today

Dec 26th, 2022



Highs 6 to 24°

Coldest ne SD & wc MN, warmest south central SD. 5 to 15° below normal

Tuesday Wednesday



28 to 38° 32 to 38°

Slight chances for mixed precipitation and/or accumulating snow Thursday



December 26, 2022 4:17 AM



It'll be a bit chilly today, but warmer air should overspread the area Tuesday and Wednesday with temperatures getting close to or reaching the melting point. 20 percent chances for precipitation enter the picture by Thursday (mixed precipitation and accumulating snow both possible), with near to slightly below normal temperatures through the rest of the week.

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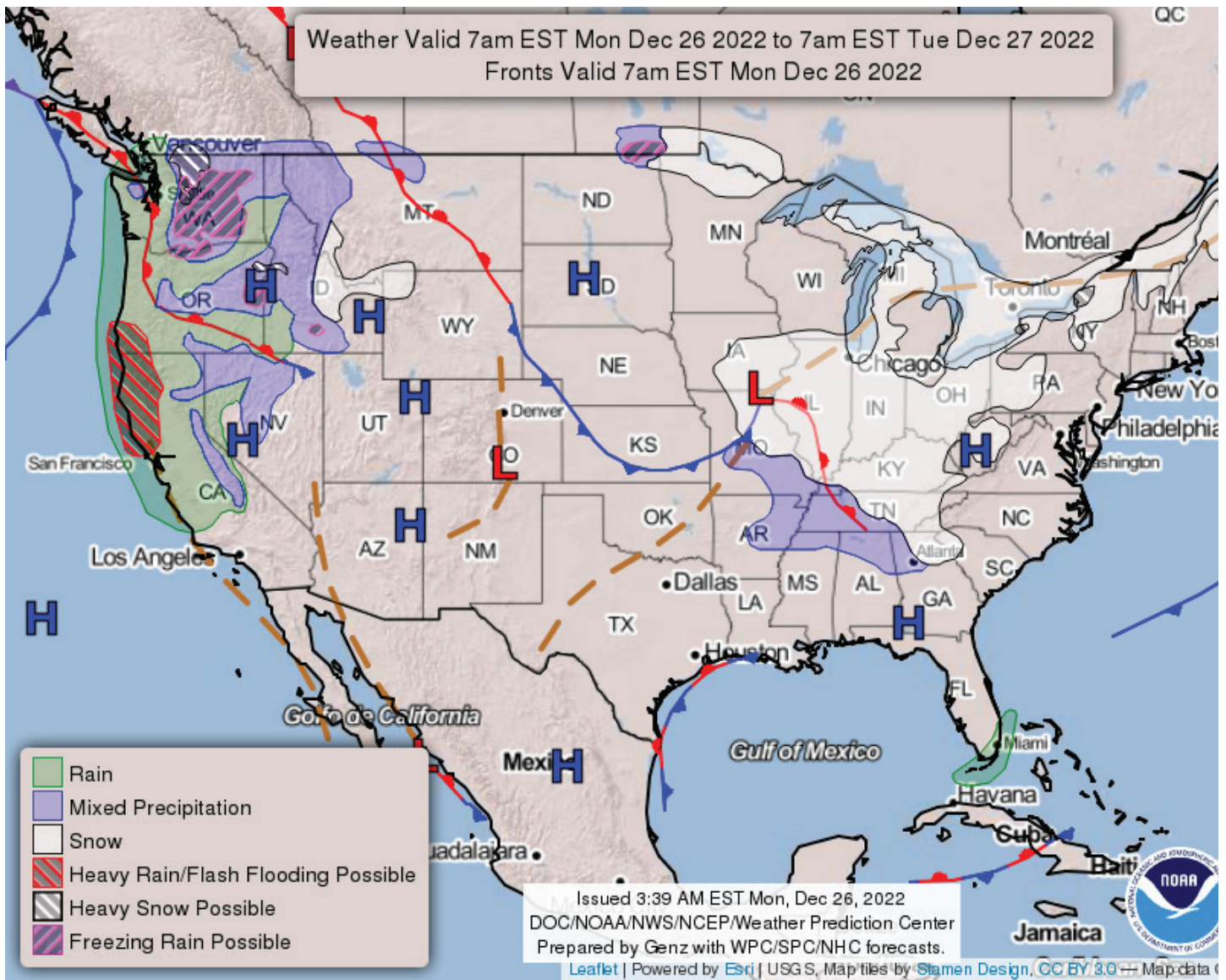
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: -2 °F at 3:45 PM
Low Temp: -16 °F at 7:55 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 10:09 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 2011
Record Low: -29 in 1990
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.50
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85
Average Precip to date: 21.71
Precip Year to Date: 19.35
Sunset Tonight: 4:56:38 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:46 AM



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Today in Weather History

December 26, 1988: Moderate to heavy snow fell across western and northern South Dakota, as well as across most of Minnesota, from the evening of the 25th through the morning of the 27th. Much of the northern one-half to two-thirds of Minnesota and the western and northern sections of South Dakota were blanketed with 6-12 inches of new snow. Numerous accidents and minor injuries were indirectly related to the snowy conditions. Several snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches at Timber Lake; 10 to 12 inches at Seneca and Hoven; 11 inches at Aberdeen; 8 inches at Pierre, Eureka and Blunt; 7 inches at Chelsea, Redfield, Cottonwood, and Rapid City; and 6 inches at Ferney, Huron, and Eden. In Minnesota, 8 inches fell in Browns Valley, 6 inches fell at Wheaton, and 5 inches accumulated at Artichoke Lake.

December 26, 1776: George Washington crossed the ice-clogged Delaware River. He marched on Trenton in the midst of snow and sleet thus surprising and captured many of the British garrisons.

1947 - New York City received a record 26.4 inches of snow in 24 hours, with as much as 32 inches reported in the suburbs. The heavy snow brought traffic to a standstill, and snow removal cost eight million dollars. Thirty thousand persons were called upon to remove the 100 million tons of snow. The storm claimed 27 lives. (26th-27th) (David Ludlum)

1983 - Miami, FL, established a December record with a morning low of 33 degrees. Just three days earlier, and again three days later, record warm temperatures were reported in Florida, with daytime highs in the 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Freezing rain plagued parts of the south central U.S., from northwest Texas to southwestern Missouri. Southwestern Missouri was turned into a huge skating rink as roads became sheets of ice. Damage to tree limbs and power lines compared to a hundred tornadoes, and half of the city of Springfield was left without electricity for 24 hours. Snow, sleet and ice covered the northwest two thirds of Oklahoma. 75,000 homes were left without electricity as ice accumulated one to two inches in a 40-mile band from Duncan to Norman to Tulsa to Miami. 25,000 of those homes were still without power a week later. The storm claimed the lives of seven persons. (24th-27th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Low pressure produced heavy snow from North Dakota to western sections of the Great Lakes Region, with up to fourteen inches reported in the Chicago area. Cold arctic air hovered over the Plateau Region. Temperatures in the Big Smokey Valley of Nevada plunged to 31 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds behind an arctic cold front produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region and dangerous wind chill temperatures in the northeastern U.S. Wind chill readings as cold as 40 degrees below zero were reported in New York State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003 - A major snow storm in Utah caused several fatalities due to avalanches. As much as 2 ft of snow fell in parts of the state, particularly south of Salt Lake City. Three people that were seen snowboarding in the Aspen Grove recreational area

December 26, 2004: A magnitude 9.1 earthquake near Sumatra, Indonesia generated a tsunami that caused tremendous devastation throughout the Indian Ocean. The quake, which is the third largest in the world since 1900, caused severe damage and casualties in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, and in the Nicobar Islands, India. The tsunami that followed killed more people than any other tsunami in recorded history, with 227,898 dead or missing. The total estimated material losses in the Indian Ocean region were \$10 billion, and insured losses were \$2 billion

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHY MOTHERS MATTER

One of the most beautiful passages in Scripture is found in Luke's Gospel. It is called "The Magnificat." We have Mary proclaiming, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The word "soul" is a special word and in Hebrew is used to reveal or describe a person's entire identity. It is the very essence – or being or character or the "sum total" – of a person. In this one word,

Mary reveals that all of her is committed to the Lord. The sum and substance of her life was to worship God in all of His Majesty!

If we want to study the smallest particle of God's creation we put it under a microscope to magnify it. This enlarges, or expands, every detail of the particle so we can discover its intricacies, its subtleties, and its structure. Mary was determined to put God under her "microscope" so she could understand Him personally, intimately, and completely.

In her "song" she magnified her Lord – not her Son. Often we become overly concerned about the way our children look rather than what they look at. Not so with Mary. She recognized her responsibility as a mother and knew that if God were first in her life, He would be first in her child's life. She had her priorities right.

God entrusted Mary with the Messiah because He was at the center of her life and knew that her Son would be nurtured in what matters most in the life of a child: knowing, understanding and following His will.

Prayer: We ask, Lord, that all mothers everywhere will recognize the importance of being a mother and the trust You place in them to raise children to know You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:46-55 "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.



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)
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News from the Associated Press

Extreme cold, travel chaos: Woes from deadly storm continue

By CAROLYN THOMPSON and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The deep freeze from a deadly winter storm that walloped much of the United States will continue into the week as people in western New York deal with massive snow drifts that snarled emergency vehicles and travelers across the country see canceled flights and dangerous roads.

The massive storm has killed at least 34 people across the U.S. and is expected to claim more lives after trapping some residents inside houses and knocking out power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses.

The extreme weather stretched from the Great Lakes near Canada to the Rio Grande along the border with Mexico. About 60% of the U.S. population faced some sort of winter weather advisory or warning, and temperatures plummeted drastically below normal from east of the Rocky Mountains to the Appalachians.

The National Weather Service said Sunday the frigid arctic air “enveloping much of the eastern half of the U.S. will be slow to moderate.”

That’s especially unwelcome news for Buffalo, which saw hurricane-force winds and snow causing white-out conditions that paralyzed emergency response efforts.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said almost every fire truck in the city was stranded Saturday and implored people Sunday to respect an ongoing driving ban in the region. Officials said the airport would be shut through Tuesday morning. The National Weather Service said the snow total at the Buffalo Niagara International Airport stood at 43 inches (1.1 meters) at 7 a.m. Sunday.

Huge snowdrifts nearly covered cars and there were thousands of houses, some adorned in unlit holiday displays, dark from a lack of power.

With snow swirling down untouched and impassable streets, forecasters warned an additional 1 to 2 feet (30 to 60 centimeters) of snow was possible in some areas through early Monday morning amid wind gusts of 40 mph (64 kph). Police said Sunday evening that there were two “isolated” instances of looting during the storm.

Two people died in their suburban Cheektowaga, New York, homes Friday when emergency crews could not reach them in time to treat their medical conditions. Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz said 10 more people died there during the storm, including six in Buffalo, and warned there may be more dead.

“Some were found in cars, some were found on the street in snowbanks,” Poloncarz said. “We know there are people who have been stuck in cars for more than two days.”

Freezing conditions and power outages had Buffalonians scrambling to get to anywhere with heat amid what Hochul called the longest sustained blizzard conditions ever in the city. But with streets under a thick blanket of white, that wasn’t an option for people like Jeremy Manahan, who charged his phone in his parked car after almost 29 hours without electricity.

“There’s one warming shelter, but that would be too far for me to get to. I can’t drive, obviously, because I’m stuck,” Manahan said. “And you can’t be outside for more than 10 minutes without getting frostbit.”

Ditjak Ilunga of Gaithersburg, Maryland, was on his way to visit relatives in Hamilton, Ontario, for Christmas with his daughters Friday when their SUV was trapped in Buffalo. Unable to get help, they spent hours with the engine running, buffeted by wind and nearly buried in snow.

By 4 a.m. Saturday, their fuel nearly gone, Ilunga made a desperate choice to risk the howling storm to reach a nearby shelter. He carried 6-year-old Destiny on his back while 16-year-old Cindy clutched their Pomeranian puppy, following his footprints through drifts.

“If I stay in this car I’m going to die here with my kids,” Ilunga recalled thinking. He cried when the family walked through the shelter doors. “It’s something I will never forget in my life.”

Travelers’ weather woes continued, with hundreds of flight cancellations already and more expected after a bomb cyclone — when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm — developed

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near the Great Lakes, stirring up blizzard conditions, including heavy winds and snow.

The storm knocked out power in communities from Maine to Seattle. But heat and lights were steadily being restored across the U.S. According to poweroutage.us, fewer than 100,000 customers were without power Monday at 7 a.m. EDT — down from a peak of 1.7 million.

Concerns about rolling blackouts across eastern states subsided Sunday after PJM Interconnection said its utilities could meet the day's peak electricity demand. The mid-Atlantic grid operator had called for its 65 million consumers to conserve energy amid the freeze Saturday.

Storm-related deaths were reported in recent days all over the country: 12 in Erie County, New York, ranging in age from 26 to 93 years old, and another in Niagara County where a 27-year-old man was overcome by carbon monoxide after snow blocked his furnace; 10 in Ohio, including an electrocuted utility worker and those killed in multiple car crashes; six motorists killed in crashes in Missouri, Kansas and Kentucky; a Vermont woman struck by a falling branch; an apparently homeless man found amid Colorado's subzero temperatures; and a woman who fell through Wisconsin river ice.

In Jackson, Mississippi, city officials on Christmas Day announced residents must now boil their drinking water due to water lines bursting in the frigid temperatures

Frigid monster storm across US claims at least 34 lives

By CAROLYN THOMPSON and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Millions of people hunkered down against a deep freeze Sunday to ride out the winter storm that has killed at least 34 people across the United States and is expected to claim more lives after trapping some residents inside houses with heaping snow drifts and knocking out power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses.

The scope of the storm has been nearly unprecedented, stretching from the Great Lakes near Canada to the Rio Grande along the border with Mexico. About 60% of the U.S. population faced some sort of winter weather advisory or warning, and temperatures plummeted drastically below normal from east of the Rocky Mountains to the Appalachians, the National Weather Service said.

Travelers' weather woes are likely to continue, with hundreds of flight cancellations already and more expected after a bomb cyclone — when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm — developed near the Great Lakes, stirring up blizzard conditions, including heavy winds and snow. Some 1,707 domestic and international flights were canceled on Sunday as of about 2 p.m. EDT, according to the tracking site FlightAware.

The storm unleashed its full fury on Buffalo, with hurricane-force winds and snow causing whiteout conditions, paralyzing emergency response efforts. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said almost every fire truck in the city was stranded Saturday and implored people Sunday to respect an ongoing driving ban in the region. Officials said the airport would be shut through Tuesday morning. The National Weather Service said the snow total at the Buffalo Niagara International Airport stood at 43 inches (109 centimeters) at 7 a.m. Sunday.

Daylight revealed cars nearly covered by 6-foot snowdrifts and thousands of houses, some adorned in unlit holiday displays, dark from a lack of power. With snow swirling down untouched and impassable streets, forecasters warned that an additional 1 to 2 feet of snow was possible in some areas through early Monday morning amid wind gusts of 40 mph. Police said Sunday evening that there were two "isolated" instances of looting during the storm.

Two people died in their suburban Cheektowaga, New York, homes Friday when emergency crews could not reach them in time to treat their medical conditions. County Executive Mark Poloncarz 10 more people died in Erie County during the storm, including six in Buffalo, and warned there may be more dead.

"Some were found in cars, some were found on the street in snowbanks," said Poloncarz. "We know there are people who have been stuck in cars for more than 2 days."

Freezing conditions and day-old power outages had Buffalonians scrambling to get to anywhere that had heat amid what Hochul called the longest sustained blizzard conditions ever in the city. But with streets

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under a thick blanket of white, that wasn't an option for people like Jeremy Manahan, who charged his phone in his parked car after almost 29 hours without electricity.

"There's one warming shelter, but that would be too far for me to get to. I can't drive, obviously, because I'm stuck," Manahan said. "And you can't be outside for more than 10 minutes without getting frostbit."

Ditjak Ilunga of Gaithersburg, Maryland, was on his way to visit relatives in Hamilton, Ontario, for Christmas with his daughters Friday when their SUV was trapped in Buffalo. Unable to get help, they spent hours with the engine running, buffeted by wind and nearly buried in snow.

By 4 a.m. Saturday, their fuel nearly gone, Ilunga made a desperate choice to risk the howling storm to reach a nearby shelter. He carried 6-year-old Destiny on his back while 16-year-old Cindy clutched their Pomeranian puppy, following his footprints through drifts.

"If I stay in this car I'm going to die here with my kids," Ilunga recalled thinking. He cried when the family walked through the shelter doors. "It's something I will never forget in my life."

The storm knocked out power in communities from Maine to Seattle. But heat and lights were steadily being restored across the U.S. According to poweroutage.us, less than 200,000 customers were without power Sunday at 3 p.m. EDT — down from a peak of 1.7 million.

Concerns about rolling blackouts across eastern states subsided Sunday after PJM Interconnection said its utilities could meet the day's peak electricity demand. The mid-Atlantic grid operator had called for its 65 million consumers to conserve energy amid the freeze Saturday.

In North Carolina, less than 6,500 customers had no power — down from a peak of 485,000. Across New England, power has been restored to tens of thousands with just under 83,000 people, mostly in Maine, still without it. In New York, about 34,000 households were still without power Sunday, including 26,000 in Erie County, where utility crews and hundreds of National Guard troops battled high winds and struggled with getting stuck in the snow.

Storm-related deaths were reported in recent days all over the country: 12 in Erie County, New York, ranging in age from 26 to 93 years old, and another in Niagara County where a 27-year-old man was overcome by carbon monoxide after snow blocked his furnace; 10 in Ohio, including an electrocuted utility worker and those killed in multiple car crashes; six motorists killed in crashes in Missouri, Kansas and Kentucky; a Vermont woman struck by a falling branch; an apparently homeless man found amid Colorado's subzero temperatures; and a woman who fell through Wisconsin river ice.

In Jackson, Mississippi, city officials on Christmas Day announced that residents must now boil their drinking water due to water lines bursting in the frigid temperatures.

In Buffalo, William Kless was up at 3 a.m. Sunday. He called his three children at their mother's house to wish them Merry Christmas and then headed off on his snowmobile for a second day spent shuttling people from stuck cars and frigid homes to a church operating as a warming shelter.

Through heavy, wind-driven snow, he brought about 15 people to the church in Buffalo on Saturday, he said, including a family of five transported one-by-one. He also got a man in need of dialysis, who had spent 17 hours stranded in his car, back home, where he could receive treatment.

"I just felt like I had to," Kless said.

S. Korea launches jets, fires shots after North flies drones

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's military fired warning shots, scrambled fighter jets and flew surveillance assets across the heavily fortified border with North Korea on Monday, after North Korean drones violated its airspace for the first time in five years, officials said.

South Korea's military detected five drones from North Korea crossing the border, and one traveled as far as the northern part of the South Korean capital region, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

The military responded by firing warning shots and launching fighter jets and attack helicopters to shoot down the North Korean drones. The attack helicopters fired a combined 100 rounds but it wasn't immediately known if the North Korean drones were shot down. There were no immediate reports of civilian

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damage on the ground in South Korea, according to the Defense Ministry.

One of the aircraft, a KA-1 light attack plane, crashed during takeoff but its two pilots both ejected safely, defense officials said. They said they also requested civilian airports in and near Seoul to halt takeoffs temporarily.

South Korea also sent surveillance assets near and across the border to photograph key military facilities in North Korea as corresponding measures against the North Korean drone flights, the Joint Chiefs said. It didn't elaborate, but some observers say that South Korea likely flew unmanned drones inside North Korean territory.

"Our military will thoroughly and resolutely respond to this kind of North Korean provocation," Maj. Gen. Lee Seung-o, director of operations at the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

South Korea's public confirmation of any reconnaissance activities inside North Korea is highly unusual and likely reflects a resolve by the conservative government led by President Yoon Suk Yeol to get tough on North Korean provocations. North Korea could respond with more fiery rhetoric or weapons tests or other provocation, some observers say.

On Friday, South Korea detected two short-range ballistic missile launches by North Korea, the latest in the country's torrid run of weapons tests this year. Friday's launches were seen as a protest of the South Korean-U.S. joint air drills that North Korea views as an invasion rehearsal.

It's the first time for North Korean drones to enter South Korean airspace since 2017, when a suspected North Korean drone was found crashed in South Korea. South Korean military officials said at the time that the drone with a Sony-made camera photographed a U.S. missile defense system in South Korea.

North Korea has previously touted its drone program, and South Korean officials said the North has about 300 drones. In 2014, several suspected North Korean drones equipped with Japanese-made cameras were found south of the border. Experts said they were low-tech but could be considered a potential security threat.

Earlier this month, North Korea 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. They were among high-tech weapons systems that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has vowed to introduce along with multi-warheads, underwater-launched nuclear missiles, nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles.

North Korea released low-resolution photos of South Korean cities as viewed from space, but some experts in South Korea said the images were too crude for surveillance purposes. Such assessments infuriated North Korea, with Kim's powerful sister Kim Yo Jong issuing a series of derisive terms to insult unidentified South Korean experts and express her anger.

North Korea is to hold a key ruling Workers' Party conference this week to review past policies and set policy goals. Some experts say that during the meeting, North Korea will likely reaffirm its push to bolster nuclear and missile arsenals to cope with what it calls hostile U.S. policies, such as U.S.-led international sanctions and its regular military training with South Korea.

North Korea would eventually use its boosted nuclear capability as a bargaining chip to win international recognition as a legitimate nuclear state, the relaxing of international sanctions and other concessions, analysts say.

Russia says it shot down Ukrainian drone near airbase

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The Russian military reported on Monday that it shot down a Ukrainian drone approaching an airbase deep inside Russia, the second time the airbase has been targeted this month, raising questions about the effectiveness of Russia's air defenses if drones can fly that far into the country.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the incident took place in the early hours of Monday, and three servicemen were killed by debris at the Engels airbase that houses the Tu-95 and Tu-160 nuclear-capable strategic bombers that have been involved in launching strikes on Ukraine.

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Engels is located in Russia's Saratov region on the Volga river, more than 600 kilometers (more than 370 miles) east of the border with Ukraine.

No damage was inflicted on Russian aircraft, the ministry said.

Ukrainian Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat, speaking to Ukrainian television on Monday, did not directly acknowledge his country's involvement in Monday's incident, but said: "These are the consequences of Russian aggression."

He added: "If the Russians thought that the war would not affect them in the deep rear, they were deeply mistaken"

Ukrainian officials have never confirmed sending drones into Russia. They have maintained ambiguity over previous high-profile attacks, including drone strikes on Russian military bases earlier this month.

On Dec. 5, unprecedented drone strikes on Engels and the Dyagilevo base in the Ryazan region in western Russia killed a total of three servicemen and wounded four more. The strikes on the airbases were followed by a massive retaliatory missile barrage in Ukraine that struck homes and buildings and killed civilians.

In Ukraine, at least four civilians have been wounded in Russian shelling of five regions in the country's southeast over the past 24 hours, according to the deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office, Kyrylo Tymoshenko. Overall the intensity of the shelling the night from Sunday into Monday has been significantly lower.

For the first time in weeks, Russian forces didn't shell the Dnipropetrovsk region, which borders the partially occupied southern regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, its governor, Valentyn Reznichenko, reported on Telegram.

"This is the third quiet night in 5.5 months since the Russians started shelling" the areas around the city of Nikopol, Reznichenko wrote. Nikopol is located across the Dnieper River from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is under control of the Russian forces.

Ukrainian-controlled areas of the neighboring Kherson region were shelled 33 times over the past 24 hours, according to Kherson's Ukrainian Gov. Yaroslav Yanushevich. There were no casualties.

On Sunday, Russian forces attacked the city of Kramatorsk, where Ukrainian forces are headquartered. Three missiles hit an industrial facility and damaged residential buildings, but no casualties were reported, according to the battlefield report from the Ukrainian presidency.

In the partially occupied eastern Donetsk region, fierce battles continue around the city of Bakhmut, which Russian forces have been trying to seize for weeks to consolidate their grip on Ukraine's east.

In the neighboring Luhansk region that it is almost entirely under Moscow's control, the Russian forces are "suffering huge losses and medical facilities are overwhelmed with wounded soldiers," Luhansk's Ukrainian governor, Serhiy Haidai, told Ukrainian television Monday. The Russian army is redeploying paratroopers from the Kherson region to the area, Haidai said.

On Saturday, a deadly attack on the city of Kherson, which was retaken by Kyiv's forces last month, killed and wounded scores. Local residents are lining up to donate blood for those wounded in the deadly attack, Gov. Yaroslav Yanushevich said Monday.

Packed ICUs, crowded crematoriums: COVID roils Chinese towns

By DAKE KANG Associated Press

BAZHOU, China (AP) — Yao Ruyan paced frantically outside the fever clinic of a county hospital in China's industrial Hebei province, 70 kilometers (43 miles) southwest of Beijing. Her mother-in-law had COVID-19 and needed urgent medical care, but all hospitals nearby were full.

"They say there's no beds here," she barked into her phone.

As China grapples with its first-ever national COVID-19 wave, emergency wards in small cities and towns southwest of Beijing are overwhelmed. Emergency rooms are turning away ambulances, relatives of sick people are searching for open beds, and patients are slumped on benches in hospital corridors and lying on floors for a lack of beds.

Yao's elderly mother-in-law had fallen ill a week ago with the coronavirus. They went first to a local

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hospital, where lung scans showed signs of pneumonia. But the hospital couldn't handle serious COVID-19 cases, Yao was told. She was told to go to larger hospitals in adjacent counties.

As Yao and her husband drove from hospital to hospital, they found all the wards were full. Zhuozhou Hospital, an hour's drive from Yao's hometown, was the latest disappointment.

Yao charged toward the check-in counter, past wheelchairs frantically moving elderly patients. Yet again, she was told the hospital was full, and that she would have to wait.

"I'm furious," Yao said, tearing up, as she clutched the lung scans from the local hospital. "I don't have much hope. We've been out for a long time and I'm terrified because she's having difficulty breathing."

Over two days, Associated Press journalists visited five hospitals and two crematoriums in towns and small cities in Baoding and Langfang prefectures, in central Hebei province. The area was the epicenter of one of China's first outbreaks after the state loosened COVID-19 controls in November and December. For weeks, the region went quiet, as people fell ill and stayed home.

Many have now recovered. Today, markets are bustling, diners pack restaurants and cars are honking in snarling traffic, even as the virus is spreading in other parts of China. In recent days, headlines in state media said the area is "starting to resume normal life."

But life in central Hebei's emergency wards and crematoriums is anything but normal. Even as the young go back to work and lines at fever clinics shrink, many of Hebei's elderly are falling into critical condition. As they overrun intensive care units and funeral homes, it could be a harbinger of what's to come for the rest of China.

The Chinese government has reported only seven COVID-19 deaths since restrictions were loosened dramatically on Dec. 7, bringing the country's total toll to 5,241. On Tuesday, a Chinese health official said that China only counts deaths from pneumonia or respiratory failure in its official COVID-19 death toll, a narrow definition that excludes many deaths that would be attributed to COVID-19 in other places.

Experts have forecast between a million and 2 million deaths in China through the end of next year, and a top World Health Organization official warned that Beijing's way of counting would "underestimate the true death toll."

At Baoding No. 2 Hospital in Zhuozhou on Wednesday, patients thronged the hallway of the emergency ward. The sick were breathing with the help of respirators. One woman wailed after doctors told her that a loved one had died.

The ER was so crowded, ambulances were turned away. A medical worker shouted at relatives wheeling in a patient from an arriving ambulance.

"There's no oxygen or electricity in this corridor!" the worker exclaimed. "If you can't even give him oxygen, how can you save him?"

"If you don't want any delays, turn around and get out quickly!" she said.

The relatives left, hoisting the patient back into the ambulance. It took off, lights flashing.

In two days of driving in the region, AP journalists passed around thirty ambulances. On one highway toward Beijing, two ambulances followed each other, lights flashing, as a third passed by heading in the opposite direction. Dispatchers are overwhelmed, with Beijing city officials reporting a sixfold surge in emergency calls earlier this month.

Some ambulances are heading to funeral homes. At the Zhuozhou crematorium, furnaces are burning overtime as workers struggle to cope with a spike in deaths in the past week, according to one employee. A funeral shop worker estimated it is burning 20 to 30 bodies a day, up from three to four before COVID-19 measures were loosened.

"There's been so many people dying," said Zhao Yongsheng, a worker at a funeral goods shop near a local hospital. "They work day and night, but they can't burn them all."

At a crematorium in Gaobeidian, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) south of Zhuozhou, the body of one 82-year-old woman was brought from Beijing, a two-hour drive, because funeral homes in China's capital were packed, according to the woman's grandson, Liang.

"They said we'd have to wait for 10 days," Liang said, giving only his surname because of the sensitivity of the situation.

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Liang's grandmother had been unvaccinated, Liang added, when she came down with coronavirus symptoms, and had spent her final days hooked to a respirator in a Beijing ICU.

Over two hours at the Gaobeidian crematorium on Thursday, AP journalists observed three ambulances and two vans unload bodies. A hundred or so people huddled in groups, some in traditional white Chinese mourning attire. They burned funeral paper and set off fireworks.

"There's been a lot!" a worker said when asked about the number of COVID-19 deaths, before funeral director Ma Xiaowei stepped in and brought the journalists to meet a local government official.

As the official listened in, Ma confirmed there were more cremations, but said he didn't know if COVID-19 was involved. He blamed the extra deaths on the arrival of winter.

"Every year during this season, there's more," Ma said. "The pandemic hasn't really shown up" in the death toll, he said, as the official listened and nodded.

Even as anecdotal evidence and modeling suggests large numbers of people are getting infected and dying, some Hebei officials deny the virus has had much impact.

"There's no so-called explosion in cases, it's all under control," said Wang Ping, the administrative manager of Gaobeidian Hospital, speaking by the hospital's main gate. "There's been a slight decline in patients."

Wang said only a sixth of the hospital's 600 beds were occupied, but refused to allow AP journalists to enter. Two ambulances came to the hospital during the half hour AP journalists were present, and a patient's relative told the AP they were turned away from Gaobeidian's emergency ward because it was full.

Thirty kilometers (19 miles) south in the town of Baigou, emergency ward doctor Sun Yana was candid, even as local officials listened in.

"There are more people with fevers, the number of patients has indeed increased," Sun said. She hesitated, then added, "I can't say whether I've become even busier or not. Our emergency department has always been busy."

The Baigou New Area Aerospace Hospital was quiet and orderly, with empty beds and short lines as nurses sprayed disinfectant. COVID-19 patients are separated from others, staff said, to prevent cross-infection. But they added that serious cases are being directed to hospitals in bigger cities, because of limited medical equipment.

The lack of ICU capacity in Baigou, which has about 60,000 residents, reflects a nationwide problem. Experts say medical resources in China's villages and towns, home to about 500 million of China's 1.4 billion people, lag far behind those of big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Some counties lack a single ICU bed.

As a result, patients in critical condition are forced to go to bigger cities for treatment. In Bazhou, a city 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of Baigou, a hundred or more people packed the emergency ward of Langfang No. 4 People's Hospital on Thursday night.

Guards worked to corral the crowds as people jostled for positions. With no space in the ward, patients spilled into corridors and hallways. Sick people sprawled on blankets on the floor as staff frantically wheeled gurneys and ventilators. In a hallway, half a dozen patients wheezed on metal benches as oxygen tanks pumped air into their noses.

Outside a CT scan room, a woman sitting on a bench wheezed as snot dribbled out of her nostrils into crumpled tissues. A man sprawled out on a stretcher outside the emergency ward as medical workers stuck electrodes to his chest. By a check-in counter, a woman sitting on a stool gasped for air as a young man held her hand.

"Everyone in my family has got COVID," one man asked at the counter, as four others clamored for attention behind him. "What medicine can we get?"

In a corridor, a man paced as he shouted into his cellphone.

"The number of people has exploded!" he said. "There's no way you can get care here, there's far too many people."

It wasn't clear how many patients had COVID-19. Some had only mild symptoms, illustrating another issue, experts say: People in China rely more heavily on hospitals than in other countries, meaning it's

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easier for emergency medical resources to be overloaded.

Over two hours, AP journalists witnessed half a dozen or more ambulances pull up to the hospital's ER and load critical patients to sprint to other hospitals, even as cars pulled up with dozens of new patients.

A beige van pulled up to the ER and honked frantically at a waiting ambulance. "Move!" the driver shouted. "Let's go, let's go!" a panicked voice cried. Five people hoisted a man bundled in blankets out of the back of the van and rushed him into the hospital. Security guards shouted in the packed ward: "Make way, make way!"

The guard asked a patient to move, but backed off when a relative snarled at him. The bundled man was laid on the floor instead, amid doctors running back and forth. "Grandpa!" a woman cried, crouching over the patient.

Medical workers rushed over a ventilator. "Can you open his mouth?" someone shouted.

As white plastic tubes were fitted onto his face, the man began to breathe more easily.

Others were not so lucky. Relatives surrounding another bed began tearing up as an elderly woman's vitals flatlined. A man tugged a cloth over the woman's face, and they stood, silently, before her body was wheeled away.

Within minutes, another patient had taken her place.

A cue for success? Zimbabwe's pool players are betting on it

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — Highlights of the World Cup and other sports events are on widescreen televisions in Ruwa on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. But all eyes are on the pool table ... and the money.

Among them is 18-year-old Levite Chisakarire.

"I have to take the cash home ... there is big money today," he said, holding a pool stick and awaiting his next opponent.

At stake is a \$150 first prize, a princely sum in a country where the majority earn slightly over \$100 a month, according to official government figures, and about half of the 15 million population live in extreme poverty, according to the World Food Program.

"It can go a long way to pay the bills," said the boyish Chisakarire, the youngest player vying for the day's prize.

Previously a minority sport played in Zimbabwe's wealthier neighborhoods, pool has increased in popularity over the years, first as a pastime and now as a survival mode for many in a country where full-time jobs are very hard to come by.

Unable to further his education after finishing high school with low grades in 2019, Chisakarire struggled to find a job in Zimbabwe's stressed industries. The outbreak of COVID-19 meant his father, a truck driver, lost regular work. So Chisakarire began hanging around an illegal tavern where patrons dodged or bribed police to overlook pandemic restrictions so they could drink beer and play pool.

His hobby became a skill and he showed a talent for shooting the round balls into the pockets. Soon it helped solve his financial problems as he began betting on his games and winning. These days he earns about \$300 on a good month by playing pool, he says.

He's not the only one. The majority of Zimbabweans earn a living from informal activities, which include selling tomatoes at roadside stands and also by playing pool, according to an October labor survey by the country's statistics agency. About half of young people aged between 15 and 34 are unemployed and not engaged in education or training.

Some, such as Chisakarire, are finding a livelihood at pool tables.

"Pool became popular as a form of entertainment in bars, but it is now proving to be more popular than soccer in many places," said Michael Kariati, a veteran Zimbabwean sports journalist for over 30 years. "It has evolved into a fiercely competitive sport with people placing bets and surviving off it."

In Harare alone, the number of professional players has quadrupled to about 800 in the past five years,

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according to Keith Goto, spokesman of the Harare Professional Pool Association.

"Then there are the money games that have grown exponentially. You find pool tables everywhere you go in the townships," he said. "It is offering a form of employment and it is paying through betting."

Others warn that betting is a dangerous habit that can have disastrous impacts on families. But with so many people out of work and Zimbabwe's economic outlook so dire, many people are desperately scrambling to make money through a cue stick.

Makeshift pool arcades flourish in bars, verandas in front of shops, and just about any open space. Some enterprising residents have pool tables at their homes where they charge people 50 cents to play and place bets in violation of city laws that require such enterprises to be properly licensed. The tables are often worn and wobbly, but people don't seem to care.

In Warren Park, a Harare township, people ignored the country's biggest local soccer derby at the country's biggest stadium nearby to congregate around pool tables where money changed hands fast.

For quick money, betting takes ingenious means. Instead of playing the entire 8-ball game, some bet on the position of the black eight-ball after the first shot of the game, also called the break. Others punt on the best of three balls. One expert player offered to play using only one hand because people were too hesitant to bet against him.

Authorities sometimes carry out so-called clean-up operations to confiscate pool tables scattered all over. Often enforcers of city by-laws are simply paid off with as little as a \$2 bribe to look the other way. Most punters in low-income townships place dollar bets on games in which they can win \$3 or \$4.

In Ruwa, competition is more organized and stakes are higher. Each club member paid \$10 as a participation fee, which went toward the prize money. On a recent day, 31 players paid to participate. Dozens more were spectators, cheering and betting on their favorite players.

"Imagine taking home \$150! That's more than what many gainfully employed people get per month," said Goto, the spokesman. "Pool should now move from bars to schools and community halls like other sports, it has become mainstream after all."

For Chisakarire, the 18-year-old, pool has become more than a game. From playing and betting in backyard taverns, he is dreaming bigger.

"It has changed my life," he said, before sinking his next ball to win the tournament and pocket \$150. "I can see myself playing in Europe one day."

China races to vaccinate elderly, but many are reluctant

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese authorities are going door to door and paying people older than 60 to get vaccinated against COVID-19. But even as cases surge, 64-year-old Li Liansheng said his friends are alarmed by stories of fevers, blood clots and other side effects.

"When people hear about such incidents, they may not be willing to take the vaccines," said Li, who had been vaccinated before he caught COVID-19. A few days after his 10-day bout with the virus, Li is nursing a sore throat and cough. He said it was like a "normal cold" with a mild fever.

China has joined other countries in treating cases instead of trying to stamp out virus transmission by dropping or easing rules on testing, quarantines and movement as it tries to reverse an economic slump. But the shift has flooded hospitals with feverish, wheezing patients.

The National Health Commission announced a campaign Nov. 29 to raise the vaccination rate among older Chinese, which health experts say is crucial to avoiding a health care crisis. It's also the biggest hurdle before the ruling Communist Party can lift the last of the world's most stringent antivirus restrictions.

China kept case numbers low for two years with a "zero-COVID" strategy that isolated cities and confined millions of people to their homes. Now, as it backs off that approach, it is facing the widespread outbreaks that other countries have already gone through.

The health commission has recorded only six COVID-19 fatalities this month, bringing the country's of-

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ficial toll to 5,241. That is despite multiple reports by families of relatives dying.

China only counts deaths from pneumonia or respiratory failure in its official COVID-19 toll, a health official said last week. That unusually narrow definition excludes many deaths other countries would attribute to COVID-19.

Experts have forecast 1 to 2 million deaths in China through the end of 2023.

Li, who was exercising at the leafy grounds of central Beijing's Temple of Heaven, said he is considering getting a second booster due to the publicity campaign: "As long as we know the vaccine won't cause big side effects, we should take it."

Neighborhood committees that form the lowest level of government have been ordered to find everyone 65 and older and keep track of their health. They are doing what state media call the "ideological work" of lobbying residents to persuade elderly relatives to get vaccinated.

In Beijing, the Chinese capital, the Liuidun neighborhood is promising people over 60 up to 500 yuan (\$70) to get a two-dose vaccination course and one booster.

The National Health Commission announced Dec. 23 the number of people being vaccinated daily had more than doubled to 3.5 million nationwide. But that still is a small fraction of the tens of millions of shots that were being administered every day in early 2021.

Older people are put off by potential side effects of Chinese-made vaccines, for which the government hasn't announced results of testing on people in their 60s and older.

Li said a 55-year-old friend suffered fevers and blood clots after being vaccinated. He said they can't be sure the shot was to blame, but his friend is reluctant to get another.

"It's also said the virus keeps mutating," Li said. "How do we know if the vaccines we take are useful?"

Some are reluctant because they have diabetes, heart problems and other health complications, despite warnings from experts that it is even more urgent for them to be vaccinated because the risks of COVID-19 are more serious than potential vaccine side effects in almost everyone.

A 76-year-old man taking his daily walk around the Temple of Heaven with the aid of a stick said he wants to be vaccinated but has diabetes and high blood pressure. The man, who would give only his surname, Fu, said he wears masks and tries to avoid crowds.

Older people also felt little urgency because low case numbers before the latest surge meant few faced risk of infection. That earlier lack of infections, however, left China with few people who have developed antibodies against the virus.

"Now, the families and relatives of the elderly people should make it clear to them that an infection can cause serious illness and even death," said Jiang Shibo of the Fudan University medical school in Shanghai.

More than 90% of people in China have been vaccinated but only about two-thirds of those over 80, according to the National Health Commission. According to its 2020 census, China has 191 million people aged 65 and over — a group that, on its own, would be the eighth most populous country, ahead of Bangladesh.

"Coverage rates for people aged over 80 still need to be improved," the Shanghai news outlet The Paper said. "The elderly are at high risk."

Du Ming's son arranged to have the 100-year-old vaccinated, according to his caretaker, Li Zhuqing, who was pushing a face-mask-clad Du through a park in a wheelchair. Li agreed with that approach because none of the family members have been infected, which means they'd be more likely to bring the disease home to Du if they were exposed.

Health officials declined requests by reporters to visit vaccination centers. Two who briefly entered centers were ordered to leave when employees found out who they were.

Heavy snow in Japan leaves 17 dead, dozens injured

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Heavy snow in large swaths of Japan has killed 17 and injured more than 90 people and left hundreds of homes without power, disaster management officials said Monday.

Powerful winter fronts have dumped heavy snow in northern regions since last week, stranding hundreds

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of vehicles on highways, delaying delivery services and causing 11 deaths by Saturday. More snowfall over the Christmas weekend brought the number of dead to 17 and injured to 93 by Monday morning, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency. Many of them had fallen while removing snow from the roofs or were buried underneath thick piles of snow sliding off rooftops.

Municipal offices in the snow-hit regions urged residents to use caution during snow removal activity and not to work alone.

The disaster management agency said a woman in her 70s was found dead buried underneath a thick pile of rooftop snow that suddenly fell on her in Yamagata prefecture's Nagai City, about 300 kilometers (180 miles) north of Tokyo, where snow piled up higher than 80 centimeters (2.6 feet) Saturday.

In Niigata, known for rice growing, some makers of mochi, or sticky rice cakes that are staple for New Year's celebration meals, said there have been delivery delays and their mochi may not reach their customers in time.

Many parts of northeastern Japan reported three times their average snowfall for the season.

Heavy snow knocked down an electric power transmission tower in Japan's northernmost main island, leaving about 20,000 homes without power on Christmas morning, though electricity was restored in most areas later that day, according to the economy and industry ministry.

Dozens of trains and flights were also suspended in northern Japan through Sunday, but services have since mostly resumed, according to the transportation ministry.

GOP stumbles with independents contributed to midterm woes

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

EAGAN, Minn. (AP) — As Republican Tyler Kistner's closing ad aired last month in one of the most competitive congressional districts in the U.S., Vickie Klang felt that something was missing.

The 58-year-old veterinary technician and self-described independent voter watched as the 30-second spot showed grainy black-and-white images of President Joe Biden with two-term Democratic Rep. Angie Craig superimposed alongside him. The narrator ominously described life in America as "dangerous and unaffordable" because of an alliance between the two Democrats.

Absent from the ad, Klang thought, was anything close to a solution beyond electing Kistner.

"You're never telling me what you're going to do for the state or the country," Klang recalled. "That's a huge turnoff."

Klang ultimately backed Craig, contributing to a 5 percentage point win for a Democratic incumbent whom Republicans spent more than \$12 million to unseat. From Maine to California, Republicans faced similar unexpected setbacks with the small but crucial slice of voters who don't identify with either major party, according to AP VoteCast, a sweeping national survey of the electorate.

Republican House candidates nationwide won the support of 38% of independent voters in last month's midterm elections, VoteCast showed. That's far short of the 51% that Democrats scored with the same group in 2018 when they swept into power by picking up 41 seats. The GOP's lackluster showing among independents helps explain in part why Republicans flipped just nine seats, securing a threadbare majority that has already raised questions about the party's ability to govern.

Some Republican strategists say the finding is a sign that messages that resonate during party primaries, including searing critiques of Biden, were less effective in the general election campaign because independent voters were searching for more than just the opposition.

"You've got to tell them what you're going to do," said David Winston, a Republican pollster and senior adviser to House Republicans who had been critical of GOP candidates' messaging strategy this year. "Somehow the Republican campaigns managed not to do that. And that's a real serious problem."

In the northern reaches of Minnesota's 2nd congressional district, a swath of lakes and onetime farm country teeming with development near the Twin Cities, more than a dozen independent voters echo Winston's assessment.

Unlike Klang, who grew up in a union Democratic household, Steve Stauff of Shakopee, 20 miles west,

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was raised in a rural, conservative Republican home. The two share a recent history of voting for Republican and Democratic statewide candidates, as well as for independent candidate for governor Jesse Ventura in 1998.

But Kistner's message, like those of other losing Republican challengers in targeted races, appeared aimed more at Republicans than swing voters: simply linking Craig with Biden, whose job disapproval had outpaced approval, and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, widely unpopular with Republicans.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy unveiled a campaign proposal in September titled "Commitment to America," billed as a GOP agenda. However, the proposal, a collection of repackaged goals such as increased domestic petroleum production, was light on details and mentioned little during the campaign.

"We were just being told, 'Pelosi bad, Biden bad, therefore Craig bad,' instead of hearing 'This is my plan to represent this district,'" said Stauff, a 42-year-old sales representative. "If you don't bring me solutions to whatever problems you think we have, how can I take you seriously?"

VoteCast suggests that independent voters distinguished between the problems facing the U.S. and Biden's culpability for them. While few independents said the economy is doing well and about two-thirds disapproved of Biden's handling of it, independents were slightly more likely to say inflation is the result of factors outside Biden's control than that Biden is to blame, 51% to 47%, according to the survey.

But that nuance was often missing from the GOP's political message.

An October Kistner ad included the claim, "Feeling hopeless? Thank Joe Biden and Angie Craig," a point that failed to land with Kathy Lewis, an independent voter from Lakeville, Minnesota.

"I understand how that is so hard on people," said Lewis, a 71-year-old school board member in the Republican-leaning exurb southwest of St. Paul. "I've never really believed the president, no matter who it is ... ever really controlled the inflation. They may have had an effect on it, but they didn't really control it one way or the other."

Democrats did significantly better among true independents and those who lean toward a party than they have in recent midterms when they have also held the White House, according to analysis of Pew Research Center post-election surveys of self-identified voters in 2014, 2010 and 1998.

While questions remained into the fall about the role the Supreme Court's June decision overturning the 1973 landmark abortion rights precedent *Roe v. Wade* would play in the election, several 2nd District Minnesota independents cited it as a driving issue in their support for Craig.

About 7 in 10 independent voters who don't side with either party think abortion should be legal in most or all cases, according to VoteCast, which also found many voters across party lines were hesitant to support candidates who were considered extreme.

Pamela Olson, an independent from rural Farmington, Minnesota, said she doesn't typically vote on a single issue. Nor did she vote for Craig in 2020. That changed with the court's decision, in light of the court decision, Craig's support for abortion rights and Kistner's opposition in most cases.

"It's about freedoms in this country. And I think it is completely up to a woman and her doctor," said Olson, a 56-year-old engineer. "There needs to be a choice for those individuals, not for somebody else to tell you what to do."

Besides the contention that GOP candidates did not focus on independents, Winston suggests that independent voters might be hesitating to lurch toward the alternative in the wake of the turmoil of Donald Trump's presidency.

"Change has to be something they are willing to vote for, as opposed to just the kneejerk reaction that 'this is bad so I'm just going to go another direction,'" Winston said.

China sends 71 warplanes, 7 ships toward Taiwan in 24 hours

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China's military sent 71 planes and seven ships toward Taiwan in a 24-hour display of force directed at the island, Taiwan's defense ministry said Monday, after China expressed anger at Taiwan-related provisions in a U.S. annual defense spending bill passed on Saturday.

China's military harassment of self-ruled Taiwan, which it claims is its own territory, has intensified in

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recent years, and the Communist Party's People's Liberation Army has sent planes or ships toward the island on a near-daily basis.

Between 6 a.m. Sunday and 6 a.m. Monday, 47 of the Chinese planes crossed the median of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial boundary once tacitly accepted by both sides, according to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense.

Among the planes China sent towards Taiwan were 18 J-16 fighter jets, 11 J-1 fighters, 6 Su-30 fighters and drones.

Taiwan said it monitored the Chinese moves through its land-based missile systems, as well as on its own navy vessels.

"This is a firm response to the current US-Taiwan escalation and provocation," said Shi Yi, the spokesman for the PLA's Eastern Theater Command, in a statement on Sunday night. It announced that the PLA was holding joint combat patrols and joint strike drills in the waters around Taiwan.

Shi was referring to the U.S. defense spending bill, which calls China a strategic challenge. With regard to the Indo-Pacific region, the legislation authorizes increased security cooperation with Taiwan and requires expanded cooperation with India on emerging defense technologies, readiness and logistics.

China's military has often used large military exercises as a demonstration of force in response to U.S. government actions in support of Taiwan. It conducted large live-fire military exercises in August in response to U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Beijing views visits from foreign governments to the island as de facto recognition of the island as independent and a challenge to China's claim of sovereignty.

Kathy Whitworth, winningest golfer in history, dies at 83

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

Kathy Whitworth set a benchmark in golf no one has ever touched, whether it was Sam Snead or Tiger Woods, Mickey Wright or Annika Sorenstam. Her 88 victories are the most by any player on a single professional tour.

Whitworth, whose LPGA Tour victories spanned nearly a quarter-century and who became the first woman to earn \$1 million for her career on the LPGA, died on Christmas Eve, her longtime partner said. She was 83.

Bettye Odle did not disclose a cause of death, saying only that Whitworth died suddenly Saturday night while celebrating with family and friends.

"Kathy left this world the way she lived her life — loving, laugh and creating memories," Odle said in a statement released by the LPGA Tour.

Whitworth won the first of her 88 titles in the Kelly Girls Opens in July 1962. She won six majors during her career and broke Mickey Wright's record of 82 career wins when Whitworth captured the Lady Michelob in the summer of 1982.

Her final victory came in 1985 at the United Virginia Bank Classic.

"Winning never got old," Whitworth once said.

All that was missing from her career was the U.S. Women's Open, the biggest of the women's majors. Upon being the first woman to surpass \$1 million in career earnings in 1981, she said, "I would have swapped being the first to make a million for winning the Open, but it was a consolation which took some of the sting out of not winning."

Sorenstam referred to her on Twitter as the LPGA's all-time victory leader and a "total class act" who will be dearly missed.

"Thanks for setting the bar so high, Kathy," she wrote.

Whitworth was the AP Female Athlete of the Year in 1965 and in 1967, when she easily beat out Wimbledon singles champion Billie Jean King. Whitworth was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1982.

She was the LPGA player of the year seven times in an eight-year span (1966 through 1973). She won the Vare Trophy for the lowest scoring average seven times and she was the leading money winner in eight seasons.

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But she was identified by one number — 88.

Snead was credited with a record 82 wins on the PGA Tour, a total Woods has since matched. Wright won 82 times on the LPGA Tour, while Sorenstam had 72 wins when she retired after the 2006 season at age 36.

"I think Mickey had the best swing, and was probably the greatest golfer," Betsy Rawls once told Golf Digest. "But Kathy was the best player of the game that I have ever seen."

Whitworth was born in Monahans, a small West Texas town, and learned to play golf in New Mexico. She started at age 15 in Jal, New Mexico, on the nine-hole course built for the El Paso Natural Gas employees.

She soon was a two-time winner of the New Mexico State Amateur. After briefly attending Odessa (Texas) College, she turned pro at age 19 and joined the LPGA Tour in December 1958.

"I was really fortunate in that I knew what I wanted to do," Whitworth once told Golf Digest. "Golf just grabbed me by the throat. I can't tell you how much I loved it. I used to think everyone knew what they wanted to do when they were 15 years old."

Wright had the more aesthetically pleasing swing. Whitworth was all about grinding, and about winning.

Whitworth won eight times in 1963 and 1965, and she had 11 victories in 1968. In none of those years did she earn more than \$50,000. All these years later, the LPGA Tour total prize fund for 2023 will top \$100 million.

Whitworth continued to conduct junior clinics and stay active in the game.

"I don't think about the legacy of 88 tournaments," she once said. "I did it because I wanted to win, not to set a record or a goal that no one else could surpass. I'm not some great oddity. I was just fortunate to be so successful. What I did in being a better player does not make me a better person.

"When I'm asked how I would like to be remembered, I feel that if people remember me at all, it will be good enough."

Biden, first lady thank service members in Christmas calls

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden celebrated a quiet Christmas with his family at the White House and spoke with service members stationed around the world.

"They're away from their families to protect us," Biden said in a tweet. "And they have the thanks of a grateful, indebted president."

The White House said Biden and the first lady, Jill, called members of the Army stationed at Panama City, Panama; the Navy aboard the USS The Sullivans in the Arabian Sea; the Marine Corps at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego; the Air Force at Okinawa, Japan; the Space Force in Europe; and the Coast Guard aboard the cutter Bertholf in Alameda, California.

This is Biden's second Christmas as president. On Saturday, Biden and his family joined a Mass on Christmas Eve at the White House and continued their holiday tradition of an Italian dinner.

The president and first lady on Friday also carried on another tradition with their second holiday visit to Children's National Hospital. Biden was the first sitting president to join his wife when they visited hospitalized children and their families before Christmas last year, according to the White House.

Surrounded by Christmas trees and holiday decorations, the first lady read "The Snowy Day" with the president's help holding up the book.

Biden last week encouraged national unity in a recorded address, calling out the nation's political divisions and saying he hoped "this holiday season will drain the poison that has infected our politics and set us against one another."

"So, this Christmas, let's spread a little kindness," he said.

'Avatar' sequel sails to 2nd week atop the box office

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Avatar: The Way of Water" sailed to the top of the box office in its second weekend, bringing in what studios estimate Sunday will be a strong \$56 million in North America — a sign that the sequel may stay afloat into the new year and approach the massive expectations that met its release.

James Cameron's digital extravaganza for 20th Century Studios has made \$253.7 million domestically in its first 10 days of release, compared to \$212.7 million in the same stretch for 2009's first "Avatar," which would go on to become the highest-grossing film of all time.

While Cameron's films like the "Avatar" original and "Titanic" tend to have serious legs at the box office, sequels tend to open big and decline quickly, complicating guesses on where the film will end up. Its second-weekend drop-off from the \$134 million it made in its first was not precipitous, given the way blockbusters open.

"This is James Cameron's first \$100 million opener," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for Comscore. "For this movie to have opened that big and only dropped 58%, it shows it has staying power."

Globally, "The Way of Water" is already the third highest-grossing film released in 2022, bringing in \$855 million — putting it behind only "Top Gun: Maverick" and "Jurassic World Dominion" — and is a lock to surpass \$1 billion.

It's also clear sailing for the film looking ahead, with more holiday time coming and no comparable competition until February, when Marvel's "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" is released.

Storms across the U.S. could keep people home, however.

"The biggest foe that Avatar is facing at this moment is the weather," Dergarabedian said.

Universal's animated Shrek spinoff, "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," featuring the voices of Antonio Banderas and Salma Hayek, finished a distant second with \$11.35 million in its opening weekend.

Sony's biopic "Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody" finished third with \$5.3 million.

The weekend's biggest disappointment was "Babylon," the epic of early Hollywood from "La La Land" director Damian Chazelle starring Brad Pitt and Margo Robbie. In a nationwide release it brought in just \$3.5 million, finishing fourth.

The tepid, \$6.5 million opening weekend in October of director David O. Russell's "Amsterdam," another film, set in a similar period, that combined prestige, scope, star power and a celebrated auteur, brought industry worries that audiences just weren't flocking to theaters for such films.

The concerns proved justified, as "Babylon" barely made more than half of the opening of "Amsterdam."

The coming weeks in theaters, streaming showings and any nominations it may get could help "Babylon" rise above bomb status.

"I would say Babylon is a movie that isn't about the opening weekend," Dergarabedian said. "We'll have to see what it does in the coming weeks then into the new year, particularly if it gets more awards buzz."

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore, with Wednesday through Sunday in parentheses. Final domestic figures will be released Monday.

1. "Avatar: The Way of Water," \$56 million.
2. "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," 11.35 million.
3. "Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance with Somebody," \$5.3 million.
4. "Babylon," \$3.5 million.
5. "Violent Night," \$3.14 million.
6. "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever," \$3 million.
7. "The Whale," \$924,000.
8. "The Menu," \$617,000.
9. "The Fabelmans," \$550,000.
10. "Strange World," \$410,000.

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Report: 2 missing after Austria avalanche, fewer than feared

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Rescue workers were searching for two missing people after an avalanche swept across ski trails in western Austria on Sunday, the dpa news agency reported.

Initially up to 10 people were feared missing based on video from a witness, but eight of those individuals had been identified and were no longer feared buried, dpa reported citing a spokesman of the rescue team.

About 200 rescue workers were searching the avalanche site near the town of Zuers.

The avalanche occurred at around 3 p.m. (1400 GMT) on the 2,700-meter (nearly 9,000-foot) high Trittkopf mountain between Zuers and Lech am Arlberg, and the cascading snow reached as far as nearby ski trails.

The avalanche followed days of snow in the high alpine region and unseasonably warm weather on Christmas Day. The local mountain rescue service had rated the avalanche danger as "high."

Officials said one person could be recovered quickly. Searchlights were set up on the snow mass to continue the search after darkness fell, and dogs were being used to try to find the missing.

UFC Hall of Famer Stephan Bonnar dead at age 45

By The Associated Press undefined

Former fighter Stephan Bonnar, who played a significant role in the UFC's growth into the dominant promotion in mixed martial arts, has died, UFC announced. He was 45.

Bonnar, who was inducted into the UFC's Hall of Fame in 2013, died Thursday from "presumed heart complications while at work," according to a statement from UFC on Saturday. No further details were released.

Bonnar, who originally was from Indiana, hadn't fought in the UFC since 2014, and he went just 8-6 during seven years with the promotion.

He was a contestant in 2005 on the first season of "The Ultimate Fighter," the UFC's long-running reality competition show. He reached the competition's finale, where he had a spectacular, bloody brawl with Forrest Griffin.

Griffin won the decision, but the viral attention gained by the highly entertaining bout is widely credited with exposing the little-known sport to a larger worldwide audience online and on Spike TV, which broadcast it.

"Stephan Bonnar was one of the most important fighters to ever compete in the Octagon," UFC president Dana White said in the statement. "His fight with Forrest Griffin changed the sport forever, and he will never be forgotten. The fans loved him, related to him and he always gave them his best. He will be missed."

Migrants dropped near VP Harris home on frigid Christmas Eve

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three buses of recent migrant families arrived from Texas near the home of Vice President Kamala Harris in record-setting cold on Christmas Eve.

Texas authorities have not confirmed their involvement, but the bus drop-offs are in line with previous actions by border-state governors calling attention to the Biden administration's immigration policies.

The buses that arrived late Saturday outside the vice president's residence were carrying around 110 to 130 people, according to Tatiana Laborde, managing director of SAMU First Response, a relief agency working with the city of Washington to serve thousands of migrants who have been dropped off in recent months.

Local organizers had expected the buses to arrive Sunday but found out Saturday that the group would get to Washington early, Laborde said. The people on board included young children.

Some were wearing T-shirts despite temperatures hovering around 15 degrees Fahrenheit (-9 degrees Celsius). It was the coldest Christmas Eve on record for Washington, according to the Washington Post.

Laborde said employees had blankets ready for the people who arrived on Christmas Eve and moved them quickly onto waiting buses for a ride to an area church. A local restaurant chain donated dinner and breakfast.

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Most of the arrivals were headed to other destinations and expected to remain in Washington only briefly. Gov. Greg Abbott's office did not respond to a request for comment Sunday morning. His office said last week that Texas has given bus rides to more than 15,000 people since April to Washington, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

Abbott and Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, both Republicans, are strong critics of President Joe Biden on his handling of the U.S.-Mexico border, where thousands of people are trying to cross daily, many to seek asylum. Officials on both sides of the border are seeking emergency help in setting up shelters and services for migrants, some of whom are sleeping on streets.

Republicans argue Biden and Harris, designated the administration's point person on the root causes of migration, have relaxed restrictions that induced many people to leave their countries of origin. Biden has ended some policies but kept others enacted by former President Donald Trump, whose administration also grappled with spikes in border crossings and at one point separated immigrant families and children as a deterrence initiative.

White House spokesperson Abdullah Hasan called the bus drop-offs a "cruel, dangerous, and shameful stunt."

"As we have repeatedly said, we are willing to work with anyone – Republican or Democrat alike – on real solutions, like the comprehensive immigration reform and border security measures President Biden sent to Congress on his first day in office, but these political games accomplish nothing and only put lives in danger," Hasan said in a statement Sunday.

Putin claims Moscow ready for Ukraine talks as attacks go on

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia is ready for talks to end the war in Ukraine even as the country faced more attacks from Moscow — a clear sign that peace wasn't imminent.

Putin said in a state television interview, excerpts of which were released on Sunday afternoon that Russia is "prepared to negotiate some acceptable outcomes with all the participants of this process."

He said that "it's not us who refuse talks, it's them" — something the Kremlin has repeatedly stated in recent months as its 10-month old invasion kept losing momentum.

Putin also repeated that Moscow has "no other choice" and said he believed the Kremlin was "acting in the right direction."

"We're defending our national interests, the interests of our citizens, our people," he said.

Putin's remarks come as attacks on Ukraine continue. A country-wide air raid alert was announced twice on Sunday alone, and three missiles in the afternoon hit the city of Kramatorsk in the partially occupied Donetsk region, local officials reported.

The missiles hit an industrial area of the city, and there weren't any casualties, according to the Ukrainian governor of Donetsk, Pavlo Kyrylenko. Kyrylenko said that the city of Avdiivka was also attacked on Sunday with six rounds of shelling, and a woman was wounded there.

Elsewhere in the front-line region, around the city of Bakhmut, where fierce battles have been underway in recent weeks, the Russian forces were struggling to keep up the pace of their offensive, a U.S.-based think tank reported this weekend.

"Russian forces' rate of advance in the Bakhmut area has likely slowed in recent days, although it is too early to assess whether the Russian offensive to capture Bakhmut has culminated," the Institute for the Study of War wrote in its recent update.

The think tank cited Russian military bloggers, who it said have recently acknowledged "that Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut area have managed to slightly slow down the pace of the Russian advance around Bakhmut and its surrounding settlements."

Sources on Ukrainian social media "previously claimed that Ukrainian forces completely pushed Russian forces out of the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut" around Dec. 21, the report added.

"Russian forces will likely struggle to maintain the pace of their offensive operations in the Bakhmut area and may seek to initiate a tactical or operational pause," the institute concluded.

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A day before, a deadly Russian attack on the southern city of Kherson, retaken by Ukrainian forces last month, killed and wounded scores of people.

The Russian forces shelled Ukrainian-held areas of the partially occupied Kherson region 71 times over the past 24 hours, including 41 attacks on the city of Kherson, the region's Ukrainian governor Yaroslav Yanushevich reported on Sunday.

A total of 16 people have been killed, according to the official, including three emergency workers killed in the process of demining the Berislav district of the region. Yanushevich said that 64 more have been wounded.

In the neighboring Dnipropetrovsk region, the city of Nikopol was shelled overnight from heavy artillery, Gov. Valentyn Reznichenko said. No casualties have been reported.

Some Ukrainians move up Christmas to part ways with Russia

By RENATA BRITO and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

BOBRYTSIA, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainians usually celebrate Christmas on Jan. 7, as do the Russians. But not this year, or at least not all of them.

Some Orthodox Ukrainians have decided to observe Christmas on Dec. 25, like many Christians around the world. Yes, this has to do with the war, and yes, they have the blessing of their local church.

The idea of commemorating the birth of Jesus in December was considered radical in Ukraine until recently, but Russia's invasion changed many hearts and minds.

In October, the leadership of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is not aligned with the Russian church and one of two branches of Orthodox Christianity in the country, agreed to allow faithful to celebrate on Dec. 25.

The choice of dates has clear political and religious overtones in a nation with rival Orthodox churches and where slight revisions to rituals can carry potent meaning in a culture war that runs parallel to the shooting war.

For some people, changing dates represents a separation from Russia, its culture, and religion. People in a village on the outskirts of Kyiv voted recently to move up their Christmas observance.

"What began on Feb. 24, the full-scale invasion, is an awakening and an understanding that we can no longer be part of the Russian world," Olena Paliy, a 33-year-old Bobrytsia resident, said.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which claims sovereignty over Orthodoxy in Ukraine, and some other Eastern Orthodox churches continue to use the ancient Julian calendar. Christmas falls 13 days later on that calendar, or Jan. 7, than it does on the Gregorian calendar used by most church and secular groups.

The Catholic Church first adopted the modern, more astronomically precise Gregorian calendar in the 16th century, and Protestants and some Orthodox churches have since aligned their own calendars for purposes of calculating Christmas.

The Synod of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine decreed in October that local church rectors could choose the date along with their communities, saying the decision followed years of discussion but also resulted from the circumstances of the war.

In Bobrytsia, some members of the faith promoted the change within the local church, which recently transitioned to being part of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, with no ties to Russia. When a vote was taken last week, 200 out of 204 people said yes to adopting Dec. 25 as the new day to celebrate Christmas.

"This is a big step because never in our history have we had the same dates of celebration of Christmas in Ukraine with the whole Christian world. All the time we were separated," said Roman Ivanenko, a local official in Bobrytsia, and one of the promoters of the change. With the switch, he said, they are "breaking this connection" with the Russians.

As in all the Kyiv region, Sunday morning in Bobrytsia began with the sound of sirens, but that didn't prevent people from gathering in the church to attend a Christmas Mass on Dec. 25 for the first time. In the end, there were no attacks reported in the capital.

"No enemy can take away the holiday because the holiday is born in the soul," the Rev. Rostyslav Korchak

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said in his homily, during which he used the words "war," "soldiers," and "evil" more than "Jesus Christ."

Anna Nezenko, 65, attended the church in Bobrytsia on every Christmas since the building was inaugurated in 2000, although always on Jan. 7th. She said she did not feel strange doing so Sunday.

"The most important is the God to be born in the heart," she said.

In 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church, granted complete independence, or autocephaly, to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Ukrainians who favored recognition for a national church in tandem with Ukraine's political independence from the former Soviet Union had long sought such approval.

The Russian Orthodox Church and its leader, Patriarch Kirill, fiercely protested the move, saying Ukraine was not under the jurisdiction of Bartholomew.

The other major branch of Orthodoxy in the country, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, remained loyal to Moscow until the outbreak of war. It declared independence in May, though it remains under government scrutiny. That church has traditionally celebrated Christmas on Jan. 7.

China's foreign minister signals deeper ties with Russia

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi defended what he said was his country's position of impartiality on the war in Ukraine on Sunday and signaled that China would deepen ties with Russia in the coming year.

Wang, speaking by video to a conference in the Chinese capital, also blamed America for the deterioration in relations between the world's two largest economies, saying that China has "firmly rejected the United States' erroneous China policy."

China has pushed back against Western pressure on trade, technology, human rights and its claims to a broad swath of the western Pacific, accusing the U.S. of bullying. Its refusal to condemn the invasion of Ukraine and join others in imposing sanctions on Russia has further frayed ties and fueled an emerging divide with much of Europe.

Wang said that China would "deepen strategic mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation" with Russia. Warships from the two countries held joint naval drills in the East China Sea last week.

"With regard to the Ukraine crisis, we have consistently upheld the fundamental principles of objectivity and impartiality, without favoring one side or the other, or adding fuel to the fire, still less seeking selfish gains from the situation," Wang said, according to an official text of his remarks.

Even as China has found common ground with Russia as both come under Western pressure, its economic future remains tied to American and European markets and technology. Leader Xi Jinping is pushing Chinese industry to become more self-sufficient, but Wang acknowledged that experience has shown "that China and the United States cannot decouple or sever supply chains."

He said that China would strive to bring relations with the U.S. back on course, saying they had plunged because "the United States has stubbornly continued to see China as its primary competitor and engage in blatant blockade, suppression and provocation against China."

Wang and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked by phone late last week. The State Department said that Blinken discussed the need to manage the U.S.-China relationship responsibly and raised concerns about Russia's war against Ukraine and the threats it poses to global security and economic stability.

Wang accused the U.S. of "unilateral bullying" and said that China would continue to play a constructive role in resolving the Ukraine crisis in its own way, a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said.

Today in History: December 26, deadly tsunami in Asia

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 26, the 360th day of 2022. There are five days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

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On Dec. 26, 2004, more than 230,000 people, mostly in southern Asia, were killed by a 100-foot-high tsunami triggered by a 9.1-magnitude earthquake beneath the Indian Ocean.

On this date:

In 1799, former President George Washington was eulogized by Col. Henry Lee as "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

In 1865, James H. Nason of Franklin, Massachusetts, received a patent for "an improved coffee percolator."

In 1908, Jack Johnson became the first African-American boxer to win the world heavyweight championship as he defeated Canadian Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia.

In 1917, during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation authorizing the government to take over operation of the nation's railroads.

In 1941, during World War II, Winston Churchill became the first British prime minister to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress.

In 1966, Kwanzaa was first celebrated.

In 1980, Iranian television footage was broadcast in the United States showing a dozen of the American hostages sending messages to their families.

In 1990, Nancy Cruzan, the young woman in an irreversible vegetative state whose case led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision on the right to die, died at a Missouri hospital.

In 1994, French commandos stormed a hijacked Air France jetliner on the ground in Marseille, killing four Algerian hijackers and freeing 170 hostages.

In 1996, six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey was found beaten and strangled in the basement of her family's home in Boulder, Colorado. (To date, the slaying remains unsolved.)

In 2003, an earthquake struck the historic Iranian city of Bam, killing at least 26,000 people.

In 2006, former President Gerald R. Ford died in Rancho Mirage, California, at age 93.

Ten years ago: Toyota Motor Corp. said it had reached a settlement worth more than \$1 billion in a case involving unintended acceleration problems in its vehicles. Soul singer Fontella Bass, 72, died in St. Louis.

Five years ago: The snowfall total from a storm that began on Christmas Day reached 53 inches in Erie, Pennsylvania - the biggest-ever two-day total in the state's history. The cities of New York, San Francisco and Philadelphia sued the Defense Department, charging that the military failed to properly use the national background check system for guns; the lawsuit said the failure to report criminal records of service members had allowed a former member of the Air Force to kill more than two dozen people at a Texas church in November. Voters in Liberia went to the polls for a runoff election that saw former soccer star George Weah elected as the African country's new president.

One year ago: South African Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu died at 90; the retired archbishop had been an uncompromising foe of apartheid and a modern-day activist for racial justice and LGBT rights. A major Christmas weekend storm caused whiteout conditions and closed key highways amid blowing snow in mountains of Northern California and Nevada.

Today's Birthdays: R&B singer Abdul "Duke" Fakir (The Four Tops) is 87. "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh is 77. Country musician Bob Carpenter (The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) is 76. Funk musician George Porter Jr. (The Meters) is 75. Baseball Hall of Fame catcher Carlton Fisk is 75. Retired MLB All-Star Chris Chambliss is 74. Baseball Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith is 68. Former Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana is 67. Humorist David Sedaris is 66. Rock musician James Kottak (The Scorpions) is 60. Rock musician Lars Ulrich (Metallica) is 59. Actor Nadia Dajani is 57. Rock singer James Mercer (The Shins; Flake) is 52. Actor-singer Jared Leto is 51. Actor Kendra C. Johnson is 46. Rock singer Chris Daughtry is 43. Actor Beth Behrs is 37. Actor Kit Harington is 36. Actor Eden Sher is 31. Pop singer Jade Thirlwall (Little Mix) is 30. Actor Zach Mills is 27.