

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

Monday, Jan. 30

Senior Menu: Goulash, corn, garlic breadstick, baked apples.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Pepperoni pizza, green beans.

Girls Basketball vs. Florence/Henry at Florence: C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and varsity.

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

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

Tuesday, Jan. 31

Senior Menu: Ham, sweet potatoes, mixed vegetables, tropical fruit, dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Pancake on a stick.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Boys Basketball at Langford: JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

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

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

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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



Wednesday, Feb. 1

Senior Menu: Breaded cod, parsley buttered potatoes, squash, Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Hashbrown pizza.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

United Methodist Church: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

Groton Chamber Board Meeting, noon, at City Hall
Groton Lions Dress Consignment, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Weekly Vikings Recap - Championship Round

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

San Francisco 49ers vs. Philadelphia Eagles

With the San Francisco 49ers losing both of their quarterbacks to injuries Sunday, the Philadelphia Eagles coast their way to victory and their fourth Super Bowl appearance in their franchise's history.

There was a lot of excitement heading into this NFC Championship matchup as the 49ers entered the game on a 12-game winning streak and would be the first real test for the Eagles who were able to avoid playing any of the top teams in the NFL this season. However, that excitement quickly went away as the 49ers' quarterback, Brock Purdy, hurt his elbow in the first quarter and was taken out of the game. Then the 49ers had to bring in Josh Johnson, the 15-year NFL journeyman with 14 teams to his name, to take over as their quarterback. And then when Johnson went down with a concussion, Purdy had to come back into the game even though he was unable to throw the ball.

For a 49ers' team that had everything stacked against them, they did themselves no favors throughout the game. They not only had three fumbles lost, but they also committed 11 penalties, many of which came on key third and fourth down stops by the 49ers' defense. The biggest mistake of them all came at the end of the first half when Josh Johnson fumbled a perfectly snapped ball out of the shotgun formation. At the time 49ers were still within one score of the Eagles and were set to get the ball to start the second half. Instead, Eagles recovered the fumble and extended their lead to 21-7 at halftime. The game was essentially over from that moment on.

As for the Eagles, their performance was not as dominant as the score reflects. The team only had a total of 269 yards of offense and Jalen Hurts threw for a measly 121 passing yards. Unless they get gifted another quarterback injury in the Super Bowl, the Eagles' offense will need to pick it up to keep up with the Chiefs' offense in Super Bowl LVII.

Eagles 31 - 49ers 7

Cincinnati Bengals vs. Kansas City Chiefs

After watching a complete blowout in the NFC Championship game, we thankfully were gifted a great back-and-forth game between the Cincinnati Bengals and the Kansas City Chiefs. The AFC Championship rematch from last year showcased arguably the two best quarterbacks in the NFL in Joe Burrow and Patrick Mahomes. Although it was not a perfect game by either of the star quarterbacks, the plays they made when it mattered the most are what makes them so special.

The number of stars on offense for both teams was so impressive to watch. Bengals' wide receivers, Tee Higgins and Ja'Marr Chase, both made impressive catches over double coverages by Chiefs' defensive backs in do-or-die situations for the Bengals. For the Chiefs, Travis Kelce and Marquez Valdes-Scantling combined for an impressive 13 catches, 194 receiving yards, and a touchdown each.

With 2:30 remaining, the game was tied 20-20 and the Bengals got the ball on their 6-yard line with a chance for Burrow to drive the Bengals down the field and beat the Chiefs for the fourth straight time in his short career. However, the Chiefs' defensive lineman, Chris Jones, put the game into his hands and sacked Burrow on third down.

With limited time remaining, the Chiefs got the ball back with a chance to put themselves in field goal position to win the game. With 20 seconds remaining, Mahomes, who had been hobbling in pain all game from his injured ankle, scrambled out of the pocket to the sideline. As he stepped out-of-bounds, Bengals' linebacker, Joseph Ossai, pushed Mahomes late, leading to a 15-yard penalty. The flag put the Chiefs into field goal range with 8 seconds remaining in the game. Harrison Butker, who I feel is becoming like the modern Adam Vinatieri with his clutch playoff kicks, nailed the 45-yard field goal to give the Chiefs the AFC title.

Chiefs 23 - Bengals 20

Looking ahead, the NFL Pro Bowl game will be this weekend. There will be a skills competition on Thursday, followed by a flag football match on Sunday. Six Vikings made it to the Pro Bowl, a total surpass by only the Eagles (8), Cowboys (7), and Chiefs (7). Representing the Vikings will be WR Justin Jefferson, QB Kirk Cousins, RB Dalvin Cook, TE T.J. Hockenson, OLB Za'Darius Smith, and long snapper Andrew DePaola.

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**King Carter Barse
Queen Anna Fjeldheim**

2023 Carnival of Silver Skates

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The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

prison if he gets indicted in any of the ongoing criminal investigations against him, former federal prosecutor Glenn Kirschner said.

- U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak fired Conservative Party chair Nadhim Zahawi after an investigation into his tax affairs found a "serious breach of ministerial code."
- Annie Wersching, an actress known for her roles in notable TV series like 24 and Bosch, has died at age of 45 from cancer.
- Utah's GOP Governor Spencer Cox signed a bill that would ban gender-affirming health care for transgender children with immediate effect.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, former U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson told BBC that Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened him with a missile strike during a phone call before the invasion of Ukraine.

- House Speaker Kevin McCarthy is expected to meet President Joe Biden today to "find a reasonable and a responsible way" to raise the country's debt ceiling while also controlling government spending.

- Kansas City Chiefs pulled out a thrilling last-second victory over the Cincinnati Bengals in the AFC Championship Game. The K.C. will now meet NFC-Champion Philadelphia Eagles, who won 31-7 over the San Francisco 49ers, in the Super Bowl in two weeks.

- Donald Trump will "fold like a house of cards" to avoid

H E L P
W A N T E D

Position available for full-time Police Officer. Experience and SD Certification preferred. Salary negotiable DOE. Please send application and resume to the City of Groton, PO Box 587, Groton, SD 57445. This position is open until filled. Applications may be found at <https://www.city.grotonsd.gov/forms/Application-ForCityEmployeePO.pdf>. For more information, please call 605-397-8422. Equal opportunity employer.

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Robotics go to Valley City Tournament – January 28th



Galaxy 9050E, Axel Warrington, Logan Clocksene, and Corbin Weismantel, in the pits working on their robot. (Courtesy Photo)



Gear Heads 9050B, Jack Dinger and Ethan Clark getting 9050B ready for the day. (Courtesy Photo)

Groton Robotics traveled up to Valley city, North Dakota to participate in the Valley City Frozen Classic on Saturday, January 28th competing against 11 teams from 4 towns- Groton (3), Valley City (1), Britton (2), Grand Forks (5):

Groton Teams included: Galaxy 9050E-Logan Clocksene, Axel Warrington, Corbin Weismantel, not present Kianna Sanders. Gear Heads 9050B-Ethan Clark, Jack Dinger. Gladiators 9050F-Garrett Schultz, De Eh Tha Say, not present Bradyn Wienk.

The competition started off with 22 qualifying matches, each team competing 8 times. At the end of the 22 qualifying matches Gear Heads 9050B was ranked 2nd, Gladiators 9050F - 4th, and Galaxy 9050E - 10th.

Gear Head Seniors-Ethan and Jack, added an expansion arm to help catapult their end game expansion feature more efficiently and faster. They also added a sensor laser to add more precision when shooting disks into goals. Gear Heads fought their way to the finals but ended up walking away second place in the overall tournament. The team was up against a pretty tough opponent from Grand Forks who was able to precisely shoot disks and also won their autonomous.

Gladiators, Garrett and De Eh Tha Say, made changes to their robot by taking off one expansion feature to reduce some bulk. Their robot is able to shoot, but the team is still working on intake or being able to take a disk and shoot it. The Gladiators worked their way to the semi-finals competing against Gear Heads but ended their day here with a score of 66-49.

Galaxy, Corbin, Axel and Logan, also worked on their robot the last couple weeks adding new roller flex wheels, which are soft wheels making it easier to turn rollers. The team continues to work on the design of their shooter.

Tournament champions were both from Grand Forks, ND. Congratulations to all the robotist who participated!

Groton Robotics will be headed back out to Rapid City February 11th to compete in the VRC Robot Rumble at the SD School of Mines.

For more information check out the vex VRC robotics website, download the VEX via app and follow Groton Tiger Robotics on Facebook.

Thanks to all who support Groton Robotics!

Submitted by Groton Robotics

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Gladiators 9050F, Garrett Schultz and De Eh Tha Say, getting their robot ready for the tournament. (Courtesy Photo)



Gear Heads-Ethan Clark and Jack Dinger alliance with partners, Gladiators- Garrett Schultz and De Eh Tha Say. (Courtesy Photo)

GDILIVE.COM

Looking for sponsors for these upcoming games.

**Deuel Boys and Girls JV
JH Boys Games with Aberdeen Christian on Feb. 6
North Central Boys JV Game
Elk Point-Jefferson Girls JV Game in Groton on Feb. 9
Redfield Girls JV and C games
Mobridge-Pollock Girls JV**

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Higher Power Sports



➤ **FREE Event**

➤ **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!**

Groton Fellowship of Christian Students
presents **TWO** motivational speakers,

Tim Weidenbach & Deb Hadley

➤ **Sunday,
February 5th
3:16pm**
➤ **at the Groton
Methodist
Church**



Tim's Character Coaching & Be Kind Talk:

Higher Power Sports supports & serves HS & College athletes, coaches & families throughout the Midwest. He focuses on leadership, perseverance, opportunity, integrity, loyalty & making an impact on the teams he serves. Tim shares a fun & inspiring message on how kindness is contagious & encourages acceptance.

Deb's Overcoming Adversity Presentation:

Adversity is inevitable. Deb has had more than her share of loss. Often our students are caught off guard & lack the skill set to cope with hardships that come their way. Broken relationships, setbacks from COVID, bullying, lack of playing time, academic struggles, poor body image & low self-esteem, struggles at home &/or the death of loved ones, are some of the possibilities that can send the life of a student spiraling out of control. The goal of this seminar is to equip today's youth with the tools to help prepare them to handle the hardships that come their way & inspire them to turn their setbacks into opportunities to better their lives!

Military Appreciation Night at the Groton Arena

Everyone is invited to the Groton Arena on Feb. 2 to watch girls and boys basketball games and to show your support for active duty military and veterans. Our dress up theme for the night is Camo or Red, White, and Blue. Active duty personnel and veterans will be admitted FREE to the doubleheader.

There will be many veteran service organizations set up to provide current information on veteran benefits and some organizations that advocate for veterans, educate citizens, mentor youth, and promote patriotism, citizenship, peace and security.

SFC Brent Wienk, SDANG Senior Recruiter, will be present to answer study body questions about joining the military. We may even have a Drill Sgt. in the house ready to give potential recruits some basic training drills.

Veterans and active military can sign up for chances to win gift cards at the American Legion Auxiliary booth. Everyone is encouraged to find the card booth to create cards for the Army National Guard unit currently mobilized for their deployment to the Middle East and lastly, everyone is invited to donate money to DTOM Veterans Ranch.

According to the DTOM Veterans Ranch website, "The Mission of the DTOM 22/0 Foundation and Veterans Ranch is to provide a safe place for healing and recovery for military service members, veterans, and their families while encouraging engaging, and positively impacting their lives through hope, self-conviction, and family activities, while helping them learn to live again with purpose. Vision: To end suicide among our service men and women, through mentorship, support, and building stronger families. Chris Reder is the CEO and Founder and the MRMS Program was founded by Dr. Tracy Diefenbach, and is currently practiced at the DTOM Veterans Ranch. This program is an innovative, scientific-based Neural Oscillation Excitability and Sensory Recovery program that focuses on healing components of the brain's processing and function command centers." You can find out more information at this event or by going to <https://dtom220.org/>.

Please plan to cheer on the Groton Tiger basketball teams and groove to the pep band! Then show your support and thanks to active military and veterans by wearing Red, White, Blue or Camo, giving a cash donation to DTOM Ranch, participating in making cards for active duty soldiers, and learning about the organizations that support our active military and veterans, and joining in their programs like Boys and Girls State, playing American Legion Baseball, writing an Americanism Essay or Poem, or wearing a poppy, or making a poppy poster.

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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.



The Constitution and Government Classification of Secrets

Questions surrounding news that President Joe Biden and former Vice President Mike Pence have disclosed possession of classified documents in their homes justify interruption of this column's weekly focus on landmark Supreme Court rulings. Curious readers have asked about the constitutional, legal and historical foundations of government authority to classify documents.

By David Adler

First things first. Let's not confuse the voluntary and cooperative disclosure of possession of classified documents by the Biden and Pence camps with the deceit and obstruction that characterized former President Donald Trump's efforts to undermine the Justice Department's investigation of his secretive possession of classified documents at his home in Mar-a-lago. In the scheme of things, at least this far, Biden and Pence are apples to apples, while Biden and Pence are apples to Trump's oranges.

The U.S. Supreme Court has said little about the constitutional authority to govern classification of documents, but what it has said points to executive control of the secrecy system by virtue of the president's role as Commander in Chief of the military. Yet, questions abound. The Constitution is silent on the repository of authority to classify documents. Secrecy in a democracy, moreover, is guaranteed to be a source of enduring contention.

Nobody disputes the necessity of secrecy in the affairs of state. John Jay, who possessed as much knowledge about foreign affairs as any of his founding colleagues, wrote in Federalist No. 64: "So often and so essentially have we heretofore suffered from the want of secrecy and dispatch, that the Constitution would have been inexcusably defective if no attention had been paid to those objects." The only provision in the Constitution that addresses secrecy is found in Article 1, section 5, which grants to Congress, if it wishes, authority to keep its own proceedings secret.

In the 1790s, the Federalists—the party of Washington, Hamilton and Adams—interpreted the Constitution as it applied to foreign affairs as authority for executive secrecy when it came to negotiations and matters of intelligence. There was, however, a clear understanding in the first decade of American politics that the principle of "comity" between the president and Congress required presidential permission from Congress to withhold information from the citizenry. That practice worked efficiently, and the conflicts that arose typically reflected, not interbranch disputes, but rather the demands of aggrieved citizens who feared suppression of information.

The demands of democracy and the principles of self-governance were not to be denied. Democracy encouraged the principle of disclosure. From the beginning, our founders embraced the belief that disclosure and transparency represented the best remedies for resolving policy disputes. James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, spoke for the generation that conceived the republic: "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance," he wrote, "and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

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Historic conflicts between secrecy and publicity have erupted most prominently during times of war when both principles have been urged with urgency. In wartime, governmental calculations are inspired by fears of espionage. Control of information is vital. But the fact of war focuses the citizenry; fear of death and the goal of survival become paramount. Because Americans are not, to borrow from Thoreau, mere "lumps of clay," but rather thinking, reasoning creatures, they prefer the light of knowledge to the impotence of darkness and demand information that empowers them to judge official strategies and decisions of war.

Until World War II, the United States did not have a formal classification system. Presidents, generals and admirals protected military secrets in a variety of ways. In World War I, General Pershing, headquartered in France, instituted the markings of "Secret, Confidential and For Official Circulation Only," in imitation of his French and British allies. For its part, Congress decided against passage of a statute that would have made it a crime to communicate national defense information that "might" be useful to the enemy.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt drew order from the chaos that surrounded questions of handling secrets when he recognized the threat posed by the espionage capabilities of the Germans and Russians, then united by the Hitler-Stalin pact. On March 22, 1940, Roosevelt issued an executive order creating a military classification system. FDR, who preferred to avoid assertions of inherent executive power, invoked as authority a 1938 statute that empowered the president to prohibit the creation of maps, photographs or sketches of vital "installations or equipment." The test, FDR explained, "is what the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy thinks it would be harmful to the defense of this country to give out." This test, he added, was what would be shared with the public, since congressional committees were already receiving this information in executive session.

This practice of executive determination of what might be shared with the citizenry has been adopted by presidents of both parties. With the assumption by America of global responsibility for maintaining peace and security against international aggression, the concept of national defense has become an ever-expanding net. The result is classification, in various categories, of roughly 50 million documents. And counting.

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Girls' Basketball vs. Florence-Henry at Florence Monday, Jan. 30, 2023

C game starts at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity
C and JV games sponsored by Lindsey and Tom Tietz

followed by Varsity Games

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



Anyone wanting to sponsor a JV game, Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball at Langford Area **Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2023**

JV game at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity
JV sponsor is Kent & Darcy Muller

followed by Varsity Games

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



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"It's time for your checkup"

Recently I received a mailing from my clinic reminding me it is time to schedule my annual preventative care physical. Apparently, doctors need to go to the doctor, too, even when they feel fine.

As a primary care physician, one of my passions is preventative care. Preventative care is focused on catching problems before they even start to cause symptoms, catching issues early when they are easier to treat.

Whether you want to call it your annual physical, your yearly checkup, or an annual wellness visit, this appointment gives the time for you and your provider to decide what tests, screenings, and interventions may be done to help you become and stay more healthy. One of the broken aspects of our healthcare system is our focus on problems, playing whack-a-mole, barely getting ahead, and spending too much money way too late on problems that could have been cured a lot sooner, a lot cheaper, with a little bit of effort at prevention.

This visit may go in a variety of ways depending on your age and risk factors. If you are over age 45, you should probably consider your options for colon cancer screening. If you are a woman over age 40, perhaps you should consider breast cancer screening. If you are a man over age 55, perhaps you should consider prostate cancer screening. Any of these screenings may need to start earlier if you have a family history of cancer.

Meanwhile, the visit should probably include a discussion on your mental health, your diet, and your exercise routines. Granted, these discussions take time. If you have a list of problems and symptoms you want to discuss, then perhaps you may need a separate visit to address your concerns, apart from the appointment to cover some of these preventative care topics.

Perhaps this visit will help give you a nudge to quit smoking, and a chance to catch lung cancer early by scheduling a screening CT scan of your lungs. Perhaps this visit will determine that you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol, and interventions could decrease your risk of a heart attack or stroke. Perhaps this visit will catch skin cancer early. Perhaps your provider will identify a medication you do not need anymore, or identify an over-the-counter medication or supplement you should or should not be taking such as vitamin D or aspirin. Are you taking your medications correctly?

The list goes on and on. Pap smears for cervical cancer screening. Reviewing your immunizations and updating a tetanus shot. DEXA scans help determine the strength of your bones and catch osteoporosis, trying to decrease your risk of a fall and a hip fracture.

I suppose I better make that appointment for myself!

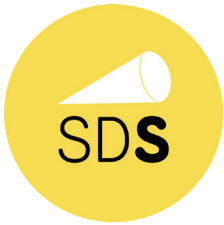
Andrew Ellsworth, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show based on science, built on trust for 21 seasons, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Based on Science, Built on Trust



Andrew Ellsworth, MD.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

COMMENTARY

Treating health care as a commodity has not driven costs lower

TOM DEAN

Assuring effective health care to a population is a challenge for every society. As care options become more complex — and expensive — the challenges increase.

In the U.S. both the organization and the financing of health care are perennial issues in public discussions, political campaigns and among social policy researchers. Basically there are two distinct but intimately related concerns — providing access to care and paying for that care. There is widespread agreement that when folks are sick or injured they should receive appropriate care. Disagreements emerge, however, in deciding how to pay for that care.

I believe it is instructive to look at the experience of other wealthy developed countries that have similar challenges. Doing so is actually quite sobering.

Using data from the Commonwealth Fund, a respected independent research organization, we can compare U.S. experience with that of Sweden, Australia, France and Canada. These countries differ significantly in aspects of culture and geography. They do, however, all guarantee health care to 100% of their population. They spend approximately \$5,000 per capita (ranging from \$4,965 to \$5,447). In the U.S., the expenditure is \$10,586 per capita and approximately 10% of the U.S. population have no form of health care coverage. Life expectancy in each of these countries exceeds that of the U.S. — 82 years (ranging from 82.0 to 82.6), compared to a U.S. average of 78 years. Recently the U.S. life expectancy has actually gone down.

An area of particular concern in the U.S. is maternal mortality — death related to child birth. In a modern society birthing mothers should not be dying. Nonetheless, maternal mortality in the U.S. is higher than in any of these countries and it has gotten worse. U.S. rates currently are three times higher than Canada, four times higher than the U.K. and 10 times higher than Australia.

In some areas U.S. performance is quite good. Outcomes in the treatment of acute myocardial infarction (heart attack), stroke and some types of cancer in the U.S. are significantly better than in comparable countries.

A troubling feature of care in the U.S. is that all too often there is inadequate coordination between different parts of the care system. This leads to inefficiency and often poorer results. To further complicate the situation, patients, fearing high costs, often put off seeking care. Delayed care increases the risk of both poor outcomes and increased expenditures over the long run.

A contributor to high costs that has gotten relatively little attention is the complexity of U.S. administrative and billing procedures. Providers (physicians, hospitals, therapists, etc.) have to document — and often justify — every service provided. Commonwealth Fund estimates are that administrative outlays account for as much as one-third of all health care expenditures. No other comparable country comes close to that rate.

There are differences between countries in patient populations, utilization of technology, etc. Researchers, however, have concluded that the single biggest difference between the U.S. and others is that prices charged in the U.S. are substantially higher.

How did all these problems develop? I believe that a major factor is that we have, with a few exceptions, consistently treated health care as a commodity to be bought and sold in the same manner as other consumer goods. The underlying belief has been that traditional market forces will ensure efficiency,

effectiveness and cost control. It has not worked.

A clear example of this failure is right here in South Dakota. In eastern South Dakota we have intense competition between two major health systems. Given that, traditional market analysis would predict that our costs would be competitive. The reality is quite the opposite. In November 2022, Forbes magazine listed South Dakota as having the most expensive health care in the nation.

Yes, there is intense competition but it is not focused on price. Competition is primarily on range of services, etc. In fact, some folks fear low cost care will be inferior even though lower cost can be a sign of just the opposite — prompt diagnosis, appropriate intervention and avoidance of complications.

The U.S. population — our families, friends and neighbors — deserve effective and efficient health care delivered at an affordable cost. We clearly are not there. We need careful analysis coupled with serious policy discussions free of the polemics which tend to dominate today's discussions. We have a long way to go. But, it is important that we start.

Tom Dean is a retired family physician who grew up on a farm west of Wessington Springs. He graduated from Wessington Springs High School, Carleton College in Minnesota and medical school in Rochester, New York. He completed a family medicine residency at the University of Washington in Seattle. He returned to Wessington Springs to practice in 1978 along with his wife, Kathy, a certified nurse midwife. He retired after 43 years of practice and still lives in Wessington Springs.

Lawmaker seeks \$5 million to expand adult day centers

Number of state-registered facilities has dwindled from 30 to three

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 28, 2023 12:15 PM

South Dakota had 30 state-registered adult day centers scattered across the state at one point. The services provided low cost programming, care and supervision during the day for people who were elderly or disabled, and let them return to their homes and families at night.

Now, there are only three left: one in Rapid City, one in Aberdeen and one in Sioux Falls. There are other centers that offer adult day services, but they aren't contracted with the state and don't receive Medicaid reimbursement.

The centers are regularly full and can't fill the demand for their services, as adults increasingly choose to age at home instead of moving into a nursing home.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, believes the decline in adult day services is due to poor Medicaid reimbursement rates by the state and expensive start-up costs for providers to enter the field.

So Rehfeldt introduced House Bill 1078, which, if passed, would allocate \$5 million in grants for health care providers to expand or establish new adult day services across the state. The bill is scheduled for its first hearing in the House Health and Human Services Committee on Tuesday.

Rehfeldt said the closure of 28 nursing homes in South Dakota during the past eight years has created a greater need for adult day centers.

"If we keep having nursing home closures, these people aren't going to have anywhere to go," Rehfeldt said. "We have to have some way to care for them, and this is a component of that."

Rehfeldt's grandfather died of Alzheimer's disease, so she saw the importance of adult day services to keep him engaged during the day and let his loved ones work or have free time without constantly supervising him.

Rich Butz's wife regularly uses services through Active Generations. She's currently attending the Ceili Cottage, which is one of two adult day services under the Active Generations umbrella.

His wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at 56. Four years later, Butz still works regularly since he hasn't reached retirement age and needs to provide for them.

People with disabilities or Alzheimer's are more prone to depression, Butz said, and such services help to enrich those people's lives. People using adult day services at Active Generations include those suffering from Alzheimer's, ALS, strokes and more.

At the end of the day, Butz is able to connect with his wife as she shares how her day was — acting as

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a husband instead of a constant caregiver.

"I think about those people who don't have this tool in their pocket like I have, and I feel badly for them," Butz said.

It's "terrible" to have so few services in the state, Butz added.

\$5 million in grants from the state's general fund would ensure there's "enough money to fill the need," according to Rehfeldt.

According to the most recent data from the state Department of Health, there were 174 consumers receiving adult day services, said Thomas Elness, director of public policy with the Alzheimer's Association of South Dakota.

But the demand is greater than that.

The Alzheimer's Association estimates there will be 20,000 South Dakotans diagnosed with Alzheimer's by 2025, up from 18,000 in 2020.

"There's a lack of support for caregivers," Elness said. "We know that caregivers are skipping out on their own doctor and dentist appointments and grocery shopping errands. Their mental health takes a hit from having to be a caregiver constantly."

Rehfeldt is in discussions with the state to reevaluate the Medicaid reimbursement rate for adult day services. As of July 2022, adult day services were reimbursed at \$1.60 per 15 minutes for patients — about \$6.40 an hour or just over \$50 for an eight-hour day.

While Rehfeldt's legislation would fill a need to address start-up and expansion costs, reimbursement rates affect the sustainability of businesses, Elness said.

"You can see very quickly how that business model doesn't work," Elness said.

Adult day services costs are about one-fourth as expensive as nursing homes, Elness added.

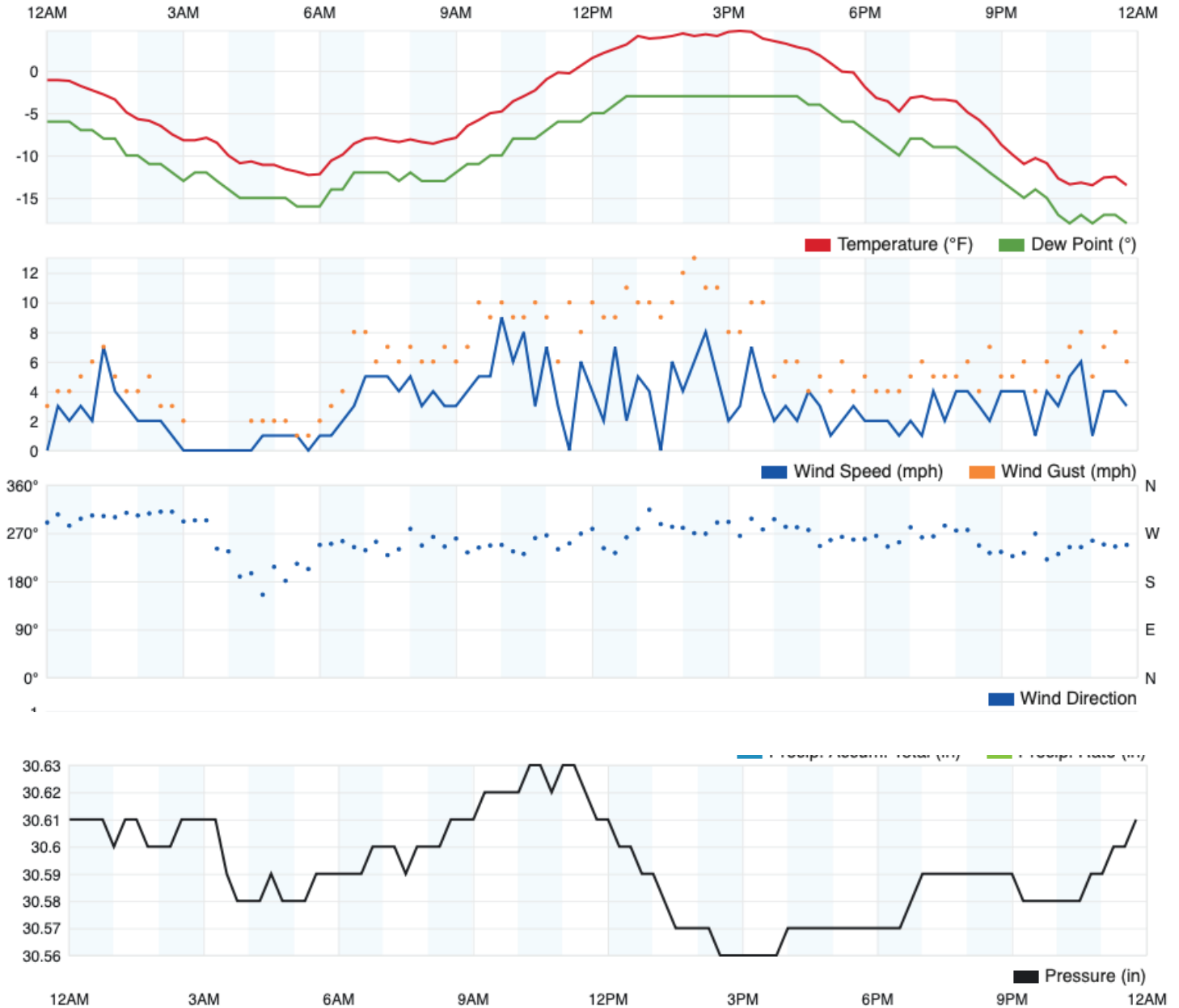
"From the state's perspective, there's immense cost savings to let more people be served by adult day services," Elness said. "Even in-home care, which we support, is expensive. Adult day care is one of the greatest, most cost-effective services the state could utilize."

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

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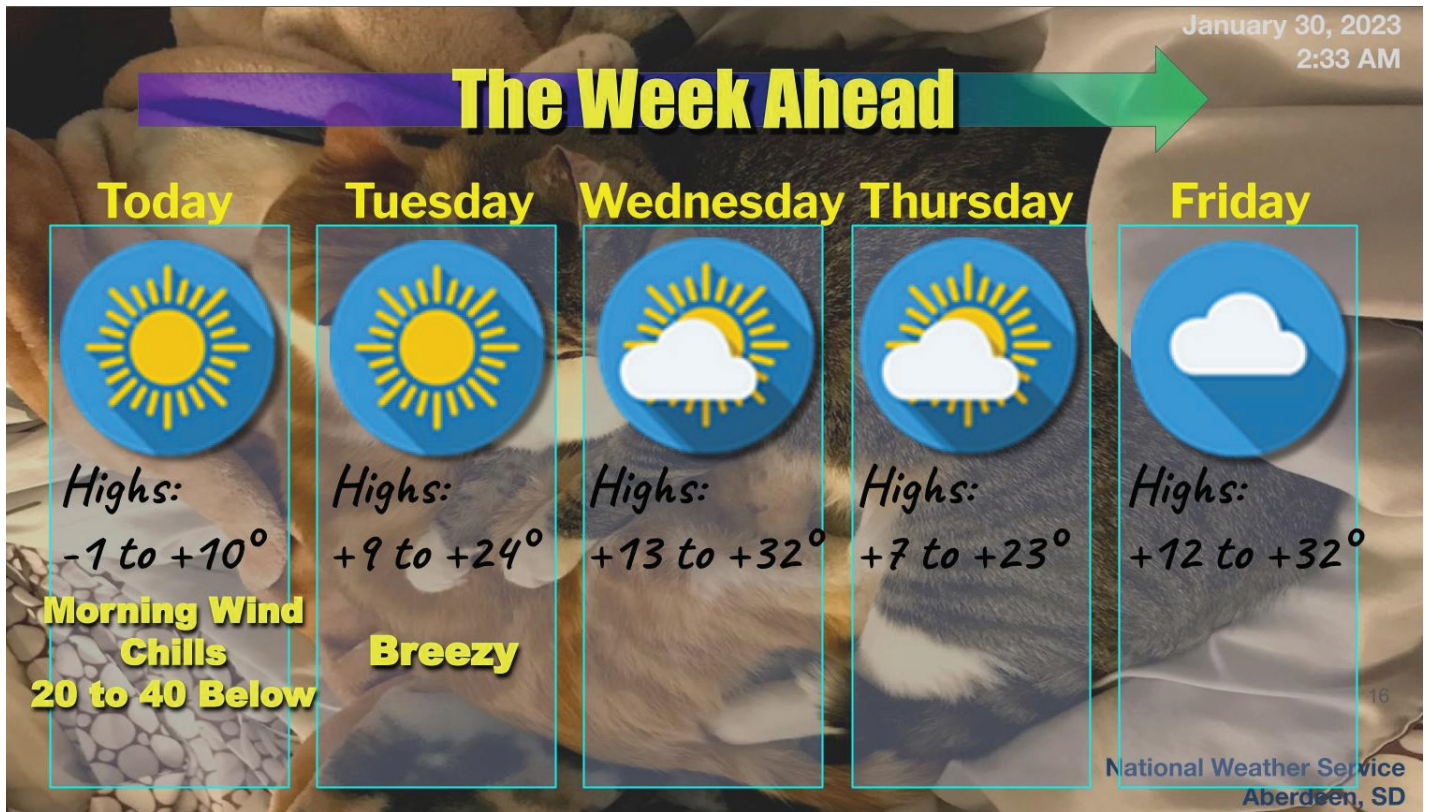
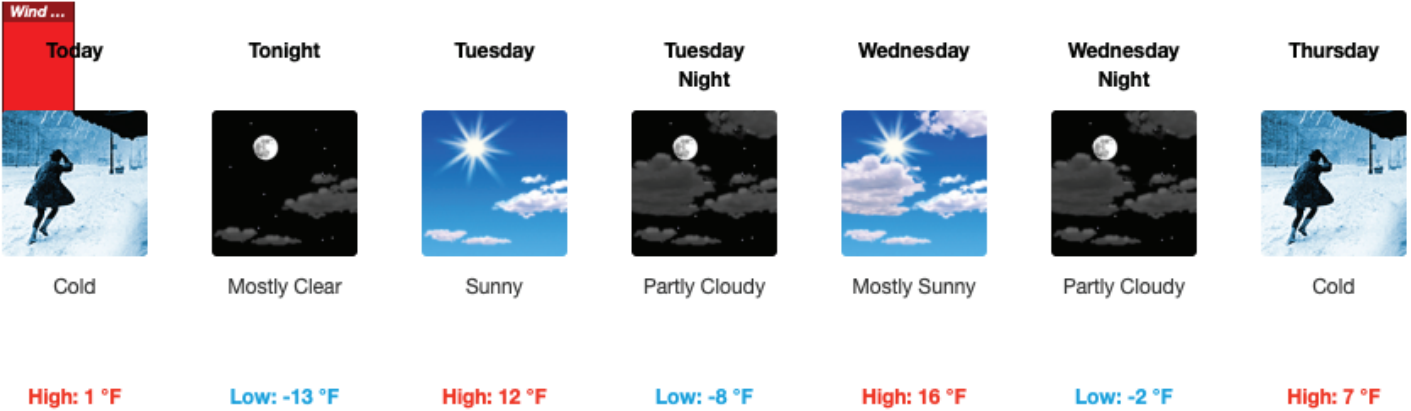
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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After a very cold start this morning, with wind chills of 20 to 40 below...look for some slight moderation in temperatures mid-week, and mainly dry conditions.

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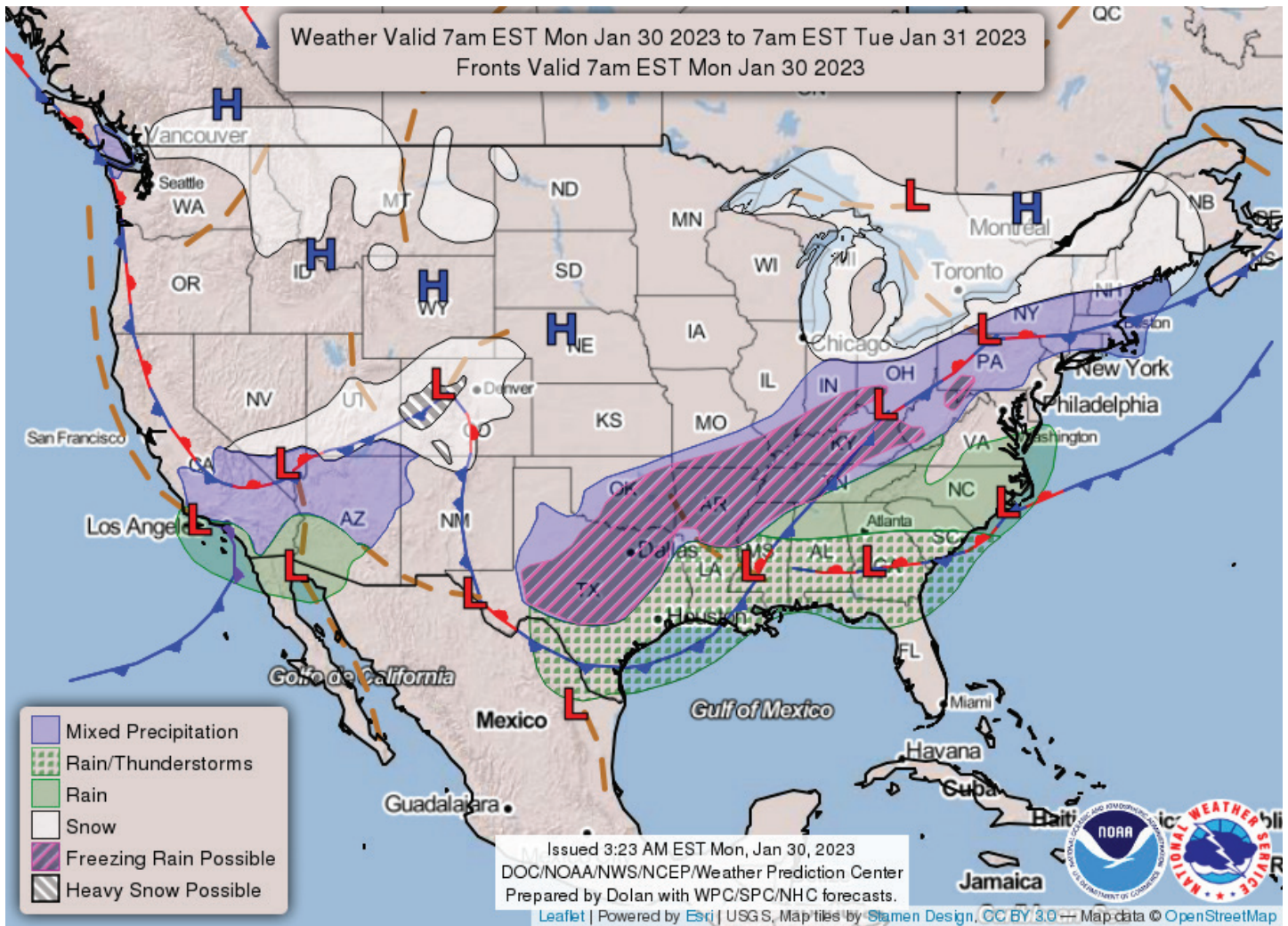
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 5 °F at 3:18 PM
Low Temp: -14 °F at 10:41 PM
Wind: 13 mph at 2:13 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 43 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1931
Record Low: -37 in 2019
Average High: 25
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.53
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.53
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:37:32 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:52:39 AM



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Today in Weather History

January 30, 2001: Widespread freezing rain, accumulating from 1/8 to 1/2 inch, changed over to snow late in the evening of the 29th. The snow accumulated from 6 to 12 inches over much of central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. The combination of ice and snow caused significant travel problems, school and flight cancellations and delays, business closings, and numerous vehicle accidents. Several highways were closed along with large portions of Interstates 29 and 90. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Murdo, 14 SSW Hayes, and 8 E of Eden, 7 inches at Castlewood and 5 NE of Peever, 8 inches at Miller, Gann Valley, Iona, Watertown, Ortonville, and 2 NW Stephan. Nine inches of snowfall accumulated 18 S of Harrold with 10 inches at Tulare and Kennebec, 11 inches at Clark, Clear Lake, and Wheaton, 12 inches at Carpenter, Willow Lake, Milbank, and Browns Valley, and 13 inches at Wilmot.

January 30, 2011: Heavy snow of 6 to 9 inches fell across part of northeast South Dakota from the afternoon of the 30th to the 31st. Travel was disrupted, especially along Interstate-90. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Webster, Summit, and Clear Lake; 7 inches at Watertown and Milbank; 8 inches at Wilmot and Sisseton; and 9 inches at Bryant, Waubay, and Andover.

1607: The Bristol Channel floods in England resulted in the drowning of many people and the destruction of a large amount of farmland and livestock. Recent research has suggested that the cause may have been a tsunami. Cardiff was one of the most badly affected towns, with the foundations of St. Mary's Church destroyed.

1936 - Birmingham, AL, established a single storm record and 24 hour record with 11 inches of snow. (29th-30th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1954: A tornado touched down near White Point Beach, Nova Scotia. A great deal of hail and lightning was reported along the coast near Liverpool, Nova Scotia.

1966: The Blizzard of 1966 impacted New York and paralyzed the region. The train service was disrupted. Numerous highways, the New York State Thruway from Albany to the Pennsylvania state line, and the Buffalo Airport and other airports throughout western and central New York were closed. The Syracuse-Oswego area's hardest hit, where Bob Sykes, a meteorology professor at the State University of New York at Oswego, reported a whopping 102.4 inches! Some schools in Orleans County were closed for the entire week following the blizzard. Economic loss from the storm was estimated at \$35 million. Winds gusting to 60 mph and temperatures in the teens, and heavy and blowing snow created severe blizzard conditions.

1977 - The great "Buffalo Blizzard" finally abated after three days. The storm added a foot of new snow to 33 inches already on the ground. Winds gusting to 75 mph reduced visibilities to near zero, produced snow drifts twenty-five feet high, and kept wind chill readings 50 degrees below zero. The blizzard paralyzed the city, and caused 250 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A winter storm brought more heavy snow to the North Atlantic Coast Region, with 13.6 inches reported at Hiram ME. January proved to be the snowiest of record for much of Massachusetts. Worcester MA reported an all-time monthly record of 46.8 inches of snow. (National Weather Summary)

1990 - A major winter storm produced heavy snow from Indiana to New England. It was the biggest storm in two and a half years for eastern New York State. Snowfall totals in the mountains of Maine ranged up to 20 inches at Guilford and Lovell. Other heavy snowfall totals included 17 inches at Utica NY, and 19 inches at Bethel VT, Ludlow VT, and New London NH. The storm claimed three lives in eastern New York State, and four lives in Vermont. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002: One of the driest Januarys on record in Iowa was broken up by a winter storm that produced snowfall across the state from January 30-31. The snow was heaviest across southern and southeastern Iowa, where storm total accumulations ranged between 11 and 13 inches along and south of Chariton's line through Ottumwa to Wapello and Burlington. The highest reported totals were 13.2 inches at Leon and 13.0 inches at Bloomfield and Fairfield.

2005 - A significant ice storm struck parts of northern Georgia on the 30th-31st. Ice accretion was as great as 2 inches in Monroe county, located southeast of Atlanta. Power outages in the area at the height of the storm affected nearly 320,000 homes and businesses.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

PRAISEWORTHY?

"He who tooteth not his own horn, the same shall be substituted," was the favorite "proverb" of Ray O., a dear friend during my days in college. Whenever anyone would begin to describe their "greatness" or why they were "superior" to anyone, he would immediately reach for his Bible. He would furrow his brow, focus his eyes, and begin to fumble through the pages of the Word and say, "I know that verse is in here somewhere. I read it just this morning during my devotions. Oh well, trust me. You know it has to be here somewhere! It's the truth and you know where to go for the truth."

He was never able to find the verse, but we all knew what he was talking about. Some people, usually those who have accomplished little, want to make sure that we think they are "superheroes." For whatever reason, perhaps fear of being overlooked or under-appreciated, they have the need to "bore" us with words that contradict the reality of their lives.

Perhaps Ray was looking for the proverb that supports his position: "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise of others." There are proven ways to refine metals to make certain that they contain no impurities. When we speak of ourselves, however, it is easy to forgo the refiner's fire and praise ourselves to make good impressions. All of us want the respect and esteem of others. It is normal. But the most accurate observations of who we are comes from reading God's Word and the observations of friends.

Prayer: Help us Father, to work diligently and with determination to develop a reputation that is worthy of Your Name. May others see Your Son in us and what we do. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise of others. Proverbs 27:21



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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2023 Community Events

- 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)
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 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)
- 06/16/2023 – SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 – Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 – GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 – Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 – GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 – Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 – Tour of Homes & Holiday Party

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.27.23

4 43 46 47 61 22

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$31,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 33
DRAW: Mins 0 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.28.23

1 24 34 37 52 9

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,470,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 33 Mins 0
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.29.23

15 16 21 23 46 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 3 Mins 0
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.28.23

7 8 15 16 18

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 33
DRAW: Mins 0 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.28.23

47 51 53 62 63 16

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins 0
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.28.23

2 18 23 27 47 15

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$613,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins 0
DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Suicide bomber kills 34, wounds 150 at mosque in NW Pakistan

By RIAZ KHAN Associated Press

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — A suicide bomber struck Monday inside a mosque within a police compound in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, killing at least 34 people and wounding as many as 150 worshippers, most of them police, officials said.

The bombing drew nationwide condemnation from opposition political parties and government officials. Ghulam Ali, the provincial governor in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where Peshawar is the capital, said there were fears the death toll could rise even further.

Most of the casualties were policemen and police officers — the targeted mosque is located within a sprawling compound, which also serves as the city's police headquarters. Police said between 300 to 350 worshippers were inside the mosque when the bomber detonated his explosives.

Sarbakaf Mohmand, a commander for the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack on Twitter. The main spokesman for the organization was not immediately available for comment.

The police compound is located in a high-security zone in Peshawar, along with several government buildings, and it was unclear how the bomber managed to penetrate so deep inside the zone unnoticed.

The impact of the explosion collapsed the roof of the mosque, which caved in and injured many, according to Zafar Khan, a local police officer.

Siddique Khan, a police official, said the death toll rose to 34, and the dead included Noor-ul-Amin, the prayer leader. Meanwhile, officials said at least 150 were wounded.

A survivor, 38-year-old police officer Meena Gul, said he was inside the mosque when the bomb went off. He said he doesn't know how he survived unhurt. He could hear cries and screams after the bomb exploded, Gul said.

Rescuers scrambled trying to remove mounds of debris from the mosque grounds and get to worshippers still trapped under the rubble, police said. At a nearby hospital, many of the wounded were listed in critical condition as the casualty toll rose.

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in a statement condemned the bombing, and ordered authorities to ensure the best possible medical treatment to the victims. He also vowed "stern action" against those who were behind the attack.

Former Prime Minister Imran Khan also condemned the bombing, calling it a "terrorist suicide attack" in a Twitter posting. "My prayers & condolences go to victims families," said the ex-premier. "It is imperative we improve our intelligence gathering & properly equip our police forces to combat the growing threat of terrorism."

Peshawar has been the scene of frequent militant attacks. The Pakistani Taliban, are known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP, and are separate group but also a close ally of the Afghan Taliban, who seized power in neighboring Afghanistan in August 2021 as U.S. and NATO troops were in the final stages of their pullout from the country after 20 years of war.

The TTP has waged an insurgency in Pakistan over the past 15 years, fighting for stricter enforcement of Islamic laws in the country, the release of their members who are in government custody and a reduction of the Pakistani military presence in the country's former tribal regions.

Pakistan has witnessed a surge in militant attacks since November when the Pakistani Taliban ended their cease-fire with government forces.

The truce ended as Pakistan was still contending with last summer's unprecedented flooding that killed 1,739 people, destroyed more than 2 million homes, and at one point submerged as much as one third of the country. The flood damages totaled to more than \$30 billion and authorities are now, months later, still struggling to arrange tents, shelter and food for the survivors.

Cash-strapped Pakistan is currently also facing one of the worst economic crisis and is seeking a crucial

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installment of \$1.1 billion from the International Monetary Fund — part of its \$6 billion bailout package — to avoid default. Talks with the IMF on reviving the bailout have stalled in the past months.

Sharif's government came to power last April after Imran Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament. Khan has since campaigned for early elections, claiming his ouster was illegal and part of a plot backed by the United States. Washington and Sharif have dismissed Khan's claims.

School where 6-year-old shot his teacher set to reopen

By BEN FINLEY and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — Stepped-up security and a new school administrator will be present as students return to the Virginia elementary school where a 6-year-old boy shot his teacher weeks ago.

Richneck Elementary School in Newport News was set to reopen Monday, more than three weeks after the Jan. 6 shooting. Police have said the boy brought a 9mm handgun to school and intentionally shot his teacher, Abby Zwerner, as she was teaching her first-grade class. The 25-year-old teacher was hospitalized for nearly two weeks but is now recovering at home.

The shooting sent shock waves through Newport News, a city of about 185,000 that is known for its shipbuilding industry. It has also raised questions nationwide about school security and how a child so young could gain access to a gun and shoot his teacher.

Days after the shooting, the Newport News School Board announced that walk-through metal detectors would be placed in every school in the district. At Richneck, two metal detection systems have been installed and two security officers have been assigned to the school, said Michelle Price, a spokesperson for the school district. Before the shooting, one security officer was assigned to Richneck and another elementary school. The officer was not at Richneck at the time of the shooting.

The security officers will also have a hand-held metal detector wand, Price said. New doors have been installed in classroom areas that didn't have any, while other doors have been repaired or replaced, she added.

The principal and assistant principal both left their jobs after the shooting, and a new administrator has been appointed to lead the school as part of a personnel shake-up.

Karen Lynch, who has worked as a principal in Newport News for 17 years, said in a letter to Richneck families last week that she is now working "on special assignment" at Richneck. Lynch said emotional support services that have been provided to students, families and staff by support specialists, social workers and licensed therapists will continue after the school reopens.

School Superintendent George Parker, who was sharply criticized by parents and teachers after the shooting, was fired by the school board last week. Parker has said that at least one school administrator received a tip that the boy may have brought a weapon to school. He said the boy's backpack was searched, but no weapon was found.

Zwerner's lawyer, Diane Toscano, said that on the day of the shooting, concerned staff at Richneck warned administrators three times that the boy had a gun and was threatening other students, but the administration didn't call police, remove the boy from class or lock down the school.

Police said the 9mm handgun was legally purchased by the boy's mother. In a statement released through their attorney, the boy's family said the gun was "secured." Attorney James Ellenson told The Associated Press that his understanding is that the gun was in the mother's closet on a shelf well over 6 feet (1.8 meters) high and had a trigger lock that required a key.

Biden visit to Baltimore highlights rail tunnel project

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ulysses S. Grant was still president when workers finished the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel, which connected Philadelphia and Washington through rail travel for the first time.

But 150 years later, the tunnel that runs under some of Baltimore's residential neighborhoods is more of a chokepoint than a lifeline. There's only one track, and trains need to slow down to just 30 mph (48

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kilometers per hour) to navigate a tight turn on the southern end.

It's a problem that President Joe Biden knows well, having commuted from Delaware to Washington on Amtrak for decades while serving as a U.S. senator. Last week he recalled walking the length of the tunnel, illuminated only by lights on a string as water dripped from the roof.

"There's a great worry," he said, "that part of it could collapse."

The tunnel is slated to be replaced with help from the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure legislation championed by the Democratic president, and he plans to visit on Monday to talk about the massive investment.

Once completed roughly a decade from now, the new tunnel is expected to have two tracks and allow trains to travel more than 100 mph. It will be named for Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery in Maryland and became a prominent abolitionist. The total project, which includes related bridges and equipment modernization, could cost \$6 billion.

Biden plans to announce labor agreements that are intended to smooth the tunnel's completion and ensure good wages for union workers, according to the White House. Maryland has also agreed to commit \$450 million for construction.

No money has yet been awarded from the federal infrastructure legislation. However, the law signed by Biden includes \$24 billion for rail improvements along the Northeast Corridor, and up to \$4.7 billion could be provided for the Baltimore tunnel, covering the majority of its cost.

Gregg Weaver, 69, got to know Biden while working as a conductor during a 42-year career with Amtrak. When he was working the morning shift on a southbound train, sometimes they would have to hold at Baltimore Penn Station because of trouble ahead at the tunnel.

"How's it look?" Biden would ask as he pondered his schedule on Capitol Hill.

"The tunnel can really complicate the whole thing," said Weaver, who retired in 2013. "It's a bottleneck."

As for Biden, "he rode so much, he probably experienced everything there is to experience," Weaver said.

Baltimore is the first of Biden's two trips dedicated to infrastructure this week. On Tuesday, he will travel to New York to talk about plans for another new rail tunnel, this one under the Hudson River.

"It's going to cut commute times, improve safety, make travel more reliable," Biden said.

Roughly 200,000 people rode through the current tunnel, which was finished 113 years ago, every work-day before the COVID-19 pandemic. But because there are only two tracks, any maintenance or problem threatens to severely constrict travel.

Besides building a new tunnel, the project would rehabilitate the existing version. It was damaged by corrosive salt water that flooded in during Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Russian shelling kills 5 in tough eastern Ukraine combat

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian shelling killed at least five people and wounded 13 others during the previous 24 hours, Ukrainian authorities said Monday as the Kremlin's and Kyiv's forces remained locked in combat in eastern Ukraine.

The casualties included a woman who was killed and three others who were wounded by the Russian shelling of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city in the country's northeast, according to regional Gov. Oleh Synyehubov.

Moscow's troops seized large areas of the northeastern Kharkiv region in the months following its invasion of its neighbor last February. But Ukrainian counteroffensives that began in August snatched back Russian-occupied territory, most notably in Kharkiv.

Those successes lent weight to Ukraine's arguments that its troops could deliver more stinging defeats to Russia if its Western allies provided more weaponry.

Kyiv last week won promises of tanks from the United States and Germany to help its war effort.

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Monday hinted at the prospect of more upcoming pledges, saying that "any activity aimed at strengthening Ukraine's defense powers is under consultation with our NATO partners."

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Military analysts say more aid for Ukraine is crucial if Kyiv is to block an expected Russian offensive in the spring and launch its own effort to push back the Russian forces.

"The pattern of delivery of Western aid has powerfully shaped the pattern of this conflict," the Institute for the Study of War, a U.S.-based think tank, said late Sunday.

But Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that supplies of Western weapons won't stop Russia.

"Ukraine keeps demanding new weapons and the West is encouraging those demands," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters Monday. "It's a deadlock, it results in a significant escalation and makes NATO countries increasingly involved in the conflict."

Ukraine's presidential office said the eastern Donetsk region, which has been the scene of intense fighting for months, remains "invariably hard."

Heavy fighting continued to rage around Bakhmut and Vuhledar, with regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko saying that 15 towns and villages in the region came under shelling Sunday.

Russian forces have been trying for months to capture Bakhmut, with the effort being led by the Wagner Group, a private military company led by a rogue millionaire with longtime links to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ukrainian troops last week said they conducted an organized retreat from Soledar, a few kilometers (miles) from Bakhmut, amid pressure from Wagner, which is believed to have a large number of convicts in its ranks.

Ukrainian authorities said the southern city of Kherson also has come under Russian shelling. The bombardment damaged residential buildings, a hospital, a school, a bus station, a bank and a post office.

Two foreign vessels were damaged in the port of Kherson, the presidential office added without elaborating.

Trump investigations: Georgia prosecutor ups anticipation

By KATE BRUMBACK and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Former President Donald Trump and his allies have been put on notice by a prosecutor, but the warning didn't come from anyone at the Justice Department.

It was from a Georgia prosecutor who indicated she was likely to seek criminal charges soon in a two-year election subversion probe. In trying to block the release of a special grand jury's report, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis argued in court last week that decisions in the case were "imminent" and that the report's publication could jeopardize the rights of "future defendants."

Though Willis, a Democrat, didn't mention Trump by name, her comments marked the first time a prosecutor in any of several current investigations tied to the Republican former president has hinted that charges could be forthcoming. The remarks ratcheted anticipation that an investigation focused, in part, on Trump's call with Georgia's secretary of state could conclude before ongoing federal probes.

"I expect to see indictments in Fulton County before I see any federal indictments," said Clark Cunningham, a Georgia State University law professor.

Besides the Georgia inquiry, a Justice Department special counsel is investigating Trump over his role in working with allies to overturn his loss in the 2020 presidential election and his alleged mishandling of classified documents.

Trump had appeared to face the most pressing legal jeopardy from the probe into a cache of classified materials at his Florida resort, and that threat remains. But that case seems complicated, at least politically, by the recent discovery of classified records at President Joe Biden's Delaware home and at a Washington office. The Justice Department tapped a separate special counsel to investigate that matter.

Willis opened her office's investigation shortly after the release of a recording of a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger. In that conversation, the then-president suggested that Raffensperger, a fellow Republican, could "find" the votes needed to overturn Trump's narrow election loss in the state to Biden, a Democrat.

"All I want to do is this: I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said

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on the call.

Since then, the investigation's scope has broadened considerably, encompassing among other things: a slate of Republican fake electors, phone calls by Trump and others to Georgia officials in the weeks after the 2020 election, and unfounded allegations of widespread election fraud made to state lawmakers.

In an interview, Trump insisted he did "absolutely nothing wrong" and that his phone call with Raffensperger was "perfect." He said he felt "very confident" that he would not be indicted.

"She's supposed to be stopping violent crime, and that's her job," Trump said of Willis. "Not to go after people for political reasons, that did things absolutely perfectly."

It is unclear how Willis' case will impact the Justice Department's probes or what contact her team has had with federal investigators. Justice Department prosecutors have been circumspect in discussing their investigations, offering little insight into how or when they might end.

But Willis' comments indicate that the Georgia investigation is on a path toward resolution — with charges or not — on a timetable independent of what the Justice Department is planning to do, legal experts said.

Cunningham, the Georgia State professor, said that Willis' comments implied that the special grand jury's report contained detail about people who the panel and Willis believe should, at minimum, be further investigated.

"She wouldn't be talking about the release of the report creating prejudice to potential future defendants unless she saw in the report peoples' names who she saw as potential future defendants," he added.

Attorney General Merrick Garland in November tapped Jack Smith, a former public corruption prosecutor, to act as special counsel overseeing investigations into Trump's actions leading up to the deadly Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot and into his possession of hundreds of classified documents at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida.

Though Smith and his team of prosecutors have issued grand jury subpoenas, he has not revealed when his investigation might conclude or who might be a target.

Garland has declined to discuss the probes, saying only that "no person is above the law" and that there aren't separate rules for Democrats and Republicans.

FBI agents recently searched Biden's Wilmington, Delaware, home, finding six items containing classified documents, the White House said. Further muddling the Justice Department's calculus: Classified records were found this month at the Indiana home of Trump's vice president, Mike Pence.

Public disclosures about Willis' case are the result, to some degree, of the unusual nature of the Georgia proceedings.

Willis in January of last year sought to convene a special grand jury to help her investigation, citing the need for its subpoena power to compel the testimony of witnesses who otherwise wouldn't talk to her. She said in a letter to Fulton County's chief judge that her office had received information indicating a "reasonable probability" that the 2020 election in Georgia "was subject to possible criminal disruptions."

The county's superior court judges voted to grant the request, and the panel was seated in May. The grand jurors heard from 75 witnesses and reviewed evidence collected by prosecutors and investigators. Among the witnesses who testified were former New York mayor and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and such Georgia state officials as Raffensperger and Gov. Brian Kemp.

The panel lacked the authority to issue an indictment, but its report is presumed to include recommendations for further action, possibly including potential criminal charges.

The special grand jury was dissolved earlier this month after wrapping up its work and finalizing a report on its investigation. The grand jurors recommended the report be made public.

News organizations, including The Associated Press, argued for the report to be released. At a hearing last week, Willis said that a decision was looming on whether to seek an indictment and that she opposed releasing the report because she wanted to ensure "that everyone is treated fairly and we think for future defendants to be treated fairly, it is not appropriate at this time to have this report released."

Attorneys for witnesses and others identified as targets have insisted that Willis is driven by politics rather than by legitimate concerns that crimes were committed. Among other things, they pointed to her public

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statements and initial willingness to speak to print and television news outlets.

Danny Porter, a Republican who served as district attorney in neighboring Gwinnett County for nearly three decades, said Willis has been navigating unfamiliar territory. Special grand juries are relatively rare in Georgia, and the law doesn't provide much guidance for prosecutors, he said.

Even so, Porter said, it appeared Willis had not crossed any ethical or legal red lines that would call into question the integrity of the investigation.

"Procedurally," he said, "I haven't seen anything that made me go, 'Oh, jeez, I wouldn't have done that.'"

Analysis: Mahomes, Hurts set for historic matchup

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Black quarterbacks have come a long way in the NFL since Fritz Pollard became the first to play in the league in 1923 and Doug Williams was the first to start and win a Super Bowl following the 1987 season.

Now, Patrick Mahomes and Jalen Hurts will be the first Black QBs to face off in a Super Bowl.

It's fitting that a season which began with 11 Black QBs starting in Week 1 will end with a historic matchup.

Mahomes can become the first two-time winner if he leads the Kansas City Chiefs to victory over the Philadelphia Eagles on Feb. 12. Hurts aims to become the fourth Black QB to win the Super Bowl, joining Williams, Mahomes and Russell Wilson.

Steve McNair, Colin Kaepernick, Cam Newton and Wilson also started in the Super Bowl and lost.

Michael Vick was the first Black QB selected No. 1 overall in the draft in 2001. McNair became the first Black QB to win MVP in 2003. Mahomes and Lamar Jackson won it back-to-back years.

They all had to overcome stereotypes to get to this point.

Jackson said a scout from the Los Angeles Chargers asked him to run routes at the NFL combine in 2018. The Baltimore Ravens ended up selecting him with the 32nd pick in the first round and he was MVP in his second season.

Donovan McNabb, a six-time Pro Bowl QB who started five NFC championship games for the Eagles, was told by some college scouts that he had to play running back or wide receiver. He wouldn't switch positions, went to Syracuse to play quarterback and was drafted No. 2 overall in 1999 by Philadelphia.

Hurts began his NFL career in 2020 as an all-purpose QB after the Eagles took him in the second round. Playing behind Carson Wentz, Hurts had 12 rushing attempts, one catch and threw just three passes in his first nine games before taking over as Philadelphia's QB.

He clearly has not forgotten that the decision to draft him in the second round of the 2020 draft was widely criticized by reporters and fans.

"My first year here, (people) probably didn't even want to draft me here," Hurts said Sunday. "It was probably one of those things. But it always handles itself."

Neither Hurts nor Mahomes celebrated their conference championship wins too much. The main goal remains ahead. They each want one more win.

Hurts puffed a victory cigar after the Eagles routed the San Francisco 49ers 31-7 but he showed little emotion, per usual, in his postgame news conference.

"I don't really know how to feel to be honest. You work really hard to put yourself in this position and I'm forever grateful," Hurts said. "Only God knows the things that each individual on this team has been able to overcome for us to come together as a team and do something special as a group. That's what means the most. I always want to go out there and give my best regardless of what's going on because I don't want to let down the guy next to me. That makes us all go harder."

Hurts, a finalist along with Mahomes for AP NFL MVP and Offensive Player of the Year, missed two games late in the season with a shoulder injury. The Eagles haven't had to lean on him in two lopsided playoff wins. He has only 275 yards passing and two TDs along with 73 yards rushing and two scores.

"I know I've been through a lot personally, but I don't want to steer away from the direction of how good this team has been at playing together, being together, and challenging one another," Hurts said.

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"When we experience some painful times and some tough times, we always found a way to overcome. You want to be going into a situation like this, and we have a chance to go out there and win it all, so we want to prepare to go do that."

Mahomes battled through an ankle injury to help the Chiefs beat the Cincinnati Bengals 23-20 to advance to their third Super Bowl appearance in four years.

He had no intention of lighting up a victory cigar after a hard-fought win.

"I don't think we have any cigars, but we'll be ready to go at the Super Bowl," Mahomes said, poking fun at Joe Burrow's penchant for puffing those after big wins.

Only one QB can win the Super Bowl. Whether it's Hurts or Mahomes, it's another victory for the Black QBs who were overlooked throughout the years.

Russian embassy says North Korea lifted lockdown in capital

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Russia's embassy in North Korea says the country has eased stringent epidemic controls in capital Pyongyang that were placed during the past five days to slow the spread of respiratory illnesses.

North Korea has not officially acknowledged a lockdown in Pyongyang or a re-emergence of COVID-19 after leader Kim Jong Un declared a widely disputed victory over the coronavirus in August, but the Russian embassy's Facebook posts have provided rare glimpses into the secretive country's infectious disease controls.

The embassy posted a notice Monday issued by North Korea's Foreign Ministry informing foreign diplomats that the "intensified anti-epidemic period" imposed in Pyongyang since Wednesday was lifted as of Monday.

Last week, the embassy said that North Korean health authorities required diplomatic missions to keep their employees indoors and also measure their temperatures four times a day and report the results to a hospital in Pyongyang. It said the North Korean measures were in response to an increase in "flu and other respiratory diseases," but it didn't mention the spread of COVID-19 or restrictions imposed on regular citizens.

Shortly before that post, NK News, a North Korea-focused news website, cited a North Korean government notice to report that health officials had imposed a five-day lockdown in Pyongyang in an effort to stem the spread of respiratory illnesses.

North Korea's state media didn't mention any preventive measures specifically tied to COVID-19 as it tightened restrictions in Pyongyang last week. But on Wednesday, the state-run Korean Central News Agency said North Korean health workers have "redoubled" their efforts to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and firmly maintain an "anti-epidemic atmosphere" throughout society to cope with the "daily-worsening world health crisis."

"(Health workers) are directing primary efforts to consolidating the anti-epidemic barrier and intensifying the medical examination and disinfection to prevent the outbreak and spread of viral respiratory diseases including influenza," the agency said. "They also make it a daily routine to measure temperatures and sterilize hands of the people in crowded places and ensure the accuracy of medical examination."

Getting a read of North Korea's virus situation is difficult as the country has been tightly shut since early 2020, with officials imposing strict border controls, banning tourists and aid workers and jetting out diplomats while scrambling to shield their poor health care system.

North Korea's admission of a COVID-19 outbreak in May last year came after it spent 2 1/2 years rejecting outside offers of vaccines and other help while steadfastly claiming that its socialist system was protecting its population from an "evil" virus that had killed millions elsewhere.

South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, said the number of foreign missions that are currently active in North Korea would be 10 or less, a list that includes the missions of China, Vietnam and Cuba along with the Russian embassy.

North Korean state media in recent weeks have stressed vigilance against a possible re-emergence of

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COVID-19. The official Rodong Sinmun newspaper, which previously described the anti-virus campaign as the "No. 1 priority" in national affairs, called for North Koreans to maintain a "sense of high crisis" Monday as COVID-19 continues to spread in neighboring countries.

Some analysts say North Korea could be taking preventive measures as it prepares to stage huge public events in Pyongyang — possibly as early as next week — to glorify Kim's authoritarian leadership and the expansion of his nuclear weapons and missiles program.

Recent commercial satellite images indicated preparations for a massive military parade in Pyongyang, likely for the 75th founding anniversary of the Korean People's Army that falls on Feb. 8 — an occasion Kim could potentially use to showcase his growing collection of nuclear-capable missiles.

Satellite images taken Friday indicated continuing parade practices at a training site in southeast Pyongyang despite the reported lockdown, according to 38 North, a website specializing in North Korea studies. But no activities were seen at Kim Il Sung Square in the central part of the city where the country usually hosts military parades, the report said.

Some outside experts linked North Korea's 2022 COVID-19 outbreak to a massive military parade in April, where Kim vowed to accelerate the development of nuclear weapons and threatened to use them if provoked.

North Korea maintains it has had no confirmed COVID-19 cases since Aug. 10, when Kim used a major political conference to declare the country has eradicated the coronavirus, just three months after the country acknowledged an omicron outbreak.

While Kim claimed that the country's purported success against the virus would be recognized as a global health miracle, experts believe North Korea has manipulated disclosures on its outbreak to help him maintain absolute control.

From May to August, North Korea reported about 4.8 million "fever cases" across its population of 26 million but only identified a fraction of them as COVID-19. Experts say the country's official death toll of 74 is abnormally small, considering the country's lack of public health tools.

North Korea has dubiously insisted that rival South Korea was responsible for its COVID-19 outbreak, saying that the virus was transported by anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets and other materials flown across the border by balloons launched by South Korean civilian activists. South Korea has dismissed such claims as unscientific and "ridiculous."

Blinken urges Israel-Palestinian calm as violence soars

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

CAIRO (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Israel and the Palestinians on Monday to exercise restraint and ease tensions amid a spike in violence that has put the region on edge.

Speaking in Cairo, just hours ahead of a two-day visit to Jerusalem and the West Bank, Blinken said it is imperative for both sides to work to de-escalate tensions that have soared since last week in what he called "a new and horrifying surge in violence" and prompted severe responses from each.

"We will be encouraging the parties to take steps to calm things down," Blinken told reporters at a joint news conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry. "There is no question that this is a very difficult moment."

He repeated U.S. condemnations of militant attacks against Israelis and noted that "we deplore overall the loss of innocent civilian life."

The latest spate of violence erupted last week with an Israeli military raid on a militant stronghold in the West Bank city of Jenin last week that killed 10 people, most of them militants, and a Palestinian shooting attack in an east Jerusalem Jewish settlement that killed seven Israelis.

And, on Monday, shortly before Blinken's arrival, the Palestinian Health Ministry said Israeli forces killed a Palestinian man in the flashpoint city of Hebron, bringing the toll of Palestinians killed in January to 35.

The violence comes after months of Israeli arrest raids in the West Bank, which were launched after a wave of Palestinians attacks against Israelis in the spring of 2022 that killed 19 people.

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But it has spiked this month during the first weeks of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new far-right government, which has promised to take a tough stance against the Palestinians and ramp up settlement construction.

Blinken's trip follows visits to Israel by President Joe Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan and CIA Director William Burns. But Blinken's meetings will be the highest-level U.S. engagement with Netanyahu since he retook power last month and the first since the surge in violence.

The visit, which was planned before the flare-up, was already expected to be fraught with tension over differences between the Biden administration and Netanyahu's government, which is made up of settlement supporters.

After the Jenin raid, the Palestinians said they would cancel security coordination with Israel and after attacks against Israelis intensified, Israel said it would beef up Jewish settlements in the West Bank, among other steps.

Israeli Army Radio reported late Sunday that the government was also set to approve a rogue outpost deep inside the West Bank, and speed up approval for other such small settlements.

Israel also arrested 42 Palestinians, some relatives of the Jerusalem attacker, in its investigation into the attack. And the firebrand National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir said he has ordered authorities to demolish illegally built Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem in response to the attack.

The Palestinians believe the Israeli retaliation, including the demolition of homes of attackers' families, amounts to collective punishment and is illegal under international law.

The turmoil has added yet another item to Blinken's lengthy diplomatic agenda in Jerusalem that was already set to include Russia's war on Ukraine, tensions with Iran and crises in Lebanon and Syria; all of which weigh heavily in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Easing strains on those issues, or at least averting new ones, are central to Blinken's mission despite Netanyahu's opposition to two of Biden's main Mideast priorities: reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and restarting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. But, with both of those matters stalled and little hope of any resumption in negotiations, the administration is attempting just to keep the concepts on life support.

In Israel, disposable plastics trigger culture war, test PM

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — On Idit Silman's first day as Israel's new environmental protection minister, she handed out soft drinks in disposable plastic cups to hospital patients.

The gesture held deep symbolic meaning in Israel, where soft drinks and single-use cups, plates and cutlery have become weapons in a culture war between the country's secular Jewish majority and the smaller but politically powerful religious minority.

For much of the public, a tax imposed last year on plastic goods seemed like a straightforward way to cut down on the use of items that are major sources of pollution. But many ultra-Orthodox Jews saw the extra cost as an assault on a way of life that relies on the convenience of disposable goods to ease the challenges of managing their large families.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, the most right-wing in Israel's history, relies heavily on ultra-Orthodox parties and has moved quickly to remove the tax on plastics. On Sunday, his Cabinet voted to repeal the tax, sending the matter to the full parliament for what is expected to be final approval.

"We promised and we delivered," said Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the Religious Zionism Party. "The fight against the cost of living is a fight we all are waging."

In 2021, when Netanyahu and his religious allies were in the opposition, then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government authorized a tax on highly sugary drinks as a health measure to curb rising obesity rates and diabetes, and the tax on single-use plastics as a means of fighting a plague of plastic pollution. The tax levied 11 shekels per kilogram (\$1.5 per pound) on single-use plastic goods, effectively doubling the market price.

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Repealing those taxes were key demands of Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox allies, who made them a rallying cry ahead of November's parliamentary election. Another coalition deal between Netanyahu and his ultra-Orthodox allies would effectively eliminate a refundable deposit on plastic bottles imposed a year ago.

The United Nations Environment Program has called plastic waste "one of the biggest environmental scourges of our time," and says the equivalent of a garbage truck-full is dumped into the ocean each minute. Plastics can take centuries to degrade, cause extensive damage to ecosystems and can contain compounds toxic to organisms.

Israel is a major consumer of single-use plastics. The Environmental Protection Ministry said in a 2021 report that Israeli consumption of single-use plastics had more than doubled between 2009 and 2019. It said the per capita average hit 7.5 kilograms (16 pounds) per year — five times the average in Europe.

Single-use plastics made up an estimated 90% of trash on Israel's coastline, and 19% of the garbage on public lands, constituting a major environmental threat, it said.

Nonetheless, Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox allies, or Haredim, are celebrating the plastic tax's expected repeal. Disposable plasticware has become a key element of the Haredi lifestyle in Israel in recent decades, said Yisrael Cohen, an ultra-Orthodox political analyst.

Families with an average of six children per household use disposable plasticware for weekday meals and large Sabbath gatherings alike as a labor-saving solution to washing the dishes. Single-use plasticware is de rigueur in Jewish seminaries where ultra-Orthodox men study and eat their meals.

"It's an entire industry, an institution," he said. "Single-use plastic is a great solution for the Haredi community."

For ultra-Orthodox politicians, these taxes were emblematic of what they considered the previous government's attack on their lifestyle. Haredi media outlets frequently referred to them as "decrees" issued by the secular finance minister at the time, Avigdor Lieberman, that were aimed at targeting the religious minority.

"Lieberman has been depicted as the one who stuck it to the ultra-Orthodox on every issue," Cohen said. "Automatically this thing was painted as something that targets the Haredim."

Environmental groups say that over the course of 2022 — the year the tax was in effect — single-use plastic consumption dropped by a third.

A survey of Israeli beaches by a pair of environmental groups, Zalul and the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, found a significant drop in the quantity of single-use plasticware and plastic bottles on Israeli beaches. They cited the taxes on plastic and sweetened drinks.

On top of the environmental impact, the tax generated nearly \$100 million in revenue, according to the country's tax authority.

Meirav Abadi, an attorney with the union, said that repealing the tax would be "like a green light to go back to using these utensils in an even more intensive manner."

Limor Gorelik, head of plastic pollution prevention at Zalul, called the minister's photo op with the plastic cups "really embarrassing."

"It's so frustrating because we were so late in trying to make steps towards other countries" on multiple environmental issues. She fears Israel may "go backwards" on other issues as well.

Smotrich, the finance minister, has also extended a tax break on coal until the end of 2023 in a bid to keep electricity bills down — a move environmentalists say will increase consumption of the polluting fuel.

Silman, who was a member of Bennett's party before defecting to Netanyahu's Likud party last year, signaled on Sunday that she may yet change her stance.

Silman voted against the Cabinet decision to repeal the plastic tax, saying that after studying the issue in recent weeks, she has come to understand the "enormous" environmental cost of disposable plastics. She said the government should find an alternative way to reduce plastic consumption before doing away with the tax.

But she said the original tax was a mistake and should not have been done in a way that "arouses antagonism toward a particular population."

Survivors of conflict to meet Pope Francis in Congo

By JUSTIN KABUMBA and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

GOMA, Congo (AP) — It took years for Marie Louise Wambale to re-establish her life after fighting between M23 and the Congolese army forced her to flee with almost nothing more than a decade ago.

Like most Catholics here in eastern Congo, she hoped that Pope Francis could bring a message of hope at a time when the M23 rebels are posing their greatest threat here since 2012.

"Many people were disappointed because they wanted to welcome him to our home, for him to come here and live our suffering, to feel it with his own eyes," she said. "We wanted him to live it because there are many people who have fled the war. There are pregnant mothers who gave birth in the camps in very bad conditions - many women and children are suffering."

Now Wambale has been tasked with taking this message to Kinshasa, where she will be among the Congolese faithful chosen to personally meet Pope Francis.

His long-awaited visit to Congo and South Sudan this week comes after he postponed an earlier trip late last year that originally had included a stop in the volatile east. Insecurity, though, has soared in the months since so the pope is limiting his visit to Congo's capital, Kinshasa.

"It is clear to anybody that there is a danger. But the danger, I would say, even more than for the Pope is for the people," the Vatican's ambassador to Congo, Archbishop Ettore Balestrero told the Associated Press.

The security requirements to protect people for a papal Mass would be hard under ordinary circumstances, but even more delicate in an already dangerous area like the east, he said.

An estimated 2 million Congolese are expected at the Mass at Kinshasa airport on February 1, which he said would make it the largest crowd event in Congo's recent history.

Fighting in eastern Congo, which has more than 120 armed groups, has simmered for years but spiked in late 2021 with the resurgence of the M23 rebel group, which had been largely dormant for nearly a decade. The rebels have captured swaths of land and are accused by the United Nations and rights groups of committing atrocities against civilians.

Eastern Congo is also increasingly grappling with violence linked to Islamic militants. Earlier this month, the Islamic State group claimed responsibility for killing at least 14 people and injuring dozens from a bomb that detonated inside a church while people were praying.

In South Sudan, where Pope Francis will travel after Congo, civil war has prevented a visit since 2017. Despite a fragile peace agreement signed more than four years ago to end half a decade of fighting that killed nearly 400,000 people, the security is deteriorating.

While large scale clashes have subsided, in recent months tens of thousands of people have been displaced by violence between politically-backed youth militias in Upper Nile and Jonglei states, displacing nearly 40,000 people.

Much of the peace agreement hasn't been implemented and there is infighting among a splintered opposition. Elections are now slated to be held in 2024 after a two-year delay but preparations have been extremely slow.

Locals say they're hoping the Pope's visit will push the government to focus on peace.

"Let the political leadership of South Sudan take the visit of Pope Francis and the other faith-based leaders as an opportunity to change political attitudes towards making peace and stability prevail," said Edmund Yakani, executive director of the nonprofit Community Empowerment for Progress Organization.

"It will be a shame after the Pope Francis visit for the deadly and inhuman violence to continue among the conflicting parties," he added.

Throughout decades of war, the church has played a pivotal role in mitigating conflict in both countries.

In South Sudan, the church was key in brokering a peace deal to end the first civil war in 1972. It also created the people-to-people peace process in the 1990s, which reconciled warring southern communities and leaders during the second civil war, said John Ashworth, a retired missionary who has worked with the church in Sudan and South Sudan for 40 years.

The church also helped push the 2011 referendum, which led to the country's independence from the

north. And when civil war erupted in 2013, church leaders risked their lives protecting people, he said.

In Congo, the Catholic church mediated rising tensions in 2016 after the government postponed elections, creating an agreement which led to the 2018 vote, said Katharina R. Vogeli, founder of CapImpact, a peace-building organization working in the Great Lakes region.

Religious advisers say people in countries with enormously entrenched problems need to be lifted out of a generational sense of dread and anxiety.

"It's the message of eternal hope that transcends, which is what people need," said Ferdinand von Habsburg-Lothringen, a peace-building expert and former adviser to the South Sudan Council of Churches.

"The church has enormous power," he said. "Though they may not necessarily have political power, they have moral authority," he said.

Will Europe's ban on Russian diesel hike global fuel prices?

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe is taking another big step toward cutting its energy ties with Russia, banning imports of diesel fuel and other products made from crude oil in Russian refineries.

The European Union ban takes effect Feb. 5 following its embargo on coal and most oil from Russia. The 27-nation bloc is trying to sever its last uses of Russian energy and stop feeding the Kremlin's war chest as the anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine nears.

The newest ban has risks: Diesel prices have already jumped since the war started on Feb. 24, and they could rise again for the fuel that is key to the global economy.

"We're leaving money in the road to provide our services," said Hans-Dieter Sedelmeier of the family-run German bus and travel company Rast Reisen.

Most things people buy or eat are transported at some point by trucks, which mostly run on diesel. It also powers farm equipment, city buses and industrial equipment. The higher cost of diesel is built into the price of almost everything, helping push up inflation that has made life harder for people worldwide.

Here are key facts about the upcoming European embargo:

WILL THE EMBARGO PUSH UP DIESEL PRICES?

That depends. Diesel, like crude oil, is sold globally, and Europe could look for new sources, such as the U.S., India or countries in the Middle East. If that goes smoothly, the impact on prices might be temporary and modest.

Europe has already cut Russian diesel imports almost in half, from 50% of total imports before the war to 27%. U.S. suppliers have stepped up shipments to record levels, from 34,000 barrels a day at the start of 2022 to 237,000 barrels per day so far in January, according to S&P Global.

The EU's top energy official, Kadri Simson, says markets have had time to adjust after the ban was announced in June. Europeans also appear to have stocked up on Russian diesel before the deadline, with imports rising last month.

There is a complicating factor: The Group of Seven major democracies are talking about imposing a price cap on Russian diesel heading to other countries, just as they did on Russian crude. As with oil, the idea is to keep Russian diesel flowing to world markets but reduce Moscow's revenue.

If the cap works as advertised, global diesel flows should reshuffle, with Europe finding new suppliers and Russian diesel finding new customers, without a major loss of supply.

But it's hard to say how the cap will work without knowing where the price will be set and whether Russia will retaliate by withholding shipments.

"When Russian exports are constrained, for whatever reason, that would of course cause some trouble in this whole reshuffle process," said Hedi Grati, head of fuels and refining research for Europe at S&P Global Commodity Insights. "Europe would be competing with other big importers, and that would cause upward pressure on pricing."

If the cap doesn't block large amounts of Russian diesel, there might be "a short-lived price spike" as the market adjusts. For one, tankers would have a longer journey to Europe from the U.S., Middle East

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or India than from Russia's Baltic Sea ports, stressing shipping capacity.

But massive new refining capacity is launching in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia later this year and in Oman in 2024. That "could further alleviate any pressure points from this divorce from Russia," Grati said.

WHAT COULD A DIESEL PRICE CAP ACCOMPLISH?

The hope is to reproduce the effect of the oil price cap, which barred Western companies that largely control shipping services from handling Russian crude priced above \$60 a barrel.

Russia says it won't sell oil to countries observing the price ceiling, but the cap and falling demand from a slowing global economy has meant customers in China, India and elsewhere can buy Russian oil at steep discounts, cutting into the Kremlin's revenue.

Boosted by more expensive crude, diesel prices rose to over \$1,000 a ton last week from \$800 a ton in early December. Diesel costs more than \$40 per barrel above the crude used to make it.

One reason for the price hike was a late December storm in the U.S. that disrupted refineries, said Barbara Lambrecht, an analyst at Commerzbank.

WHAT HAPPENS IF DIESEL GETS MORE EXPENSIVE?

Fuel prices have been a major factor behind painful inflation in Europe that has robbed consumers of purchasing power and slowed the economy.

Diesel prices at the pump have swung from 1.66 euros per liter (\$6.43 a gallon) to 2.14 euros per liter (\$8.29 a gallon) in the course of a year.

"That is a gigantic increase," said Christopher Schuldes, the third generation of his family to run German trucking company Schuldes Spedition.

The company has 27 diesel trucks and 50 employees in the small town of Alsbach-Haehnlein between Frankfurt and Heidelberg in southwest Germany. It already has cut fuel costs by equipping trucks with efficient engines, ensuring trucks leave fully loaded and training employees in fuel-efficient driving.

"We did all that a long time ago, long before Russia invaded Ukraine," Schuldes said. "There's no more room for optimization."

To ease the extra diesel costs, the company tried negotiating higher prices with customers who have long-term contracts. Some agreed, some didn't. Even if a contract allows prices to rise with diesel costs, there's a two-month lag.

Regarding the embargo, "I am of two minds about it," Schuldes said. "I have to see that the company is in good shape, and that our purchasing is as economical as possible. On the other hand — on the personal level — I say Russia must not be supported."

Meanwhile, Rast Reisen, the bus and travel company near Freiburg im Breisgau in southwestern Germany, has seen diesel fuel rise from 12%-15% of costs to 20%-25%. Because 15 of its 25 buses are part of the regional public transport network, the company can't automatically raise fares, and government increases so far are "a droplet on a hot stone," said Sedelmeier, managing director for public transport.

Rast Reisen had to add a 10- to 15-euro (\$11 to \$16) diesel surcharge to trips to popular destinations like northern Germany's island of Sylt or Croatia's coast because prices spiked after catalogues were printed. Next year, prices for trips will simply be higher.

WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

Energy markets are looking to China and wondering when the world's second-largest economy will recover after the end of drastic COVID-19 restrictions. With low demand for fuel at home, the Chinese government let refineries ramp up their exports.

But if travel picks up in China, that diesel may disappear from the world market, raising prices as competition for fuel increases.

Dutch electronics giant Philips to cut 6,000 jobs worldwide

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Dutch consumer electronics and medical equipment maker Philips said Monday it is cutting 6,000 jobs worldwide over the next two years as it revealed a net loss of 1.6 billion euros (\$1.7 billion) in 2022, down from a net profit of 3.3 billion euros last year.

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The job losses come on top of a reduction of 4,000 staff the company announced in October.

The company, which has its headquarters in Amsterdam, is reeling from a worldwide recall of sleep apnea machines and economic headwinds including COVID-related issues in China and the war in Ukraine.

CEO Roy Jakobs said 2022 was "a very difficult year for Philips and our stakeholders, and we are taking firm actions to improve our execution and step up performance with urgency."

He said the job cuts will significantly reduce costs and make Philips a "leaner and more focused organization."

Adani accuses short-seller Hindenburg of attacking India

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI, India (AP) — India's Adani Group, run by Asia's richest man, has hit back at a report from U.S.-based short-seller Hindenburg Research, calling it "malicious", "baseless" and full of "selective misinformation."

Shares in the conglomerate have suffered massive losses since Hindenburg issued its report alleging fraud and other malfeasance. On Monday, shares in some Adani companies recovered some lost ground. The flagship company, Adani Enterprises, gained 3.2% and Adani Ports & Special Economic Zone Ltd. added 3.3%. But shares in other Adani listed companies fell between 5% to 20%.

Adani's 400-page rebuttal issued late Sunday accused Hindenburg of attacking India and its institutions and of breaking securities and foreign exchange laws. Adani has also accused Hindenburg, which said it was betting against the group's companies, of trying to derail a share sale originally expected to bring in about \$2.5 billion.

"This is not merely an unwarranted attack on any specific company but a calculated attack on India, the independence, integrity and quality of Indian institutions, and the growth story and ambition of India," Adani's statement said.

In response, the Hindenburg firm denied the accusations and said Adani's response largely confirmed its findings and failed to address key questions. It said the group was trying to conflate its rise with the success of India itself.

"We believe India is a vibrant democracy and emerging superpower with an exciting future. We also believe India's future is being held back by the Adani Group," Hindenburg said in a statement. "We also believe that fraud is fraud, even when it's perpetrated by one of the wealthiest individuals in the world," it said.

Gautam Adani and his family have built a vast fortune mining coal to fuel energy-hungry India's fast-growing economy. Businesses in the conglomerate span industries including infrastructure, ports, data transmission, media, renewable energy, defense manufacturing and agriculture. Adani's own net worth has skyrocketed nearly 2,000% in recent years.

With a net worth of nearly \$125 billion late last year, Adani surpassed Amazon boss Jeff Bezos to briefly become the world's second-richest man, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire Index. After last week's losses, Bloomberg's index ranked him seventh richest in the world with a fortune worth \$92.7 billion.

The report from Hindenburg said it judged the seven key Adani listed companies to have an "85% downside, purely on a fundamental basis owing to sky-high valuations."

Hindenburg said its report, "Adani Group: How the World's 3rd Richest Man is Pulling the Largest Con in Corporate History," followed a two-year investigation. It listed 88 questions it invited the company to answer. Most of the allegations involved concerns about the group's debt levels, activities of its top executives, use of offshore shell companies and past investigations into fraud.

Investors began dumping Adani-linked shares on Wednesday, wiping out some \$48 billion in market value.

Over the weekend, Adani said it would carry on with its share sale in Adani Enterprises as scheduled, despite the value of its shares falling well below the price range of the offering. On Monday, Adani Enterprises was trading at 2,850 rupees (\$35), up 3.2% but well below the band of 3,112 to 3,276 rupees initially set for the offering which closes Tuesday.

In its response to Hindenburg, the Adani Group said none of the 88 questions in its report was “based on independent or journalistic fact finding.” It rejected numerous questions as baseless, misleading or biased. In response to other questions, the group attached documents and tables of data and said it had followed local laws.

Adani also dismissed concerns over its debt-fueled growth, saying the “leverage ratios of Adani portfolio companies continue to be healthy and are in line with the industry benchmarks of the respective sectors.”

In an interview with CNBC TV-18 on Monday, Adani’s chief financial officer Jugeshinder Singh said the group’s gross debt was \$30 billion, out of which \$9 billion was from Indian banks.

Hindenburg said only 30 pages in Adani’s response focused on issues it raised and the rest consisted of court records, general information, company financials and “irrelevant corporate initiatives.” Adani failed to specifically answer 62 of the 88 questions it had posed, it said.

Late Thursday, Jatin Jalundhwala, head of the Adani group’s legal department, said the group was considering legal action against Hindenburg. Hindenburg said it stood by its report and would welcome legal action by the Adani group.

Is there hope for a dying river in Kenya’s growing capital?

By EVELYNE MUSAMBI Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Vultures scavenge for dead animals along a river turned sewer conduit in Kenya’s capital Nairobi. Its waters turn from clear to black as it traverses informal settlements and industrial hubs.

The river and its tributaries cross Kibera, known as Africa’s largest slum with close to 200,000 residents, and other informal settlements. It skirts dozens of factories that manufacture textiles, liquor and building materials. Many have been accused by environmentalists of discharging raw sewage and other pollutants like oil, plastic and glass into the water.

Experts and locals alike fear the water is harming plants in nearby farms that feed residents. Some community-based organizations help clean up the river and the government is also hoping to ramp up efforts. But families in the rapidly growing downstream suburb of Athi River, some 30 kilometers (19 miles) away, say they can no longer rely on the water for basic needs.

25-year-old Anne Nduta uses the river’s dark waters to wash her babies’ clothes by hand.

“When it rains, the Athi River water is usually full of garbage, and when it clears a bit we use it to wash clothes,” said the mother-of-two. “But as the dry season continues, the water becomes darker in color and we have to start buying expensive borehole water.”

A 20-liter (5-gallon) jerrican of borehole water sells for 20 shillings (\$0.16), and Nduta would need four of them to wash her babies’ clothes every three days.

Her problems start upstream, where informal settlements have directed some of their sewer lines straight into the Nairobi River.

The new national government, installed after the August election, says it’s on a mission to clean up the Nairobi River. Nairobi is one of Africa’s fastest growing cities and is struggling to balance the needs of creating jobs and protecting the environment from pollution.

The government has formed a commission whose mandate is to clean up and restore the river basin. No deadline has been announced yet, and no budget. The commission has yet to meet.

Ecologist Stephen Obiero said that sewage in the river used to irrigate farmland can cause “the possibility of contamination of the plant products with bacteria, viruses, protozoa ... if not properly handled by the end users.”

Morris Mutunga grows kale, spinach and amaranth on his five-acre farm in the Athi River area but has watched crops like French beans wither when irrigated with water from the river.

“I wish those polluting this river upstream in Nairobi could stop for the sake of food security in our country,” he said. The region is the source of many vegetables sold in Nairobi markets.

Upstream, some residents of informal settlements, like 36-year-old Violet Ahuga in Korogocho, cannot afford to pay to use modern toilets, so they defecate in bags and throw them in the river. The slum has

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more than 35,000 adults, according to the 2019 national census.

"My children are too young to go to the bushes alone, so I usually tell them to poop in a bag and I toss it into the river," said the mother-of-four. "I know what I'm doing is pollution, but there's no other way because I cannot afford the 850-shilling (\$6.85) monthly toilet fee." Toilets in the settlement are privately run by individuals and organizations.

Most informal settlements, which house laborers and their families, are not connected to sewer lines and have open trenches where residents pour dirty water that flows into the river.

But Ahuga also relies on the river's water for her daily income. She uses it to wash plastic bags, which she sells to traders who make reusable baskets with them.

As she splashes the black water on the bags and scrubs them with her feet, she remembers fondly how as a child she used to swim here.

The National Environment Management Authority, which is responsible for managing the river's water quality standards and issuing discharge licenses, has been accused by some Kenyan parliament members of laxity that has let industries get away with polluting the river.

Industries along the river include paint manufacturers, dairy factories, solar or lead acid batteries producers among others. Some industries have in the past been closed down for discharging raw sewage into the river.

Heavy metals like lead, barium, iron, aluminum, zinc and copper among others have been found in high levels at different sampling points along the river by various research organizations, including the University of Nairobi's public health and toxicology department.

Alex Okaru, a public health expert at the University of Nairobi, said high levels of heavy metals in the water, particularly lead and barium, could cause health effects such as liver and kidney damage if consumed.

"It is important to take necessary steps to minimize the release of these two metals into the environment," Okaru said.

In a parliament committee hearing in 2021, NEMA was accused of not taking action against a distillery that residents said was releasing waste in the Athi River area.

In an interview with The Associated Press, NEMA boss David Ongare acknowledged that few entities are being prosecuted these days but said that's because the government has been changing its approach to encourage collaboration instead of being combative, which could lead to resistance.

He said that since the changes were introduced, businesses are coming forward asking for assistance to comply with the body's directives.

"The cost of non-compliance is becoming very costly because if your enterprise is shut down, by the time you come back to production, you've lost customers and your market share," Ongare said.

He asserted that the environmental body has been constantly monitoring companies with past non-compliance issues and said if any are playing games it would soon catch up with them and action would be taken.

The environmental body also said it acts on all incidents of pollution that are reported by whistleblowers through its various platforms.

Locals and community organizations say another approach to cleaning up the river would be providing modern toilets at little or no cost. The NEMA boss said he hopes the national government's program to build affordable housing will reduce the number of people living in areas without good sanitation.

In Kibera, a community-based organization called Mazingira Yetu, or Swahili for Our Environment, is trying to address the problem by building 19 modern toilet blocks in collaboration with a government agency, Athi Water.

The organization's co-founder, Sam Dindi, said they also wanted to prevent plastic and other waste from being dumped in the river.

"The waste is collected and sorted into plastic waste, which is sold to recyclers or upcycled into baskets, and organic waste which is transformed into compost manure," Dindi said.

The manure is sold to people who have gardens, and some is used to grow tree seedlings that the or-

ganization sells. Money generated from Mazingiza Yetu projects is distributed to the youth who work with the organization.

"The idea of introducing a circular economy has worked here," he said, referring to the group's small-scale but successful reuse of waste products. "It just needs to be replicated."

Bengals' Ossai laments late hit in AFC title loss to Chiefs

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Joseph Ossai stood in front of his clean-out locker inside Arrowhead Stadium, while Bengals teammate B.J. Hill stood by for support, and lamented a mistake Sunday night that could easily haunt the defensive end for the rest of his career.

The Kansas City Chiefs were driving for a potential winning field goal in the AFC championship game when Ossai, a second-year pro, gave chase to scrambling Patrick Mahomes. Both were running at full speed when the All-Pro quarterback made it to the Cincinnati sideline, where Ossai gave a push from behind that sent Mahomes sprawling to the ground.

Penalty flags flew and Ossai knew immediately what he had done.

The 15-yard penalty for a late hit was enough to give Harrison Butker a field-goal chance, and the Chiefs' big-legged kicker barely coaxed the ball over the crossbar, giving Kansas City a 23-20 victory and a berth in the Super Bowl.

"I was just in full chase mode and pushing to maybe get him going backwards, because I knew he was going for the sideline, so make him go backwards and get that clock running," Ossai said. "I didn't know how far out of bounds we were."

It was enough that the flag was indisputable.

Making things worse, Ossai lay in a heap on the sideline as Mahomes trotted back to the field. He wound up hurting his right knee on the play, and an MRI exam is due Monday to determine the nature and extent of the injury.

"I've just got to learn from experience and know not to get close to that quarterback when he's close to the sideline," said Ossai, who had played well up to the last minute of the game, and bravely answered questions from reporters afterward.

"If there's anything that could possibly cause a penalty in the dire situation like that," he said, "I've got to do better."

Not everyone on the Cincinnati sideline was supportive after Ossai's mistake. TV cameras caught linebacker Germaine Pratt asking with an expletive why he was even near Mahomes at that point in the game. But most of the Bengals were ready to stand by Ossai's side, even batting away questions that they didn't like in the postgame locker room.

"There were a lot of other plays that could have turned the tide in that game in one second, so that's not the only one," said Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow, who was sacked five times and threw a pair of interceptions in the loss.

"This is emotional. We worked really hard to get here," added Bengals coach Zac Taylor. "Any play that people feel like was left out there, you're going to take it hard. We want guys like that, that this means a lot to. They care about it, care about their teammates. Joseph comes to work every day; he loves being a part of this team."

Ossai's career has been a hard one so far. He was a third-round pick of the Bengals out of Texas in 2021, but a meniscus injury in his second preseason game landed him on injured reserve for the season. The Nigeria native returned this season and appeared in 16 regular-season games, making just 17 tackles to go along with 3 1/2 sacks.

Yet by the way teammates gathered around him Sunday, it was clear his attitude and perseverance had won them over.

"We're one big family. It's not fake. When the going gets tough, we lift each other up," he said. "I am just happy I've got these group of guys around me, supporting me right now, because it's hard. There's a

bunch of guys in that room that I'm very thankful for, B.J. being one of them. A lot of older ones. They've done a good job taking us under their wings."

Friends mourn volunteer killed helping civilians in Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Friends and volunteers gathered Sunday at Kyiv's St Sophia's Cathedral to say goodbye to Andrew Bagshaw, a New Zealand scientist who was killed in Ukraine with another volunteer while they were trying to evacuate people from a front-line town.

Bagshaw, 48, a dual New Zealand-British citizen, and British volunteer Christopher Parry, 28, went missing this month while heading to the town of Soledar, in the eastern Donetsk region, where heavy fighting was taking place.

Volunteers spoke of their memories of Bagshaw and read tributes from his family.

Nikolletta Stoyanova, a friend in Ukraine, shared memories of his bravery.

"Even if no one wanted to go to Soledar, they can do that. Because if he understood that someone needs help, they need to do this help for these people," Stoyanova said, speaking in English.

Bagshaw's father, Phil, told reporters in New Zealand that his son wanted to do something to help.

"He was a very intelligent man, and a very independent thinker," he said. "And he thought a long time about the situation in Ukraine, and he believed it to be immoral. He felt the only thing he could do of a constructive nature was to go there and help people."

Ukrainian police said Jan. 9 that they lost contact with Bagshaw and Parry after the two headed for Soledar. Their bodies were later recovered. A Ukrainian official reported Wednesday that the defending forces made an organized retreat from the salt-mining town.

In a Jan. 24 statement, Parry's family said he was "drawn to Ukraine in March in its darkest hour." They said he'd "helped those most in need, saving over 400 lives plus many abandoned animals."

Friends said the men's bodies would be handed over to relatives in the U.K.

In the south of Ukraine, Russian forces on Sunday heavily shelled the city of Kherson, killing three people and wounding six others, the regional administration said. It said the shelling damaged a hospital, school, bus station, post office, bank and residential buildings.

Among those reported injured were two women in the hospital at the time: a nurse and a cafeteria worker. Russian forces retreated across the Dnieper River from Kherson in November, but still hold much of the province of the same name.

On Sunday, Russia's Foreign Ministry accused Ukraine and its Western allies of war crimes in connection with the shelling of two hospitals in Russian-held parts of Ukraine.

Russian officials said 14 people died on Saturday when a hospital in the eastern Luhansk province settlement of Novoaidar was struck. They said shells also fell on the territory of a hospital in Nova Kakhovka, a Russian-occupied city in Kherson province where a strategically vital bridge across the lower reaches of the Dnieper is located.

"The deliberate shelling of active civilian medical facilities and the targeted killing of civilians are grave war crimes of the Kyiv regime and its Western masters," the Foreign Ministry said. "The lack of reaction from the United States and other NATO countries to this, yet another monstrous trampling of international humanitarian law by Kyiv, once again confirms their direct involvement in the conflict and involvement in the crimes being committed."

Russian forces have shelled hundreds of hospitals and other medical facilities in Ukraine since the war began, reducing more than 100 of them to rubble, according to the Ukrainian Health Ministry.

Russian state TV aired footage of what it said was the damaged hospital in Novoaidar. It said rockets hit the pediatric department of the two-story building.

"There are no military factories here. There are no military vehicles, no tanks. Who did you shoot at?" Olga Rysnaya said in an interview on Russian TV, which identified her as a pediatric nurse.

Luhansk province, where Novoaidar is located, is almost entirely under the control of Russian forces or Russian-backed separatists. Russian and separatist officials alleged the hospital was deliberately targeted.

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The movements of journalists are restricted in areas of Ukraine under Russian control.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, said Ukrainian forces were likely increasing strikes on Russian positions deep inside Luhansk province, closer to the Russian border, in an effort "to disrupt Russian logistics and ground lines of communication." It said the strikes could be part of preparations for a future counteroffensive.

In other developments:

— A Russian missile hit an apartment building in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, late Sunday, killing at least one person and injuring three others, officials said.

— The British Defense Ministry said Sunday that Ukrainian tank crews have arrived in the U.K. to begin training on the Challenger 2 battle tank. The U.K. government has said it would send 14 of the tanks to Ukraine, which also was promised advanced battle tanks from the U.S., Germany and other European allies.

Chiefs top Bengals 23-20 on last-second kick for AFC title

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Patrick Mahomes was forced to rely on his badly sprained right ankle rather than his strong right arm when the Kansas City Chiefs were desperately driving with a chance to win the AFC championship.

The All-Pro quarterback, missing three wide receivers to injuries and battered himself, took off on a third-down play near midfield in another gut-check game with the Cincinnati Bengals. Mahomes strained to reach the mark he needed and was headed out of bounds when he felt the hands of Joseph Ossai send him sprawling into the bench.

The mad dash, coupled with the 15-yard penalty for a late hit, was all Kansas City needed.

Harrison Butker strode confidently onto the field, sent a 45-yard kick through cold, gusting wind over the crossbar with 3 seconds to go, and put the Chiefs back in the Super Bowl for the third time in four years with a 23-20 victory.

"I don't think we have any cigars," Mahomes said with a smile, "but we'll be ready to go in the Super Bowl."

It was vindication for the AFC West champions, who had lost three straight to their newfound nemeses, including a three-point overtime loss to Cincinnati in last year's conference title game. All of those defeats were by three points.

Now, the Chiefs are headed back to the big game.

Awaiting them is coach Andy Reid's old team, the Eagles, in the first matchup of Black quarterbacks in the Super Bowl with Mahomes and Philadelphia's Jalen Hurts. It will also feature a brother-against-brother showdown between Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce and Philadelphia center Jason Kelce.

"I've watched them all year," Mahomes said. "It's going to be a great challenge for us. But I'm going to celebrate this first."

Mahomes, who hurt his ankle against Jacksonville in the divisional round, threw for 326 yards and two touchdowns, even though he was missing three of his wide receivers to injuries by the end. Marquez Valdes-Scantling led with 116 yards and a touchdown, while Travis Kelce — bad back and all — had seven catches for 78 yards and a score.

"It's a tough bunch. My heart goes out to them, man, they're tough guys," Reid said. "They worked so hard this week. Pat and Kelce were both banged up a little bit. They pushed through and great things happened."

The Chiefs also managed to shut the mouths of the Bengals, some of whom had taken to calling their home "Burrowhead" for Joe Burrow, who had never lost to Kansas City. Even Cincinnati Mayor Aftab Purval started in on the trash talk.

"I've got some wise words for that Cincinnati mayor," Kelce said. "Know your role and shut your mouth, you jabroni!"

Burrow, who was sacked five times and wobbly by the end, finished with 270 yards passing to go with a

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touchdown and two interceptions for the Bengals. Tee Higgins had six catches for 83 yards and the score.

"We're not going to make it about one play. There was plenty of plays we left on the field today that could have put us in a better position," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. "The character of this football team, that's never going to change. We've got the right people in the locker room, the right men leading this team and this organization.

"I know that this is a team that our city and our fan base can be proud of," Taylor added. "They represent themselves the right way, and we're going to fight, scratch and claw to be back in this position next year."

The Chiefs were able to do early what the Buffalo Bills could not in last week's divisional round: They ran roughshod over an ailing Bengals offensive line missing two starters to injury with another bothered by a sore knee.

Burrow was sacked three times in the first quarter alone and the Bengals offense did not gain a single yard.

Mahomes looked just fine on his sore ankle in leading Kansas City to a field goal on its opening possession. When the Chiefs got the ball back, Mahomes did it again, but only after Kadarius Toney failed to pull in a nifty throw for a would-be touchdown — the incompleteness was upheld upon review.

Cincinnati finally got moving in the second quarter, but it also had to settle for Evan McPherson's chip-shot field goal.

So much for two of the league's highest-scoring offenses.

The Chiefs finally reached the end zone late in the second quarter when Mahomes hit Kelce, loosely covered by Jessie Bates III, with a fourth-down throw for the touchdown. The Bengals drove 90 yards in the closing minutes, but only added a field goal to get within 13-6 at the break.

Turns out their offense was just hitting its stride. And another classic was brewing.

After the Chiefs went three-and-out to start the second half, Burrow led the Bengals downfield, bolting through a yawning hole in the defense for a third-down conversion before hitting Higgins from 27 yards out to knot the game 13-all.

Mahomes, suddenly down three wide receivers to injuries and beginning to limp, gamely pressed on. He answered Burrow with a touchdown drive of his own, capped by a third-down throw to Valdes-Scantling to regain the lead.

The Chiefs had a chance to gain some breathing room later in the third quarter, but Mahomes somehow lost control of the ball before throwing a pass and the Bengals pounced on the fumble. Six players later — including an audacious fourth-down throw from Burrow to Ja'Marr Chase — Samaje Perine ran into the end zone to tie it at 20.

Burrow gave the Chiefs a chance when his deep throw to Higgins on third down was batted into the air and picked by rookie cornerback Josh Williams. Mahomes managed to move the Chiefs past midfield, but two runs went nowhere and his third-down throw to Jerick McKinnon was well short, forcing them to punt in Bengals territory.

Kansas City's defense held, though, got a crucial sack from Chris Jones to force a punt with 39 seconds left, and shaky return man Skyy Moore broke free for 29 yards on the return. That gave Mahomes and the offense one more try.

"It was a tough road to get here. To win 10 in a row, it was a pretty incredible feat," Taylor said. "We came up short. We wanted to play longer than that, but really proud of these guys."

INJURIES

Bengals: WR Tyler Boyd left with a quadriceps injury early in the second half.

Chiefs: Lost CB L'Jarius Sneed (concussion), LB Willie Gay Jr. (shoulder) and WRs Toney (ankle), Mecole Hardman (pelvis) and JuJu Smith-Schuster (knee).

UP NEXT

The Chiefs are headed to their third Super Bowl in four seasons. They ended a 50-year championship drought when they rallied to beat the San Francisco 49ers in 2020, then lost to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers the following year.

Super Bowl 57: Chiefs, Eagles meet for title in Arizona

By DAVID BRANDT AP Sports Writer

Patrick Mahomes finally got the best of Joe Burrow.

All he needed was a little shove.

Harrison Butker made a 45-yard field goal with 3 seconds left — after Cincinnati's Joseph Ossai was flagged for a 15-yard penalty for shoving Mahomes after he was out of bounds — and the Chiefs beat the Bengals 23-20 in the AFC championship game to make it back to the Super Bowl.

Kansas City will face the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl on Feb. 12 in Glendale, Arizona.

The Eagles opened as a 1 1/2-point favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

There are no shortage of storylines: Kansas City coach Andy Reid goes against his old team — which he led to Super Bowl 39 — in a game that's also the first matchup of Black starting quarterbacks in the Super Bowl with Mahomes and Philadelphia's Jalen Hurts.

On top of that, there's a brother-against-brother showdown between Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce and Philadelphia center Jason Kelce.

" Officially done being a Chiefs fan this season!! " Jason Kelce tweeted immediately after the Chiefs won.

The Chiefs have been making deep postseason runs on a regular basis ever since Mahomes came to town as the franchise quarterback.

This was their fifth straight trip to the AFC title game and will be their third Super Bowl appearance in that span. They beat the 49ers for the NFL title in the 2019 season, but lost to the Bucs the following season.

The Eagles clobbered the Niners 31-7 in the NFC title game earlier Sunday. They've looked dominant in the playoffs so far, also beating the New York Giants 38-7 in the divisional round.

Philadelphia is back in the Super Bowl five years after beating the New England Patriots 41-33 on Feb. 4, 2018.

Now a mostly new generation of Eagles — led by coach Nick Sirianni and Hurts — will come to Arizona to try and win another title.

The Chiefs-Bengals game looked as if it was going to overtime before Ossai's ill-advised play. Mahomes — who was playing on a badly sprained ankle — was running to get a first down in the final seconds as Ossai desperately tried to track him down.

Mahomes was out of bounds when Ossai gave him a shove, sending both players tumbling to the turf. The ensuing 15-yard penalty was enough to push Butker into field-goal range and the kick split the uprights.

A distraught Ossai sat on the bench with his head in his hands, well after the game was over.

The Bengals and Chiefs were playing for the fourth time in less than 400 days and Cincinnati had won the previous three meetings — all by three points. This one was decided by a field goal, too, and all Burrow could do was watch.

The Bengals lost to the Rams in last year's Super Bowl and they just missed another chance at returning to the title game.

NO DRAMA IN NFC

Odds makers thought fans were in for some close conference championship games.

They'll have to settle for a 50% success rate.

The NFC title game was a blowout. Niners rookie quarterback Brock Purdy was injured in the first quarter when Eagles linebacker Haason Reddick drilled his right arm on a play that was ruled a fumble. The Eagles recovered that fumble and the injury proved to be a game-changer.

With Purdy hurt, San Francisco turned to 36-year-old journeyman Josh Johnson, who couldn't do much before eventually leaving with a concussion. Purdy came back into the game, but could barely throw, and the Eagles cruised to the win.

The 49ers dealt with quarterback injuries all season, losing Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo before turning to Purdy, a seventh-round draft pick out of Iowa State. Purdy stepped into a starter's role in December and won his first seven games before Sunday's injury.

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Here's a few things to know about the upcoming Super Bowl:

WHAT'S THE UPCOMING SCHEDULE?

FEB. 5

Pro Bowl flag-football game, 3 p.m. EST, ABC/ESPN

FEB. 12

Super Bowl LVII, Philadelphia Eagles vs. Kansas City Chiefs, 6:30 p.m. EST, Fox

RIHANNA AT HALFTIME

Rihanna will take center stage as the headline act for this year's Super Bowl halftime show.

With sales of more than 250 million records worldwide, Rihanna ranks as one of the best-selling female artists ever. Her most recent album was 2016's "Anti." Rihanna last performed publicly at the Grammy Awards in 2018.

The singer said she turned down a similar opportunity for the 2019 Super Bowl that was ultimately headlined by Maroon 5. At the time, many artists voiced support for Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who protested police brutality against Black people and minorities by kneeling during the national anthem in 2016.

Country music star Chris Stapleton will sing the national anthem, while R&B legend Babyface will perform "America the Beautiful."

PRO BOWL MAKEOVER

The Pro Bowl is getting a major makeover this year after the NFL eliminated its full-contact all-star game and replaced it with weeklong skills competitions and a flag football game.

The flag football contest is Feb. 5 in Las Vegas at Allegiant Stadium, one week before the Super Bowl.

The Pro Bowl debuted in January 1951 in Los Angeles and stayed there for 21 seasons before the game moved to different cities from 1972-80. Hawaii hosted from 1980-2009, and the game has had several homes in the years since, including Miami, Phoenix, Orlando and Las Vegas.

"The game was kind of silly, I guess," Saints two-time Pro Bowl offensive lineman Ryan Ramczyk said back in September when the news was announced. "Guys weren't out there playing true football. Hopefully, there'll be a lot of interactions with the fans and guys will get their opportunity to go out there and show some skills. I could see that being a good change."

Hurts, Eagles soar into Super Bowl, rout 49ers for NFC title

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Jalen Hurts can conduct a singalong about as well as he can orchestrate the kind of punishing scoring drives that sent the Eagles into the Super Bowl.

At the end of one more triumph, Hurts stood on the stage on the field — as his Eagles teammates passed around the NFC championship trophy — and clutched a microphone in front of what was suddenly Philadelphia's largest karaoke joint. His rendition of the team fight song was a tad off-key.

Hurts may not sing as well as he can score, but it was another memorable moment in a season full of them. And the Eagles don't believe they're done yet.

"We've got new moments," Hurts said. "New moments and new times."

Hurts had one of Philadelphia's four rushing touchdowns and the Eagles soared into the Super Bowl, forcing both of San Francisco's quarterbacks out of the game with injuries and beating the wounded 49ers 31-7 in the NFC championship game on Sunday.

The Eagles, who won the Super Bowl five years ago with a different coach and quarterback, will try to do it again behind the formidable duo of Hurts and coach Nick Sirianni. Philadelphia will play former Eagles coach Andy Reid's Kansas City Chiefs.

"We get to do it because we did it better than anyone in the NFC this year," Sirianni said.

Hurts had a modest game by his standards after a season in which he was a finalist for MVP. He was 15-of-25 passing for 121 yards and ran for 39, improving to 16-1 as a starter this season. The Eagles (16-3) lost two games that he missed with a sprained right shoulder.

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Hurts sat alone at his locker dressed all in purple and he took a few puffs of a cigar as the Eagles celebrated around him. He understood there was one more game to win.

"I never knew how far we'd go," Hurts said, "but I never said it couldn't be done."

Miles Sanders ran for two touchdowns and linebacker Haason Reddick made the hit that forced 49ers rookie quarterback Brock Purdy out of the game with an elbow injury. Reddick also recovered a fumble by Purdy's replacement, Josh Johnson, who later suffered a concussion.

That forced Purdy back into the game, but his injury was clearly a factor as the 49ers all but gave up on the passing game, even while trailing by multiple scores. Purdy said he was unable to throw the ball more than 10 yards after his elbow got hurt.

San Francisco's bad luck at quarterback was finally too much to overcome as its 12-game win streak ended. The Niners (15-5) lost both Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo to season-ending injuries, and Purdy — the final pick in April's draft — lost as a starter for the first time.

Philadelphia police greased traffic and light poles in what proved again to be a futile attempt to slow the postgame revelry. The city now has its beloved Birds in the Super Bowl just three months after the Philadelphia Phillies reached the World Series.

"When you guys go into our indoor (practice facility), there's always that picture in the back part of it of the 2017 NFC championship game, and it's just the electricity of the stadium," said Sirianni, who was hired two years ago to replace the Eagles' Super Bowl-winning coach, Doug Pederson. "We're looking forward to getting another picture up there of this special moment that we had."

The game disintegrated in the waning minutes and Philadelphia's K'Von Wallace and San Francisco's Trent Williams were ejected for their roles in a brawl. Williams yanked Wallace from behind and slammed him to the ground.

The moment only seemed to rile up Eagles fans even more as they soon waved their green towels and went wild as confetti fluttered around them.

"We've got one more game for the rest of our lives," Sanders said.

TAKING CONTROL

The Eagles broke the game open in the final two minutes of the first half, getting a rise out of a crowd that had been quiet with nervous energy since a touchdown on the opening drive.

Sanders broke free for a 13-yard run for a 14-7 lead, concluding a 14-play, 75-yard drive extended by three 49ers penalties.

Johnson bobbled a shotgun snap and fumbled on the next drive, and Reddick — the free-agent pickup from Carolina having one of the great defensive seasons in franchise history — recovered at the San Francisco 30. Boston Scott scooted 10 yards for a touchdown and 21-7 lead.

Even with Hurts almost a non-factor — he had 97 yards passing in the first half — the Eagles were firmly in control. His 1-yard rushing touchdown on Philadelphia's signature rugby-style QB sneak made it 28-7 late in the third quarter.

"We've got a chance to go out there and win it all," Hurts said. "So we want to go prepare to go do that."

The Eagles used quick thinking as they scored on their opening drive for the second straight playoff game. DeVonta Smith made a sensational one-handed grab for 29 yards, but replays showed he appeared to lose control of the ball as he hit the ground. Smith popped up and frantically waved the Eagles to the line. Niners coach Kyle Shanahan did not challenge the call and the Eagles got off the next play. Sanders scored on a 6-yard run.

"Smart players do smart things," Sirianni said. "He did a smart thing right there. I'm going to say he caught it, though."

NINERS' NADIR

Purdy left the game with an elbow injury after he was drilled in the arm by Reddick on San Francisco's first drive. The play was initially ruled an incomplete pass, but replays confirmed it was a fumble.

"I knew that was a sack-fumble because I got my hand on the ball," Reddick said.

He also got his hand on Purdy's arm, changing the course of the game. The 23-year-old Purdy's improb-

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able rise from "Mr. Irrelevant" to playoff starter ended with a whimper as he failed to become the first rookie QB to lead a team to the Super Bowl.

He was improbably needed again in the third quarter after Johnson, a journeyman backup signed in December, was also injured.

"I hurt for these guys," Shanahan said. "We felt really good about this game. It was tough circumstances."

With little hope they could get anything going behind Johnson, the 49ers turned to Christian McCaffrey, a midseason acquisition who led the team with 13 TDs in the regular season and playoffs, to get on the board. He broke three tackles on a 23-yard touchdown run that made it 7-7 in the second quarter.

That turned out to be the only moment of hope for Shanahan's Niners, who managed 164 yards of offense and 11 first downs.

"You're never out of the fight," McCaffrey said. "We believed it and it just didn't turn out our way. We got beat and wish we had another shot at it with everybody."

IN THE HOUSE

First lady Jill Biden, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, actor Bradley Cooper, comedian Kevin Hart, Los Angeles Angels star Mike Trout and several 76ers, including Joel Embiid, attended the game.

UP NEXT

The Eagles will play in the fourth Super Bowl in franchise history when they face the Chiefs on Feb. 12 in Glendale, Arizona. Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs will be making their third Super Bowl appearance in four seasons; they won it all three years ago.

Taxes slow India's solar power rollout but boost manufacture

By SIBI ARASU Associated Press

BENGALURU, India (AP) — In May last year Fortum India, a subsidiary of a Finnish solar developer, won the bid for a solar power project in the state of Gujarat. The project was due to be completed three months ago and would have generated enough electricity for 200,000 homes.

But like many other solar power projects in the country, it's been delayed as Fortum India struggles to source and pay for necessary components.

"For the last six months, we have not been able to finish developing any new projects," said Manoj Gupta, who oversees Fortum India's solar projects in India.

Gupta said solar panels and cells have become obstructively expensive because of protective taxes the Indian federal government implemented in April last year. The basic customs duty imposes a levy of 40% on imported solar modules and 25% on solar cells.

The government says it wants to encourage the domestic manufacture of components required to produce solar power and reduce the country's reliance on imports.

But solar developers say homegrown producers, while rapidly growing and being pushed along by policy initiatives, are still too fledgling to meet demand. Current cell and module manufacturing capacity in India is around 44 gigawatts per year, just a fraction of what's needed to meet India's renewable aims.

In 2022, India had a target to install 100 gigawatts of solar energy as part of goal to add 175 gigawatts of clean electricity to its grid. But only 63 gigawatts of solar power were ultimately installed last year, according to Indian federal government data. India missed its 2022 renewable energy target by just nine gigawatts.

"Without these duties we would have easily achieved our targets for larger solar projects, at least," said Jyoti Gulia of the renewable energy research and advisory firm JMK Research.

Most solar developers in India and around the world rely on China, with the nation producing more than 80% of the world's solar components, according to the International Energy Agency. Many countries have tried to encourage domestic production to limit dependence on the country. The United States' recent climate law, for example, also incentivizes homemade renewable energy manufacturing.

"China controls the market and we saw during both the pandemic and the geopolitical conflict between our countries that they just stopped the supply chain completely," said Chiranjeev Saluja from the Indian solar manufacturer Premier Energies. "I think the government wants to develop the whole solar ecosystem,

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that is the intent behind such policies.”

Saluja added that a bustling solar manufacturing industry also had wider economic benefits.

“The jobs in manufacturing are well-paying, secure jobs. And while developers employ only a handful of people, to manufacture cells required to produce one gigawatt of solar energy, you will need at least 500 people,” he said.

A 2022 report found that India’s renewable energy sector could employ more than one million people by 2030, but only if domestic manufacturing continued to scale up considerably.

Another Indian government policy that mandates that solar components can only be bought from government-approved manufacturers to ensure that the modules and cells are of good quality is also stalling projects, according to analysts.

Developers are unable to purchase from southeast Asian countries as manufacturers there have yet to be approved or have not applied. Many of those countries have free trade agreements with India which would make them exempt from import taxes.

“The situation is quite grim today,” said Vinay Rustagi, managing director at the renewable energy consultancy Bridge to India. “Global supply chain issues, material shortages and, of course, the duty on solar components has led to a lot of projects being postponed.”

Rustagi said the growth in domestic manufacturing as a result of the tax is “encouraging, but I do not think it is sustainable.” He added that the government “should be aiming to create strong domestic capabilities that can be a preferred choice without any taxes or duties.”

Solar manufacturers do not agree.

“We have allowed for dumping from other countries for too long. Otherwise domestic manufacturing would have taken a strong root already,” said Gyanesh Chaudhary, vice chairman at Vikram Solar, an Indian solar manufacturer.

“These taxes and policies were announced well in advance and there was enough time to factor them into costs,” Chaudhary said. “Mandates such as the approved list of manufacturers are to make sure the quality of products coming into India are of a certain minimum quality.”

But Srivatsan Iyer of solar developer Hero Future Energies said the unpredictability of the sector made it hard to factor in the extra costs.

“Land, connectivity to the project site, supply chain issues are just some dynamic factors and, of course, the pandemic,” said Iyer of the difficult landscape for solar projects. “With these duties, clean power is just more expensive for India now.”

Iyer is worried that the extra costs could also thwart India’s next renewable energy target in 2030. But he’s hopeful the government might defer some duties in the upcoming federal budget announcement scheduled for Feb. 1.

The government hasn’t yet given any indication that it will make amendments to its tax policy.

Tyre Nichols case revives calls for change in police culture

By AARON MORRISON, CLAUDIA LAUER and ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — An unarmed Black man dies after a videotaped beating by police. The officers involved are fired. After a thorough review of the evidence, criminal charges are swiftly filed against the offending officers.

Investigation, accountability and charges.

This is often the most Black citizens can hope for as the deaths continue. Nationwide, police have killed roughly three people per day consistently since 2020, according to academics and advocates for police reform who track such deaths.

Tyre Nichols’ fatal encounter with police officers in Memphis, Tennessee, recorded in video made public Friday night, is a glaring reminder that efforts to reform policing have failed to prevent more flashpoints in an intractable epidemic of brutality.

Nearly 32 years ago, Rodney King’s savage beating by police in Los Angeles prompted heartfelt calls for change. They’ve been repeated in a ceaseless rhythm ever since, punctuated by the deaths of Amadou

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Diallo in New York, Oscar Grant in Oakland, California, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and so many others.

George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis in 2020 was so agonizing to watch, it summoned a national reckoning that featured federal legislation proposed in his name and shows of solidarity by corporations and sports leagues. All fell short of the shift in law enforcement culture Black people in America have called for — a culture that promotes freedom from fear, trust in police and mutual respect.

"We need public safety, right? We need law enforcement to combat pervasive crime," said Jason Turner, senior pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis. "Also, we don't want the people who are sworn to protect and serve us brutalizing us for a simple traffic stop, or any offense."

The five Black officers are now fired and charged with murder and other crimes in the Jan. 10 death of Nichols, a 29-year-old skateboarder, FedEx worker and father to a 4-year-old boy.

From police brass and the district attorney's office to the White House, officials said Nichols' killing points to a need for bolder reforms that go beyond simply diversifying the ranks, changing use-of-force rules and encouraging citizens to file complaints.

"The world is watching us," Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy said. "If there is any silver lining to be drawn from this very dark cloud, it's that perhaps this incident can open a broader conversation about the need for police reform."

President Joe Biden joined national civil rights leaders in similar calls to action.

"To deliver real change, we must have accountability when law enforcement officers violate their oaths, and we need to build lasting trust between law enforcement, the vast majority of whom wear the badge honorably, and the communities they are sworn to serve and protect," the president said.

But Memphis, whose 628,000 residents celebrate barbecue and blues music and lament being the place where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, has seen this before. The city took steps advocates called for in a "Reimagine Policing" initiative in 2021, and mirrored a set of policy changes reformers want all departments to implement immediately, known as "8 Can't Wait."

De-escalation training is now required. Officers are told to limit uses of force, exhaust all alternatives before resorting to deadly force and report all uses of force. Tennessee also took action: State law now requires officers to intervene to stop abuse and report excessive force by their colleagues.

Showing unusual transparency for a police department, the MPD now publishes accountability reports that include the race of people subjected to use of force each year. They show Black men and women were overwhelmingly targeted for rougher treatment in 2019, 2020 and 2021. They were subject to nearly 86% of the recorded uses of guns, batons, pepper spray, physical beatings and other force in 2021, the total nearly doubling that year to 1,700 cases.

Seven uses of force by Memphis police ended in death during these three years.

"I don't know how much more cumulative Black death our community should have to pay to convince elected officials that the policing system isn't broken — it's working exactly as it was designed to, at the expense of Black life," said Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, co-executive director of the Highlander Research and Education Center, a Tennessee-based civil rights leadership training school.

The Nichols case — just one of the brutality cases to make national news this month — exposes an uncomfortable truth: More than two years since the deaths of Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks touched off protests, policing reforms have not significantly reduced such killings.

States approved nearly 300 police reform bills after Floyd's murder, creating civilian oversight of police, more anti-bias training, stricter use-of-force limits and alternatives to arrests in cases involving people with mental illnesses, according to a recent analysis by the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland.

Despite calls to "defund the police," an Associated Press review of police funding nationwide found only modest cuts, driven largely by shrinking revenue related to the coronavirus pandemic. Budgets increased and more officers were hired for some large departments, including New York City's.

Still stuck in Congress is the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which would prohibit racial profiling,

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ban chokeholds and no-knock warrants, limit the transfer of military equipment to police departments, and make it easier to bring charges against offending officers. Biden said he told Nichols' mother that he would be "making a case" to Congress to pass the Floyd Act "to get this under control."

The Rev. Al Sharpton said his eulogy at Nichols' funeral on Wednesday will include a call for new laws. NAACP President Derrick Johnson also took Congress to task.

"By failing to write a piece of legislation, you're writing another obituary," Johnson said. "Tell us what you're going to do to honor Tyre Nichols. ... We can name all the victims of police violence, but we can't name a single law you have passed to address it."

Advocates want state and federal legislation because local changes vary widely in scope and effect and can be undone by a single election after years of grassroots activism. But some say strict regulations are just the start — and the video of Nichols' agony proves it.

"Changing a rule doesn't change a behavior," said Katie Ryan, chief of staff for Campaign Zero, a group of academics, policing experts and activists working to end police violence. "The culture of a police department has to shift into actually implementing the policies, not just saying there's a rule in place."

The five officers charged — Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Desmond Mills Jr., Emmitt Martin III and Justin Smith — were part of the so-called Scorpion unit. Scorpion stands for Street Crimes Operations to Restore Peace in our Neighborhoods.

The Memphis police chief, Cerelyn "CJ" Davis, disbanded the unit on Saturday.

"It is in the best interest of all to permanently deactivate the Scorpion unit," she said in a statement.

Prior to the move by Davis, Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland said it was clear that the officers involved in the attack on Nichols violated the department's policies and training.

"I want to assure you we are doing everything we can to prevent this from happening again," Strickland said in a statement. "We are initiating an outside, independent review of the training, policies and operations of our specialized units."

The Memphis police union extended condolences to Nichols' family, saying it "is committed to the administration of justice and NEVER condones the mistreatment of ANY citizen nor ANY abuse of power." The statement also expressed faith that the justice system would reveal "the totality of circumstances" in the case.

Patrick Yoes, national president of the Fraternal Order of Police, pushed back against the conclusion that policing must change. This was not "legitimate police work or a traffic stop gone wrong," Yoes said. "This is a criminal assault under the pretext of law."

Protesters turned out again Friday night after the city released the video footage. Turner, the Memphis pastor, called the images "further proof that our city's and our nation's criminal justice systems are in dire need of change."

"It's not like we're short on concrete, reasonable recommendations," said the Rev. Earle Fisher, senior pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. "What we're short on is the political will and the commitment to making the structural changes."

Barrett Strong, Motown artist known for 'Money,' dies at 81

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Barrett Strong, one of Motown's founding artists and most gifted songwriters who sang lead on the company's breakthrough single "Money (That's What I Want)" and later collaborated with Norman Whitfield on such classics as "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," "War" and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," has died. He was 81.

His death was announced Sunday on social media by the Motown Museum, which did not immediately provide further details.

"Barrett was not only a great singer and piano player, but he, along with his writing partner Norman Whitfield, created an incredible body of work," Motown founder Berry Gordy said in a statement.

Strong had yet to turn 20 when he agreed to let his friend Gordy, in the early days of building a recording

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empire in Detroit, manage him and release his music. Within a year, he was a part of history as the piano player and vocalist for "Money," a million-seller released early in 1960 and Motown's first major hit. Strong never again approached the success of "Money" on his own, and decades later fought for acknowledgment that he helped write it. But, with Whitfield, he formed a productive and eclectic songwriting team.

While Gordy's "Sound of Young America" was criticized for being too slick and repetitive, the Whitfield-Strong team turned out hard-hitting and topical works, along with such timeless ballads as "I Wish It Would Rain" and "Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)." With "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," they provided an up-tempo, call-and-response hit for Gladys Knight and the Pips and a dark, hypnotic ballad for Marvin Gaye, his 1968 version one of Motown's all-time sellers.

As Motown became more politically conscious late in the decade, Barrett-Whitfield turned out "Cloud Nine" and "Psychedelic Shack" for the Temptations and for Edwin Starr the protest anthem "War" and its widely quoted refrain, "War! What is it good for? Absolutely ... nothing!"

"With 'War,' I had a cousin who was a paratrooper that got hurt pretty bad in Vietnam," Strong told LA Weekly in 1999. "I also knew a guy who used to sing with (Motown songwriter) Lamont Dozier that got hit by shrapnel and was crippled for life. You talk about these things with your families when you're sitting at home, and it inspires you to say something about it."

Whitfield-Strong's other hits, mostly for the Temptations, included "I Can't Get Next to You," "That's the Way Love Is" and the Grammy-winning chart-topper "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" (Sometimes spelled "Papa Was a Rolling Stone"). Artists covering their songs ranged from the Rolling Stones ("Just My Imagination") and Aretha Franklin ("I Wish It Would Rain") to Bruce Springsteen ("War") and Al Green ("I Can't Get Next to You").

Strong spent part of the 1960s recording for other labels, left Motown again in the early 1970s and made a handful of solo albums, including "Stronghold" and "Love is You." In 2004, he was voted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, which cited him as "a pivotal figure in Motown's formative years."

Whitfield died in 2008.

The music of Strong and other Motown writers was later featured in the Broadway hit "Ain't Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations."

Strong was born in West Point, Mississippi and moved to Detroit a few years later. He was a self-taught musician who learned piano without needing lessons and, with his sisters, formed a local gospel group, the Strong Singers. In his teens, he got to know such artists as Franklin, Smokey Robinson and Gordy, who was impressed with his writing and piano playing. "Money," with its opening shout, "The best things in life are free/But you can give them to the birds and bees," would, ironically, lead to a fight — over money.

Strong was initially listed among the writers and he often spoke of coming up with the pounding piano riff while jamming on Ray Charles' "What'd I Say" in the studio. But only decades later would he learn that Motown had since removed his name from the credits, costing him royalties for a popular standard covered by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and many others and a keepsake on John Lennon's home jukebox. Strong's legal argument was weakened because he had taken so long to ask for his name to be reinstated. (Gordy is one of the song's credited writers, and his lawyers contended Strong's name only appeared because of a clerical error).

"Songs outlive people," Strong told The New York Times in 2013. "The real reason Motown worked was the publishing. The records were just a vehicle to get the songs out there to the public. The real money is in the publishing, and if you have publishing, then hang on to it. That's what it's all about. If you give it away, you're giving away your life, your legacy. Once you're gone, those songs will still be playing."

Report: drones attack convoy in east Syria coming from Iraq

BASSEM MROUE and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Drones attacked a convoy of trucks in eastern Syria Sunday night shortly after it crossed into the country from Iraq, Syrian opposition activists and a pro-government radio station said. There was no immediate word on casualties.

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The strike comes amid heightening tension between Iran and its rivals in the region.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attack on the convoy in the Syrian border region of Boukamal, which is a stronghold of Iran-backed militias.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said the drones appear to have been from the U.S.-led coalition, adding that they targeted six refrigerated trucks. The group said there were casualties and ambulances rushed to the area.

Another activist said the strike hit a convoy of trucks of Iran-backed militiamen. Omar Abu Layla, a Europe-based activist from Deir el-Zour who runs a group that monitors developments, tweeted that there was no immediate word on casualties.

The pro-government Sham FM radio station also reported that six refrigerated trucks were hit.

In Baghdad, an official with an Iran-backed militia confirmed there was a strike saying it only targeted one truck. He gave no word on casualties.

The attack in eastern Syria came hours after bomb-carrying drones targeted an Iranian defense factory in the central city of Isfahan causing some damage at the plant.

Last month, Israel's military chief of staff strongly suggested that Israel was behind a strike on a truck convoy in Syria in November, giving a rare glimpse of Israel's shadow war against Iran and its proxies across the region.

Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, who finished his military service earlier this month, said Israeli military and intelligence capabilities made it possible to strike specific targets that pose a threat.

Israeli leaders have in the past acknowledged striking hundreds of targets in Syria and elsewhere in what it says is a campaign to thwart Iranian attempts to smuggle weapons to proxies like Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group or to destroy weapons caches.

The November strike hit tanker trucks carrying fuel and other trucks carrying weapons for the militias in Syria's eastern province of Deir el-Zour, the Observatory reported at the time. It said at least 14 people, most of them militiamen, were killed in the strike.

The strike, along the border with Iraq, targeted Iran-backed militiamen, Syrian opposition activists said at the time. Some of those killed in the attack were Iranian nationals, according to two paramilitary officers in Iraq.

At the time, Israel declined to comment on the strike.

Iran is a main backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad and has sent thousands of Iran-backed fighters to help Syrian troops during the country's 11-year civil war. Both Iran and Assad's government are also allied with Hezbollah, which has fought alongside Assad's forces in the war.

Israel consider Iran to be its chief enemy and has warned against what it views as its hostile activities in the region.

Kansas City police find body in man's car after towing it

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Family members and a forensic expert are questioning why Kansas City police didn't find a man's body in the cargo area of his own SUV until after they towed it to a Missouri police station earlier this month.

Adam "A.J." Blackstock Jr.'s death is being investigated as a homicide, according to The Kansas City Star.

The newspaper reported that police defended how they initially handled the situation because they didn't have a search warrant when they had the vehicle towed on Jan. 17 and Blackstock had yet to be officially reported missing.

One forensic expert told the newspaper that police should have looked inside the vehicle before they moved it.

"The idea of taking a vehicle into custody without searching inside a vehicle or opening the trunk is just negligent," said Brent Turvey, a forensic scientist and criminologist with the Forensic Criminology Institute in Sitka, Alaska.

Family members said they want answers about what happened to Blackstock, 24, who left behind an

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18-month-old son.

"We really are asking for justice," Danielle Blackstock, his older sister, told the newspaper. "We can't have him back. But we need justice."

The paper quoted Kansas City Police Department spokesman Sgt. Jake Becchina as saying last week that detectives were making headway toward identifying persons of interest in the case, but charges had yet to be filed.

Adam Blackstock Sr. said he called police after being unable to reach his son when the family returned from a trip to Disneyland. He used GPS to locate what he believed was his son's vehicle in a driveway in the Kansas City, Missouri, neighborhood of Oak Park Southwest. The SUV was covered by a gray tarp.

When officers arrived, the homeowner said the vehicle belonged to her uncle and provided the phone number of a man who said it was his.

Blackstock Sr. convinced police otherwise, in part by using a remote starter to turn on the vehicle. Officers persuaded the woman at the home to let them remove it. They noticed what appeared to be a bullet hole in the driver's seat and blood on the floorboards, but didn't immediately investigate further.

They saw the lifeless body in the back only after towing the SUV.

Becchina said that the officers showed "very creative thinking to talk the homeowner into allowing the vehicle to be towed based on consent at that time, when there was no other legal standing to enter onto the property, much less process the car on the property."

Tunisian voters shun elections seen as test for democracy

By BOUAZZA BEN BOUAZZA Associated Press

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — Voters in Tunisia massively shunned parliamentary elections seen as an important test for their president and their country's troubled democracy, according to preliminary turnout figures Sunday. Independent observers reported scattered violations.

Turnout was just 11.3% of Tunisia's 8 million voters, according to preliminary estimates from the national electoral commission. That is about the same level of participation as in the first round of voting last month.

Many disaffected Tunisians stayed away, and the influential Islamist party Ennahdha and other opposition movements boycotted.

The runoff elections were being watched around the Arab world. They're seen as a conclusive step in President Kais Saied's push to consolidate power, tame Islamist rivals and win back lenders and investors needed to save the teetering economy.

But the low turnout casts doubt on the future parliament's legitimacy and could complicate Saied's plans. Election officials are expected to announce the official preliminary results Wednesday.

Voters were choosing lawmakers to replace the last parliament, led by Ennahdha, which Saied suspended in 2021 and later disbanded. He then had the constitution rewritten to give more power to the president and less to the legislature.

Analysts note a growing crisis of confidence between citizens and the political class since Tunisia's 2011 revolution unleashed Arab Spring uprisings across the region, and led Tunisians to create a new democratic political system once seen as a model.

It's now seen as disintegrating.

In the first-round elections, 10 candidates secured seats outright in the 161-seat parliament without winning any votes because they ran unopposed. No candidates bothered to run in seven constituencies; electoral officials say those seats will be filled in special elections at a later date.

At a voting station in the Tunis suburb of Soukra, people trickled in to mark their ballots and drop them in a plastic box.

Multiple independent organizations reported violations in Sunday's voting.

In a statement, the associations Chahed (Witness) and Mourakiboun (Controllers) said some polling station heads refused to provide their observers access to data on turnout rates or the number of voters in their constituencies.

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Chahed also reported violations of rules prohibiting election day campaigning and said authorities used administrative vehicles to transport voters to polling stations.

The vice president of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, Amira Mohamed, said on Mosaique radio that journalists were barred from some voting stations, contrary to electoral rules.

Electoral commission member Maher Jedidi rejected accusations of wrongdoing, but said there might have been "isolated cases" of problems in the more than 4,000 voting centers. He said the commission would address any problems it finds.

Meanwhile, critics of the president were doubtful the new parliament would be effective, regardless of who is elected.

The opposition Work and Achievement Party, which was among the groups that boycotted the elections, instead held a meeting Sunday in its Tunis offices.

"Kaies Saied, when he wrote his constitution and ignored the committee he formed to write a new constitution, he wanted parliament to be a group of people in a closed place who had no influence on the situation of the country," party chief Abdellatif Meki told The Associated Press.

"The next parliament has no control over the government. So for parliament members who make promises to the people, what is the mechanism by which they will keep their promises?" he asked.

Saied and his supporters argued that his overhaul of Tunisian politics was needed to end political deadlock seen as worsening economic and social crises. Unemployment tops 18%, the soaring budget deficit has led to shortages of staples, and the International Monetary Fund has frozen talks on a much-awaited new loan for the Tunisian government.

Saied's popularity has sunk since his election in 2019, as evidenced by a video shared online of an impromptu visit he made to a cafe in Tunis amid campaigning earlier this month.

"God willing, we will provide you with everything you need ... as long as you have hope," he told a group of young people.

One retorted, "We don't have hope."

'24,' 'Runaways' actor Annie Wersching has died at 45

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Actor Annie Wersching, best known for playing FBI agent Renee Walker in the series "24" and providing the voice for Tess in the video game "The Last of Us," has died. She was 45.

Wersching passed away Sunday morning in Los Angeles following a battle with cancer, her publicist told The Associated Press. The type of cancer was not specified.

Neil Druckmann, who created "The Last of Us," wrote on Twitter that "We just lost a beautiful artist and human being. My heart is shattered. Thoughts are with her loved ones."

Actor Abigail Spencer, who appeared with Wersching on the sci-fi series "Timeless," tweeted, "We love you Annie Wersching. You will be deeply missed."

Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Wersching appeared on dozens of television shows over the course of her two-decade career.

Her first credit was in "Star Trek: Enterprise," and she would go on to have recurring roles in the seventh and eighth seasons of "24," "Bosch," "The Vampire Diaries," Marvel's "Runaways," "The Rookie" and, most recently, the second season of "Star Trek: Picard" as the Borg Queen.

She also provided the voice and motion capture performance for Tess for the popular video game "The Last of Us."

Wersching was diagnosed with cancer in 2020, according to Deadline, and continued working. She's survived by her husband, actor Stephen Full, and three sons. A GoFundMe page was set up Sunday to support the family.

Erdogan might approve Finland's NATO bid, 'shock' Sweden

By ZEYNEP BILGINSOY Associated Press

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ISTANBUL (AP) — Turkey's president has suggested his country might approve Finland's application for NATO membership before taking any action on Sweden's, while the Turkish government issued a travel warning for European countries due to anti-Turkish demonstrations and what it described as Islamophobia.

The travel warning published late Saturday followed demonstrations last weekend outside the Turkish Embassy in Sweden, where an anti-Islam activist burned the Quran and pro-Kurdish groups protested against Turkey. The events stiffened Turkey's refusal so far to ratify Sweden's NATO bid.

Sweden and Finland applied jointly to become members of the military alliance, dropping their longstanding military nonalignment following Russia's war on Ukraine. In a prerecorded video of an event released Sunday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan indicated that Turkey might sign off on only Finland.

"If needed, we could give a different message about Finland. Sweden will be shocked when we give the different message about Finland," Erdogan said to a group of young people in Bilecik province.

Turkey has accused the government in Stockholm of being too lenient toward groups it deems as terror organizations or existential threats, including Kurdish groups. NATO requires unanimous approval of its existing members to add new ones, but Erdogan's government has said it would only agree to admit Sweden if the country met its conditions.

In its travel warning to citizens, the Turkish foreign ministry cited an increase in anti-Turkish protests by "groups with links to terror groups," a reference to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey. Along with Turkey, the European Union and United States also designate the PKK as a terror group.

Pro-Kurdish groups have waved the flags of the PKK and its affiliates during protests in Sweden organized as a response to Sweden and Finland's promise to prevent the PKK's activities in their countries in order to gain Turkey's approval for their NATO memberships.

Erdogan said he told the Swedish prime minister, "You will extradite these terrorists if you really want to enter NATO. If you don't extradite these terrorists, then sorry." He said Turkey had provided a list of 120 people it wants extradited from Sweden, a demand that was part of a memorandum signed in June that averted Turkey's veto of the Nordic nations' joint application.

Turkey is demanding the extradition of alleged PKK militants as well as some followers of Fethullah Gulen, the Muslim cleric accused of the 2016 attempted coup. In December, the Swedish Supreme Court said the country cannot extradite Bulent Kenes, the former editor-in-chief of a newspaper linked to Gulen, angering Turkey.

Turkey also strongly condemned far-right activist Rasmus Paludan's burning of the Quran last weekend in Stockholm, which he repeated in Copenhagen Friday. Ankara summoned the Dutch ambassador after another far-right activist tore pages of the Quran in the Hague.

Following last week's protests, Erdogan warned Sweden not to expect support for its membership bid for the military alliance. Turkey also indefinitely postponed a key meeting in Brussels that would have discussed Sweden and Finland's NATO membership.

The Turkish foreign ministry urged its citizens to take precautions and stay away from demonstration areas in Europe. It also said they should go to local authorities if they face xenophobic or racist attacks.

In a separate advisory, the ministry also urged Turkish citizens to be vigilant in the United States in case of protests in response to the fatal beating by Memphis, Tennessee, police of Tyre Nichols, an unarmed Black man.

Earlier Saturday, before Turkey had issued its travel warning, the Nordic countries separately issued updated travel guidelines for Turkey. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden urged their citizens visiting Turkey to avoid large gatherings and to exercise caution.

The Swedish Foreign Ministry said in a message on its website that Sweden's embassy in Ankara remains closed to the public and visitors to the country's consulate general in Istanbul are "requested to exercise vigilance."

"We want to make Swedes in Turkey aware that further manifestations may occur," the Swedish ministry said, referring to counter-protests that erupted in Turkey after last weekend's events in Stockholm.

Biden, McCarthy to discuss debt limit in talks on Wednesday

By HOPE YEN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said Sunday he is looking forward to discussing with President Joe Biden a “reasonable and responsible way that we can lift the debt ceiling” when the two meet Wednesday for their first sit-down at the White House since McCarthy was elected to the post.

McCarthy, R-Calif., said he wants to address spending cuts along with raising the debt limit, even though the White House has ruled out linking those two issues together as the government tries to avoid a potentially devastating financial default.

The speaker pledged that cuts to Social Security and Medicare would be off the table.

“I know the president said he didn’t want to have any discussion (on cuts), but I think it’s very important that our whole government is designed to find compromise,” McCarthy told CBS’ “Face the Nation.” “I want to sit down together, work out an agreement that we can move forward to put us on a path to balance — and at the same time not put any of our debt in jeopardy at the same time.”

Asked whether he would make a guarantee, McCarthy said, “There will not be a default,” though he suggested that declaration depended on the willingness of Biden and Democrats to negotiate.

The White House on Sunday confirmed Wednesday’s meeting on “a range of issues.” It said Biden looked forward to “strengthening his working relationship” with McCarthy and to asking about the speaker’s plan on spending, noting that the first House bill passed by Republicans this year to slash IRS funding would ultimately increase the deficit.

“The President will ask Speaker McCarthy if he intends to meet his Constitutional obligation to prevent a national default, as every other House and Senate leader in U.S. history has done,” the White House said. “He will underscore that the economic security of all Americans cannot be held hostage to force unpopular cuts on working families.”

McCarthy was elected speaker on a historic post-midnight 15th ballot early on Jan. 7, overcoming holdouts from his own ranks and tensions that have tested the new GOP majority ability to govern.

Word of the long-awaited White House meeting comes at a time of divided government in Washington with a debt ceiling crisis brewing and House Republicans ready for confrontation.

McCarthy has been eager to push Biden to the negotiating table, hoping to make good on the promises the GOP leader made to holdouts during his campaign to become speaker to pare federal spending back to 2022 budget levels, which would be a sizable 8% budget cut.

The White House has made clear that Biden is not willing to entertain policy concessions in exchange for lifting the debt limit, which is the nation’s borrowing authority. The United States bumped up against that limit earlier this month, and the Treasury Department has deployed “extraordinary measures” to stave off a potential default for at least a few more months.

Biden himself has scoffed at the idea of negotiating spending cuts, telling Democratic congressional leaders last week that Republicans were “genuinely serious about cutting Social Security, cutting Medicare.”

On Sunday, when McCarthy was asked if he would push cuts to those programs, he said, “Let’s take those off the table.” Pressed on possible defense cuts that he may have promised to House conservatives, McCarthy responded: “I want to eliminate waste wherever it is. ... I want to look at every single department.”

Washington Rep. Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said his party supports a clear fiscal plan for the future but that Republicans have been disingenuous in addressing the issue.

“We shouldn’t be negotiating over whether or not we should pay our bills. That’s our position,” Smith told “Fox News Sunday.” “Right now, the Republicans don’t have a plan. Their plan, as led by the extremists in their party, is to complain about spending, not raise the debt ceiling, but not actually offer a plan that says, ‘This is what we’re going to cut.’”

The coming debt limit showdown has a familiar precedent.

A little more than a decade ago, a new generation of tea party House Republicans swept to power, eager

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to confront the Obama administration to slash federal spending and curb the nation's ballooning debt load. As vice president at the time, Biden was central to those negotiations. But House Republicans and the White House could never strike a deal, causing a fiscal crisis. This time, Biden and his Democratic allies in Congress are in no mood to broker deals with a new era of hard-line Republicans led by the Freedom Caucus.

McCarthy pointed to Biden's previous experience in trying to negotiate spending cuts and said he's hopeful the president will be open to listening again.

"I think the president is going to be willing to make an agreement together," McCarthy said.

In an Associated Press interview last weekend, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she expected Congress would ultimately vote to raise the limit. But she said GOP demands for spending cuts in return for backing an increase were "a very irresponsible thing to do" and risk creating a "self-imposed calamity" for the global economy.

Baby girl found abandoned in Florida an hour after birth

MULBERRY, Fla. (AP) — Florida authorities found a newborn girl wrapped in a blanket and still attached to a placenta on a hill outside a trailer park early Saturday morning.

Polk County deputies responding to a call about a baby crying outside near Mulberry, east of Tampa, found the girl about an hour after she was born, the sheriff's office said in a news release. The temperature was in the low 50s (about 11 degrees Celsius).

Polk County medical workers took the baby to a hospital, where she was healthy and stable, according to the sheriff's office.

"It was by the grace of God that we found the abandoned baby girl when we did, before exposure to the cold or any animals caused her any harm. She was left in an extremely vulnerable condition, but she's a strong little girl, and it looks like she's doing great," said Sheriff Grady Judd.

Deputies used a K-9 unit, a drone and bloodhound to try to find the mother, but were unsuccessful.

Florida has a safe haven law that allows parents to leave newborns at a fire station or medical facility up to a week after birth.

'Don't be numb to this': Battling despair over gun deaths

By TIM SULLIVAN and CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Increasingly it feels like America is at war with itself.

In New Orleans, just days into the new year, a 14-year-old girl was shot to death, along with her father and uncle. A few days after, in a Virginia classroom, a 6-year-old boy pulled out a gun and shot his first-grade teacher. That news was eclipsed by a mass shooting at a California dance studio last weekend that left 11 people dead. A day later and a few hundred miles away, a farmworker opened fire in a beachside town, killing seven coworkers. Three more were killed and four wounded in a shooting at a short-term rental home in an upscale Los Angeles neighborhood early Saturday.

Just keeping track of all the shootings has become overwhelming, with the locations, circumstances and the names of the victims running together into a seemingly endless trail of bloodshed and grief.

And many Americans are deeply pessimistic that anything will soon change. When President Joe Biden signed a bill last year to fight gun violence — the first such measure to pass Congress in a generation — a substantial majority supported it. But 78% said they believed it would do little or nothing at all, a survey by the Pew Research Center found.

The sheer number of killings and the glacial pace of the political response "breeds a sense of powerlessness and despair," said Pedro Noguera, the dean of the school of education at the University of Southern California and a sociologist who has studied gun violence for more than two decades.

"I don't think anybody feels good about where we are at — even gun enthusiasts," he said.

But if all that might make you think America has gone numb to gun violence, Zeneta Everhart would disagree. Fiercely.

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Everhart's then-19-year-old son, Zaire, was working his part-time job at a Buffalo supermarket last May when a gunman stormed in, looking for Black people to kill. Ten died in the attack. Zaire was shot in the neck but survived.

"I don't think that the country is becoming numb to it, but I think that the country is frustrated," she said. "I think that people are tired."

"You know, we don't want to hear about this. We don't want to hear about our children dying by gun violence, and we don't want to hear about our seniors" who were killed in the California studio attack. "How awful. How heartbreaking."

But that makes Everhart and others even more determined to find ways to stem the violence.

The month after the supermarket shooting, she and other victims' relatives went to Washington, D.C., testifying before a House committee about the need for gun safety legislation. Two weeks later, Biden signed the gun violence bill.

That success, and her son's continuing recovery, keep her energized.

But in a country where attitudes about guns and violence are often contradictory, charting a course of action makes for uneasy calculus.

Overall, 71% of Americans say gun laws should be stricter, according to a 2022 poll by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. But in the same poll, 52% said it is also highly important to protect Americans' right to own guns for personal safety.

Last year's gun violence law was designed to incrementally toughen requirements for young people to buy guns, deny firearms to more domestic abusers and help local authorities temporarily take weapons from people judged to be dangerous. Most of its \$13 billion cost would go to bolster mental health programs and for schools.

This year, though, the number of shooting deaths are already deeply discouraging.

The nation's first mass shooting last year happened on Jan 23. By the same date this year, the nation had already endured six mass shootings, leaving 39 people dead, according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University. It tracks every attack in the U.S. that has claimed at least four lives, not including the shooter's, since 2006.

"Unfortunately, I think we have become immune to it," said Mark Gius, a professor at Quinnipiac College who studies gun violence and public policy. "It's become a part of life."

Fred Guttenberg, whose 14-year-old daughter Jaime was killed when a gunman rampaged through a Parkland, Florida, high school in 2018, knows too well how overwhelming the violence can be.

The immediate instinct to these shootings, he said, is to think "Here we go again." But it doesn't end there. "It's not that Americans don't care. It's that we've let it go too far," he said. "America is paying attention. People are more engaged on this issue than they've ever been."

For years, he's been pushing in Congress and Florida for legislation known as "Jaime's Law," which would require people buying ammunition to undergo the same background checks required to buy a gun. The bills have stalled repeatedly, but he's not giving up.

While mass killings like Parkland grab much of the attention, more than half of America's roughly 45,000 annual firearm deaths are from suicide.

Of gun killings, the vast majority leave only one or two people dead. Many of those deaths get no attention, beyond from the authorities and the people left behind.

"That's the sad thing," said USC's Noguera. "It almost takes being directly impacted to understand how dangerous the situation is right now."

It has created a situation where even people who detest guns can find themselves wondering if they should buy one.

"It's understandable," he said. "People think: If the state can't protect us, then we must protect ourselves."

Eight months after the Buffalo supermarket attack, doctors have been unable so far to remove all the bullet fragments lodged inside the body of Everhart's son, some of them dangerously close to vital organs.

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But his survival motivates her to keeping pushing government for change, and she urges others not to give up fighting when they hear about yet another shooting.

"Don't be numb to this," she said. "This should hurt you. You should feel something."

Protesters: 'Cop City' activist's killing doesn't make sense

By R.J. RICO Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Tortuguita's cautious voice rang out from a platform amid the tall pines the first time Vienna met them: "Who goes there?" she remembers them calling.

The tree-dweller, who chose the moniker Tortuguita – Spanish for "Little Turtle" – over their given name, was perched above the forest floor in the woods just outside Atlanta last summer.

Vienna quickly identified herself, and Tortuguita's watchfulness melted into the bubbly, curious, funny persona so many in the forest knew. They welcomed the newcomer and helped her settle in alongside the other self-proclaimed "forest defenders" on an 85-acre (34-hectare) site officials plan to develop into a huge police and firefighter training center. Protesters derisively call it "Cop City."

"It was a magical experience for me, being able to live out our ideals," Vienna told The Associated Press, recalling how the protesters shared clothing, food and money, all while engaging in community activism. She and Tortuguita quickly fell in love during those warm, late summer days.

That was before. Before a Jan. 18 police operation that ended in gunfire, leaving 26-year-old Tortuguita dead and a state trooper hospitalized, shot in the abdomen. Officials have said officers fired in self-defense after Tortuguita, whose given name was Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, shot the trooper. Activists argue it was state-sanctioned murder.

Outrage over the events has galvanized leftists around the world, with vigils from Seattle to Chicago to London to Lützerath, Germany.

Environmentalists for years had urged officials to turn the land into park space, arguing that the tall, straight pines and oaks were vital to preserving Atlanta's tree canopy and minimizing flooding.

Vienna, 25, recalls her first four months there as joy-filled. There were campfires and sleepovers, in her tent or Tortuguita's, nestled in the large wooded tract that activists call the Weelaunee Forest, the Muscogee (Creek) name for the land.

City Council approved the \$90 million Atlanta Public Safety Training Center in 2021, saying a state-of-the-art campus would replace substandard offerings and boost police morale beset by hiring and retention struggles in the wake of violent protests against racial injustice that roiled the city after George Floyd's death in 2020.

The planned development, largely financed by private corporate donations, enraged activists. Trees would be razed to build a shooting range, a "mock village" to rehearse raids and a driving course to practice chases. All would be within earshot of a poor, majority-Black neighborhood in a city with one of the nation's highest degrees of wealth inequality.

Like many of those who took to living in the forest to oppose the development, Tortuguita was an eco-anarchist committed to fighting climate change and halting expansion of a police state, Vienna said.

Beyond the distrust many in the "Stop Cop City" movement have toward police, six people who knew Tortuguita told the AP that authorities' allegations about the protester's final encounter do not match up with the person they knew: someone who, almost to a fault, always put others first.

"They were genuinely so generous and loving and always wanted to take care of people," Vienna said of her partner, who last year took a 20-hour course to become a medic for the activists. "Their biggest thing was building communities of care."

Tortuguita's brother, Daniel Esteban Paez, said his sibling was even growing long hair to donate to children with cancer.

Tortuguita was a "citizen of Earth," Paez said, growing up in their home country of Venezuela as well as Aruba, London, Russia, Egypt, Panama and the U.S. as their stepfather's oil industry career led the family around the world. Tortuguita graduated magna cum laude from Florida State University and had been

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active in Food Not Bombs, helping feed homeless people in Tallahassee, Florida.

They had lived for several months among the "Stop Cop City" campers, a group whose reputation had been growing among leftist activists.

The campers built platforms in the trees and slept out, seeking public support and to block construction. They barricaded forest entrances and have been accused of threatening contractors and vandalizing heavy equipment.

Officials recently ratcheted up pressure. In December, authorities said firefighters and police officers were removing barricades to the site when they were attacked with rocks and incendiary devices. Vienna was among six arrested and accused of domestic terrorism for allegedly throwing rocks at fire department and emergency services workers, as well as a moving police vehicle. She's fighting the charges in court.

The allegations are designed to scare others away from the cause, argued Marlon Kautz of the Atlanta Solidarity Fund, a group providing legal aid to those arrested.

"These charges are purely being brought for the sake of putting activists in jail ... and demonizing the movement in the public eye," Kautz said. "When we see the authorities using the criminal justice system to chill speech and prevent activists from associating with the movement, that is a grave threat to democracy."

DeKalb County District Attorney Sherry Boston declined to comment on the specific facts of each case but said "if a person uses threats and violence in an effort to force a government entity to change a policy ... that is defined as Domestic Terrorism according to the Georgia statute."

A month after the December altercation with police, Tortuguita was dead, killed as officers tried to clear remaining protesters from the site. Seven others were arrested on domestic terrorism charges during what authorities called a "clearing operation."

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has said there is no body camera or dashcam footage of the shooting, but that ballistic analysis shows the trooper was shot by a bullet from a handgun in Tortuguita's possession.

The GBI said Tortuguita was inside a tent and did not comply with officers' commands prior to firing at authorities. Vienna declined to comment when asked whether she knew if her partner had a gun, though the GBI says records show Tortuguita legally purchased the firearm in 2020.

Vienna and other activists have questioned the official version of events, calling the shooting a "murder," accusing officials of an inconsistent, vague narrative and demanding an independent investigation. The GBI says it has a "track record of impartiality" when investigating officer-involved shootings.

On Jan. 21, violence and vandalism broke out when a masked contingent among hundreds protesting in downtown Atlanta began throwing rocks and aiming fireworks at a skyscraper housing the Atlanta Police Foundation. Activists then lit a police cruiser on fire and smashed a few more windows. No injuries were reported.

Authorities arrested six more people that night on charges including domestic terrorism, saying that "explosives" had been recovered. Police declined to elaborate when asked whether they were referring to fireworks or more dangerous incendiary devices.

"Make no mistake about it: these individuals meant harm to people," Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens said during a news conference Saturday.

In response, GOP Gov. Brian Kemp on Thursday declared a state of emergency, giving him the option of calling in the Georgia National Guard to help "subdue riot and unlawful assembly."

Paez, Tortuguita's 31-year-old brother from Texas, said his family is heartbroken.

"Our family doesn't want violence toward cops, but we also don't want violence from cops," Paez told the AP. "I'm just terrified at the thought that the tactics that were used to kill my sibling are going to be replicated at Cop City."

He bristles at the allegation that Tortuguita was a domestic terrorist. They were too kind. Too smart. Too caring.

"He was a privileged person but he chose to be with the homeless, to be with the people that needed his caring," said Tortuguita's mother, Belkis Terán, who lives in Panama.

For a long time, Paez said he did not care about the forest's fate. He was far more concerned about Tortuguita's safety.

"I told my sibling, 'If you were ever to die, I'm going to dump oil and hazardous materials in your stupid

forest,” Paez recalled, his voice cracking. “They called my bluff. I care about the forest now.”

Trustees picked by DeSantis may change progressive college

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

SARASOTA, Fla. (AP) — “Your education. Your way. Be original. Be you.”

That’s how New College of Florida describes its approach to higher education in an admission brochure. The state school of fewer than 1,000 students nestled along Sarasota Bay has long been known for its progressive thought and creative course offerings that don’t use traditional grades.

The school, founded in 1960, is also a haven for marginalized students, especially from the LGBTQ community, said second-year student Sam Sharf in a recent interview on campus.

“There’s a lot of students out there that are not allowed to be themselves in their hometowns,” said Sharf, who is a transgender woman. “When they get to come here, they get to thrive because they really get to be themselves.”

To Sharf and others, New College’s reputation as a haven for originality and individualized coursework is now threatened. Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis’ recently appointed six new trustees who intend to turn the school into a classical liberal arts school modeled after conservative favorite Hillsdale College in Michigan.

One new trustee, Manhattan Institute senior fellow Christopher Rufo, said in a column on his website that the governor wants the group to accomplish what he calls “institutional recapture,” which would move New College away from such things as diversity, equity and inclusion programs and teaching of critical race theory — the idea that racism is enmeshed in U.S. society.

“Ours is a project of recapture and reinvention,” Rufo wrote, listing several ways he believes left-wing ideas have permeated universities across the country. “Conservatives have the opportunity finally to demonstrate an effective countermeasure against the long march through institutions.”

Students such as Sharf and New College faculty have begun to push back, organizing meetings to plan strategy and issuing statements against the conservative takeover.

“We support (students’) fearless pursuit of knowledge, including research on race and gender,” the New College chapter of United Faculty of Florida wrote in a public statement last week. “We assert our unflinching commitment to free speech, academic integrity and the respectful exchange of different viewpoints.”

Sharf said many students worry New College will become “a quote-unquote ‘Hillsdale of the South.’ I’m not trying to be in an environment where I’m force-fed dogmatic, nationalistic, Christian education. I want to be in a place where you’re free to think and learn what you want.”

The governor’s appointment of the New College trustees, including a government professor at Hillsdale College, are only one part of DeSantis’ effort to shift Florida’s 28 state-funded institutions of higher learning in a more conservative direction. The moves come as DeSantis considers a potential 2024 presidential campaign in which education culture battles could play a prominent part, particularly in a Republican primary.

These efforts include a memo DeSantis sent to all Florida colleges and universities requiring them to list programs and staff involved in diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, initiatives. The governor signed legislation last April to change the accreditation method for Florida schools and heighten performance review of tenured professors.

During his second inaugural address earlier this month, DeSantis said his goal is to “ensure that our institutions of higher learning are focused on academic excellence and the pursuit of truth, not the imposition of trendy ideology.”

The presidents of all 28 Florida colleges and universities responded to DeSantis’ memo on DEI initiatives with a joint statement seeking to distance their institutions from critical race theory and similar concepts. They set a Feb. 1 goal to remove any objectionable programs.

That statement says, in part, that the schools will not fund programs with the primary idea that “systems of oppression should be the primary lens through which teaching and learning are analyzed and/or improved upon.”

The presidents added that critical race theory can be taught but only “as one of several theories and in

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an objective manner.”

Back in Sarasota, New College has previously fended off efforts to fold it into another state school, such as Florida State University or the University of South Florida, which has a nearby campus. It was once a private school and then was part of USF beginning in 1975 but, since 2001, has been a standalone part of the public university system.

The new trustees, on an interim basis pending Florida Senate confirmation, will join the rest of the 13-member board at a meeting Jan. 31. Students and other opponents of conservative change expect to make their views known, Sharf said.

“The vast majority of people on campus don’t want this,” she said. “They would erase a lot of things on campus. I don’t want to be in a place that tries to erase my existence.”

‘Avatar 2’ tops box office for 7th weekend

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

“Avatar: The Way of Water” claimed the No. 1 spot on the domestic box office charts for the seventh weekend in a row with an additional \$15.7 million, according to studio estimates on Sunday.

It was a quiet weekend overall, notable mostly for the Hindi language blockbuster “Pathaan” that broke into the top five and the post-Oscar nominations rereleases of films like “Everything Everywhere All At Once” and “The Fabelmans.”

“Avatar 2’s” first-place North American run has only been matched by the first “Avatar,” and, in the past 25 years, bested by “Titanic” (which stayed in first place for 15 weeks). All three were directed by James Cameron.

Globally, “The Way of Water” has now grossed an estimated \$2.1 billion, passing “Star Wars: The Force Awakens,” to become the fourth-highest grossing film of all time (of which Cameron has directed three).

“James Cameron just keeps ticking off all the records and milestones,” said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore. “And it’s still got a wide-open marketplace.”

Second place went to Universal and DreamWorks’ family-oriented offering “Puss In Boots: The Last Wish,” which made \$10.6 million in its sixth weekend. The animated spinoff has earned over \$140.8 million in North America and was recently made available to stream at home, too.

Third place went to Sony’s “A Man Called Otto” with \$6.8 million from 3,957 locations. The meme-able horror “M3GAN,” a Universal release, snuck into fourth place with \$6.4 million in its fourth weekend, bringing its domestic total to \$82.3 million.

The Indian film “Pathaan,” starring Shah Rukh Kha in his first role in five years, settled in fifth place with \$5.9 million from only 695 screens.

“A top five appearance is really impressive,” Dergarabedian said, noting that the marketplace over the past several years has presented opportunities for Indian films to break into the domestic top 10.

Neon also launched the horror movie “Infinity Pool,” written and directed by Brandon Cronenberg and starring Mia Goth and Alexander Skarsgård, in 1,853 locations following its Sundance debut. It made an estimated \$2.7 million. The romantic comedy “Maybe I Do,” with Diane Keaton, Richard Gere and Susan Sarandon, made \$562,000 from 465 screens. And Lukas Dhont’s Cannes-winning boyhood drama “Close” opened on four screens in New York and Los Angeles, earning \$68,143.

Many studios boasting best picture nominees also chose to capitalize on the buzz of Tuesday’s Oscar nominations with sizable re-releases. “Everything Everywhere All At Once,” which got a leading 11 nominations, came back to theaters in force playing on 1,400 screens where it earned another \$1 million. The A24 release has made \$71 million domestically to date. Steven Spielberg’s “The Fabelmans,” nominated for seven Oscars, also expanded to 1,962 screens in North America and took in an additional \$760,000, bringing its domestic total to \$16 million. And Sarah Polley’s “Women Talking” also added a few hundred screens, earning \$1 million over the weekend. It’s made \$2.4 million to date. The Oscar boosts could continue over the coming weeks, too — the show isn’t until March 12.

“We are seeing in real time the halo effect of the Oscar nominations on these best picture nominees,”

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Dergarbedian said. "The Oscar bounce is back, something we haven't seen over the past couple of years."

Several of the highest profile releases of the weekend were both star-driven comedies that went straight to streaming: Netflix had "You People," with Eddie Murphy, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jonah Hill and Lauren London and Amazon Prime Video offered "Shotgun Wedding," with Jennifer Lopez, Josh Duhamel and Jennifer Coolidge.

Seven weekends into "Avatar 2," theater owners are also likely looking for the next big blockbuster, which is still a ways off. "Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania" doesn't arrive in theaters until Feb. 17.

But, as Dergarbedian said, "2023 is already looking more like 2019 rather than the last three years."

"This is great news for theaters," he said. "You have the Oscar bounce in play, an Indian film in the top 5 and 'Avatar' breaking records left and right."

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," \$15.7 million.
2. "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," \$10.6 million.
3. "A Man Called Otto," \$6.8 million,
4. "M3GAN," \$6.4 million.
5. "Pathaan," \$5.9 million.
6. "Missing," \$3.8 million.
7. "Plane," \$3.8 million.
8. "Infinity Pool," \$2.7 million.
9. "Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist," \$2.4 million.
10. "The Wandering Earth 2," \$1.4 million.

Ryan Reynolds goes through range of emotions in FA Cup match

By STEVE DOUGLAS AP Sports Writer

Ryan Reynolds went from joy to despair, and punch-the-air ecstasy to desolation.

The unlikely new love of his life — Welsh soccer club Wrexham — put the movie star on an emotional roller coaster Sunday in a thrill-a-minute FA Cup match that had an ending not quite in the script.

Wrexham, the fifth-tier team bought by Reynolds and fellow Hollywood actor Rob McElhenney for \$2.5 million in November 2020 on the recommendation of one of their writers, conceded in the fifth minute of stoppage time to draw 3-3 with Sheffield United.

Reynolds and one of his daughters flew in for the fourth-round match at the atmospheric Racecourse Ground in north Wales, about 28 miles south of Liverpool, and went through a whole range of emotions as the goals poured in at either end.

He's getting used to it by now.

"I'm now so much in love with this sport that I actually hate it," Reynolds, a Canadian-born actor best known for starring in the "Deadpool" movies, told the BBC before the match.

"Each match I'm pacing around like a caged lion."

With 71 places between the teams in English soccer's pyramid, Wrexham came close to a big upset to add to a long line in its history. The team beat then-English champion Arsenal in the third round in 1992 and also reached the quarterfinals in the 1996-97 season, when it was in the third tier.

This was the biggest occasion since Reynolds and McElhenney, an American actor and director who was the creator of TV show "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," took over.

Fans serenaded Reynolds, who was in one of the directors' boxes and was standing for most of the game, with a chant of "There's only one Ryan Reynolds" near the end of the match — when Wrexham was 3-2 ahead and looked like completing a win against an opponent that was down to 10 men at that point.

Reynolds was seen walking across the field and to the locker room after the final whistle to speak to the players.

And he has a sequel to look forward to: Wrexham and Sheffield United will meet in a replay next month.

Wrexham beat another second-tier team, Coventry, in the previous round.

The new Hollywood owners are using Wrexham for a behind-the-scenes TV series called "Welcome To Wrexham," which is on Disney+.

Reynolds said he hopes to lead Wrexham into the Premier League.

"The plan is now, and has always been, the Premier League," Reynolds said. "I can't really put a date on that. But if it's theoretically possible to go from fifth division to Premier League, why wouldn't we do it?"

Iran says drone attack targets defense facility in Isfahan

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Bomb-carrying drones targeted an Iranian defense factory in the central city of Isfahan overnight, authorities said Sunday, causing some damage at the plant amid heightened regional and international tensions engulfing the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian Defense Ministry offered no information on who it suspected carried out the attack, which came as a refinery fire separately broke out in the country's northwest and a 5.9 magnitude earthquake struck nearby, killing three people.

However, Tehran has been targeted in suspected Israeli drone strikes amid a shadow war with its Mideast rival as its nuclear deal with world powers collapsed. Meanwhile, tensions also remain high with neighboring Azerbaijan after a gunman attacked that country's embassy in Tehran, killing its security chief and wounding two others.

Details on the Isfahan attack, which happened around 11:30 p.m. Saturday, remained scarce. A Defense Ministry statement described three drones being launched at the facility, with two of them successfully shot down. A third apparently made it through to strike the building, causing "minor damage" to its roof and wounding no one, the ministry said.

The state-run IRNA news agency later described the drones as "quadcopters equipped with bomblets." Quadcopters, which get their name from having four rotors, typically operate from short ranges by remote control. Iranian state television later aired footage of debris from the drones, which resembled commercially available quadcopters.

State TV aired mobile phone video apparently showing the moment that drone struck along the busy Imam Khomeini Expressway that heads northwest out of Isfahan, one of several ways for drivers to go to the holy city of Qom and Tehran, Iran's capital. A small crowd stood gathered, drawn by anti-aircraft fire, watching as an explosion and sparks struck a dark building.

"Oh my God! That was a drone, wasn't it?" the man filming shouts. "Yeah, it was a drone."

Those there fled after the strike.

That footage of the strike, as well as footage of the aftermath analyzed by The Associated Press, corresponded to a site near Minoo Street in northwestern Isfahan that's near a shopping center that includes a carpet and an electronics store. Later state TV footage confirmed the location and showed two points of damage at the facility's roof, likely from the explosion.

The Defense Ministry only called the site a "workshop," without elaborating. Isfahan, some 350 kilometers (215 miles) south of Tehran, is home to both a large air base built for its fleet of American-made F-14 fighter jets and its Nuclear Fuel Research and Production Center.

The attack comes after Iran's Intelligence Ministry in July claimed to have broken up a plot to target sensitive sites around Isfahan. A segment aired on Iranian state TV in October included purported confessions by alleged members of Komala, a Kurdish opposition party that is exiled from Iran and now lives in Iraq, that they planned to target a military aerospace facility in Isfahan after being trained by Israel's Mossad intelligence service.

Activists say Iranian state TV has aired hundreds of coerced confessions over the last decade. Israeli officials declined to comment on the attack.

Meeting later alongside his Qatari counterpart, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian criticized the "cowardly attack" when asked if it would affect the country's nuclear program.

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"Such moves can't impact our nuclear scientists will and intentions to achieve peaceful nuclear energy," Amirabdollahian said.

Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said he passed a message from the Americans to Iran that related to its nuclear program, without offering specifics.

Separately, Iran's state TV said a fire broke out at an oil refinery in an industrial zone near the north-western city of Tabriz. An IRNA report later blamed the fire on "wear and tear" of the site's piping. Tabriz is some 520 kilometers (325 miles) northwest of Tehran.

State TV also said the magnitude 5.9 earthquake killed three people and injured 816 others in rural areas in West Azerbaijan province, damaging buildings in many villages.

Iran's theocratic government faces challenges both at home and abroad as its nuclear program rapidly enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels since the collapse of its atomic accord with world powers.

Nationwide protests have shaken the country since the September death of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian woman detained by the country's morality police. Its rial currency has plummeted to new lows against the U.S. dollar. Meanwhile, Iran continues to arm Russia with the bomb-carrying drone that Moscow uses in attacks in Ukraine on power plants and civilian targets.

Israel is suspected of launching a series of attacks on Iran, including an April 2021 assault on its underground Natanz nuclear facility that damaged its centrifuges. In 2020, Iran blamed Israel for a sophisticated attack that killed its top military nuclear scientist.

Israeli officials rarely acknowledge operations carried out by the country's secret military units or its Mossad intelligence agency. However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who recently re-entered the premiership, long has considered Iran to be the biggest threat his nation faces.

The U.S. and Israel also just held their largest-ever military exercise amid the tensions with Iran. However, a U.S. military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity citing the sensitivity of the situation given regional tensions, told the AP on Sunday night that "no U.S. military forces have conducted strikes or operations inside Iran."

Meanwhile, tensions remain high between Azerbaijan and Iran as Azerbaijan and Armenia have fought over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Iran in October launched a military exercise near the Azerbaijan border. Azerbaijan also maintains close ties to Israel, which has infuriated Iranian hard-liners, and has purchased Israeli-made drones for its military.

Anwar Gargash, a senior Emirati diplomat, warned online that the Isfahan attack represented one more event in the "dangerous escalation the region is witnessing." The United Arab Emirates was targeted in missile and drone attacks last year claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

It "is not in the interest of the region and its future," Gargash wrote on Twitter. "Although the problems of the region are complex, there is no alternative to dialogue."

Israel prepares to demolish home of Palestinian gunman

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Sunday sealed the home of an east Jerusalem man who killed seven people outside a synagogue, in a preliminary step ahead of the expected demolition of the building, as two Palestinian men died from Israeli fire.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet approved an order to seal the home of a second Palestinian shooter — a 13-year-old boy who wounded two Israeli men in east Jerusalem on Saturday. His Cabinet also took steps toward approving other punitive measures against the families of Palestinian attackers, including potentially stripping them of citizenship rights and deporting them.

The moves by Israel, along with escalating violence, further raised tensions as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken landed in the region. Blinken's high-wire diplomatic act, focused largely on restoring calm, begins Monday after he completes a brief visit to Egypt.

Earlier on Sunday, Israeli police sealed up the east Jerusalem home of a 21-year-old Palestinian attacker who killed seven people and wounded three outside a synagogue on Friday night during the Jewish sab-

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bath. The attacker was shot and killed by police.

"We sealed the home of the terrorist who carried out the horrendous attack in Jerusalem, and his home will be demolished," Netanyahu told his Cabinet.

"We are not seeking an escalation, but we are prepared for any scenario. Our answer to terrorism is a heavy hand and a strong, swift and precise response," he said.

The planned home demolition is among a series of punitive steps, including plans to "strengthen" its West Bank settlements, announced by Israel in the wake of the twin shootings.

Palestinians, meanwhile, reported dozens of attacks by Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank. The most serious took place in the Palestinian town of Turmus Ayya, where the official Wafa news agency quoted residents as saying that settlers torched a car and set a home on fire.

Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, a military spokesman, called the incident "disgraceful" and said the military was taking it "very seriously" as it investigated.

Later Sunday, Netanyahu's office said the Cabinet would seal the family home of the 13-year-old shooter as well. Israel typically demolishes attackers' homes only in deadly attacks. The boy's victims were both badly wounded but survived Saturday's shooting.

His office also said the Cabinet was pushing ahead with plans that could strip residency and citizenship rights of the families of Palestinian attackers, and potentially deport them to the occupied West Bank. Such moves have been condemned by human rights groups as collective punishment.

Israeli police released footage of Israeli army engineers welding metal plates over the windows of the home of the first shooter and welding the front door shut.

Police said the attacker, identified as 21-year-old Khairy Alqam, was killed in a shootout with officers Friday night after fleeing the scene in the predominantly ultra-Orthodox east Jerusalem settlement of Neve Yaakov.

Relatives said Alqam's grandfather was killed in a 1998 stabbing in Jerusalem. The killing remains unsolved, but a Jewish extremist was arrested in 2010 in connection with a string of attacks on Palestinians. He was released and charges were not pressed.

Musa Alqam, the gunman's father, said he had no idea if his son had been motivated by revenge. "I don't know how he planned what he did," he said.

The suspect in the 2010 arrest was assisted by Itamar Ben-Gvir, who is now Israel's national security minister. At the time, Ben-Gvir was a far-right activist who accompanied the suspect to court.

More funerals for the victims in Friday's shooting, the deadliest attack on Israelis since 2008, were scheduled to take place Sunday.

Israeli media identified one of the dead as a Ukrainian healthcare worker, Irina Korlova. The Ukrainian Embassy confirmed that one of the victims of the shooting was a Ukrainian citizen.

The weekend shootings followed a deadly Israeli raid in the West Bank on Thursday that killed 10 Palestinians, most of them militants. In response, Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip fired a barrage of rockets into Israel, triggering a series of Israeli airstrikes in response.

The deaths of two more Palestinians on Sunday raised the Palestinian death toll from fighting this month to 34.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said an 18-year-old Palestinian man who was shot by a security guard next to the West Bank settlement of Kedumim died Sunday. The Israeli military said that a settlement security guard had identified a man armed with a pistol outside the settlement and shot him.

The ministry also confirmed the death of a 24-year-old Palestinian man who was wounded in last week's military raid in the West Bank town of Jenin. There was no immediate claim of his affiliation with a militant group.

Netanyahu on Sunday repeated his vow to "strengthen the settlements" in the occupied West Bank. He said that doing so was aimed at "sending a message to the terrorists that seek to uproot us from our land that we are here to stay."

Israel captured the West Bank, along with east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. It has built dozens of settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, now home to more than 700,000

Jewish settlers, in the decades since.

Most of the international community, including the United States, considers the settlements an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians, who seek the West Bank as the heartland of a future independent state. A settlement announcement could lead to a tense visit with Blinken.

In Cairo, Blinken opened his Mideast tour, speaking with students at the American University in the city before holding talks with Egyptian officials on Monday. He was then scheduled to travel to Israel for the most critical leg of the visit for talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials.

Gregory Allen Howard, who wrote 'Remember the Titans,' dies

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Screenwriter Gregory Allen Howard, who skillfully adapted stories of historical Black figures in "Remember the Titans" starring Denzel Washington, "Ali" with Will Smith and "Harriet" with Cynthia Erivo, has died. He was 70.

Howard died Friday at a hospital in Miami of heart failure, according to publicist Jeff Sanderson.

Howard was the first Black screenwriter to write a drama that made \$100 million at the box office when "Titans" crossed that milestone in 2000. It was about a real-life Black coach coming into a newly integrated Virginia school and helping lead their football team to victory. It had the iconic line: "I don't care if you like each other or not. But you will respect each other."

Howard said he shopped the story around Hollywood with no success. So he took a chance and wrote the screenplay himself. "They didn't expect it to make much money, but it became a monster, making \$100 million," he said. "It made my career," he told the Times-Herald of Vallejo, California, in 2009. The film made the Associated Press' list of the best 25 sports movies ever made.

Howard followed up "Remember the Titans" with "Ali," the 2002 Michael Mann-directed biopic of Muhammad Ali. Smith famously bulked up to play Ali and was nominated for a best actor Oscar.

Howard also produced and co-wrote 2019's "Harriet," about abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Erivo lead a cast, that included Leslie Odom Jr., Clarke Peters and Joe Alwyn.

"I got into this business to write about the complexity of the Black man. I wanted to write about Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Marcus Garvey. I think it takes a Black man to write about Black men," he told the Times-Herald.

Born in Virginia, his family moved often due to his stepfather's career in the Navy. After attending Princeton University, graduating with a degree in American history, Howard briefly worked at Merrill Lynch on Wall Street before moving to Los Angeles in his mid-20s to pursue a writing career.

He wrote for TV and penned the play "Tinseltown Trilogy," which focused on three men in Los Angeles over Christmastime as their stories interconnect and inform each other.

Howard also wrote "The Harlem Renaissance," a limited series for HBO, "Misty," the story of prima ballerina Misty Copeland and "This Little Light," the Fannie Lou Hamer story. Most recently, he wrote the civil rights project "Power to the People" for producer Ben Affleck and Paramount Pictures.

He is survived by a sister, Lynette Henley; a brother, Michael Henley; two nieces and a nephew.

Elon Musk's mysterious ways on display in Tesla tweet trial

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Elon Musk's enigmatic personality and unconventional tactics are emerging as key exhibits in a trial revolving around one of his most polarizing pursuits — tweeting.

The trial, centered on a pair of tweets announcing Musk had obtained the money to take Tesla private in 2018, reeled the 51-year-old billionaire into a federal courtroom in San Francisco for three days of testimony that opened a peephole into his often inscrutable mind.

Musk, who now owns the Twitter service that he deploys as his megaphone, was often a study in contrasts during his roughly eight hours on the stand. The CEO of the electric carmaker is facing a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of Tesla shareholders after Musk tweeted about a company buyout that didn't happen.

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Through both his testimony and the evidence submitted around it, Musk came across as impetuous, brash, combative and contemptuous of anyone who questioned his motives as a game-changing entrepreneur who has inspired comparisons to Apple's late co-founder, Steve Jobs.

At other times, Musk sounded like the savvy visionary that his supporters hail him to be — an intrepid rebel who by his own estimates has raised more than \$100 billion from investors. They have been richly rewarded from his leadership of pioneering companies that include PayPal in digital payments, Tesla in electric vehicles and SpaceX in rocket ships.

"It is relatively easy for me to get investment support because my track record is extremely good," Musk wryly observed.

But his confidence in his ability to get the money he wants to pursue his plans is one reason he found himself in court. The three-week trial is set to resume Tuesday and head for jury deliberations by Friday.

Here's what to know so far:

PLANTING THE SEEDS

Evidence and testimony have shown Musk had started to mull taking Tesla private in 2017 so he wouldn't have to hassle with the headaches and distractions that accompany running a publicly traded company.

After a July 31, 2018, meeting with a top representative from Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, Musk sent a letter to Tesla's board outlining why he wanted to take the automaker private at a price of \$420 per share — about 20% above its stock price at the time.

Musk was serious enough that he had already discussed the pros and cons with Michael Dell, who had gone through the public-to-private transition in 2013 when he led a \$25 billion buyout of the personal computer company bearing his name, according to trial evidence.

THE TROUBLESOME TWEETS

The crux of the case hinges on an Aug. 7, 2018, tweet in which Musk declared "funding secured" to take Tesla private. Musk abruptly posted the tweet minutes before boarding his private jet after being alerted that the Financial Times was about to publish a story that Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund had spent about \$2 billion buying a 5% stake in Tesla to diversify its interests beyond oil, according to his testimony.

Amid widespread confusion about whether Musk's Twitter account had been hacked or he was joking, Musk followed up a few hours later with another tweet suggesting a deal was imminent.

Musk defended the initial tweet as a well-intentioned move to ensure all Tesla investors knew the automaker might be on its way to ending its then-eight-year run as a publicly held company.

"I had no ill motive," Musk testified. "My intent was to do the right thing for all shareholders."

Guhan Subramanian, a Harvard University business and law professor hired as an expert for shareholder lawyers, derided Musk's method for announcing a potential buyout as an "extreme outlier" fraught with potential conflicts.

"The risk is that Mr. Musk timed his announcement of his (management buyout) proposal to serve his own interests rather than the interests of the company," Subramanian testified.

WHERE'S THE MONEY?

There's another issue threatening to undermine Musk's defense. He hadn't locked up the financing for his proposed deal or even pinned down how much would be needed to pull it off, based on testimony from Musk, other witnesses and other evidence.

That is one reason U.S. District Judge Edward Chen had decided last year that Musk's 2018 tweets were false and has instructed the jury to view them that way.

It also prompted regulators to allege Musk misled investors with the tweets, resulting in a \$40 million settlement with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that also required Musk to step down as Tesla's chairman.

Chen ruled that the 2018 settlement, in which Musk didn't acknowledge wrongdoing and has since lamented making, can't be mentioned to the jury.

Musk testified that he believed he had secured an oral commitment to provide wherever money was needed for a Tesla buyout during a July 31, 2018, face-to-face meeting with Yasir al-Rumayyan, governor of Saudi Arabia's wealth fund.

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That was reinforced in testimony from Tesla's former chief financial officer, Deepak Ahuja, who was at the discussions and took al-Rumayyan on a half-hour tour of a Tesla factory.

But a text message al-Rumayyan sent to Musk after the "funding secured" tweets made it appear that the discussions about the Saudi fund financing a private buyout were preliminary.

"I would like to listen to your plan Elon and what are the financial calculations to take it," al-Rumayyan wrote to Musk, according to a copy submitted as evidence in the trial.

Musk framed al-Rumayyan's text as an attempt to backpedal from his previous commitment. He also insisted the Saudi fund had given an "unequivocal commitment" to financing the buyout.

MONEY MANEUVERING

After his 2018 tweets, Musk tried to get the money needed for the Tesla buyout with the help of Egon Durban, co-CEO of the private equity firm Silver Lake, which helped finance the Dell buyout in 2013. Musk also enlisted Dan Dees, a top executive with Goldman Sachs, an investment banking firm that had worked closely with Tesla.

In testimony, both Durban and Dees discussed efforts to raise money for a Tesla buyout for a wide range of potential investors that included two Chinese companies, Alibaba and Tencent, as well as Google in documents initially code-named "Project Turbo," then "Project Titanium."

The buyout would have required anywhere from \$20 billion to \$70 billion, according to the documents — funding that never came close to getting raised, Durban and Dees both testified, largely because Musk scrapped the proposal to take Tesla private on Aug. 24, 2018, after consulting with shareholders.

Tesla's shares are now worth eight times what they were then, after adjusting for two stock splits.

Musk still contends he could have gotten the money had he wanted and, even if there was a shortfall, he could have covered any gap by selling some of his stock in privately held SpaceX. That is a strategy Musk used in his \$44 billion purchase of Twitter, except he sold about \$23 billion of his stock in Tesla.

Durban and Dees both testified that they had no doubt the money for a buyout could have been raised — echoed by former Tesla director Antonio Gracias.

"He is the Michael Jordan of fundraising," Gracias testified.

Police: 1 of 2 boys recovered after Amber Alert has died

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — One of the twin Ohio boys who became the center of a statewide AMBER Alert that garnered nationwide attention last month has died, authorities said.

Columbus police said officers were sent to a home shortly before 11 p.m. Saturday on a report of a baby not breathing. Medics transported the baby, who was about 6 months old, to Children's Hospital, where he was pronounced dead less than an hour later.

Columbus police said they were "actively investigating." WBNS-TV reports that an autopsy is scheduled Monday. No further details about the child's death were immediately available.

Columbus police identified the child as one of two boys who were the subject of an Amber Alert, used to publicize a child's disappearance, after an idling car was taken Dec. 20 while their mother was picking up an order at a Columbus pizza restaurant.

One child was found hours later in a car carrier seat between two vehicles in a parking lot near Dayton International Airport, about 70 miles (112 kilometers) west of Columbus. Police officers in Indianapolis, which is 175 miles (282 kilometers) west of Columbus, found the other boy on the evening of Dec. 22 in an abandoned car that had been stolen three days earlier in Columbus, Ohio, authorities said.

Nalah Tamiko Jackson, 24, was arrested on kidnapping charges and was later indicted on two federal counts of kidnapping of a minor. She appeared in federal court in Columbus a week ago but did not enter a plea at that time; a message seeking comment on the charges was sent Sunday to federal public defenders representing her.

Should federal grants favor highway repair over expansion?

By JEFF McMURRAY Associated Press

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Arizona officials refer to a notoriously congested stretch of desert highway through tribal land as the Wild Horse Pass Corridor, a label that's less about horses than the bustling casino by the same name located just north of where the interstate constricts to four lanes.

With the Gila River Indian Community's backing, the state allocated or raised about \$600 million of a nearly \$1 billion plan that would widen the most bottleneck-inducing, 26-mile section of I-10 on the route between Phoenix and Tucson.

But its bid for federal grant money under the new infrastructure law to finish the job fell short, leaving some advocates for road construction accusing the Biden administration of devaluing those projects to focus on repairs and mass transit.

"Upset would be the right terminology," Casa Grande Mayor Craig McFarland said of his reaction when he learned the project won't receive one of the law's first Mega Grants the U.S. Department of Transportation will announce this week. "We thought we had done a good job putting the proposal together. We thought we had checked all the boxes."

The historic federal investment in infrastructure has reenergized dormant transportation projects, but the debate over how to prioritize them has only intensified in the 14 months since President Joe Biden signed the measure.

The law follows decades of neglect in maintaining the nation's roads, bridges, water systems and airports. Research by Yale University economist Ray Fair estimates a sharp decline in U.S. infrastructure investment has caused a \$5.2 trillion shortfall. The entire law totals \$1 trillion, and it seeks to not only remedy that dangerous backlog of projects but also build out broadband internet nationwide and protect against damage caused by climate change.

Some of the money, however, has gone to new highway construction — much of it from the nearly 30% increases Arizona and most other states are receiving over the next five years in the formula funding they can use to prioritize their own transportation needs.

For specific projects, many of the biggest awards available under the law are through various highly competitive grants. The Department of Transportation received around \$30 billion worth of applications for just the first \$1 billion in Mega Grants being awarded, spokesperson Dani Simons said.

Another \$1 billion will be available each of the next four years before the funding runs out. Still, the first batch has been closely watched for signals about the administration's preferences.

Jeff Davis, senior fellow at the Eno Center for Transportation, said it's already clear that the Biden administration plans to direct a greater share of its discretionary transportation funding to "non-highway projects" than the Trump administration did. However, with so much more total infrastructure money to work with, Davis said, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

For example, one of the projects that the administration told Congress it had chosen for a Mega Grant will widen Interstate 10 — but in Mississippi, not Arizona. Davis said the department likely preferred the Mississippi project due to its significantly lower price tag. This year's Mega Grants combine three different award types into a single application, one of which caters specifically to rural and impoverished communities.

Some of the winning grants are for bridges, while others are for mass transit — including improvements to Chicago's commuter train system and concrete casing for a rail tunnel in Midtown Manhattan.

Along with the nine projects selected, transportation department staff listed seven others as "highly recommended" — a distinction Davis said makes them clear front-runners to secure money next year. Arizona's I-10 widening effort was part of a third group of 13 projects labeled as "recommended," which Davis said could put them in contention for future funding unless they're surpassed by even stronger applicants.

But such decisions remain largely subjective.

Advocates for regions such as the Southwest, where the population is growing but more spread out, argue that their need for new or wider highways is just as big of a national priority as a major city's need for more subway stations or bicycle lanes.

Arizona state Rep. Teresa Martinez, a Republican who represents Casa Grande at the southern end of the corridor, said she was livid when she heard from a congressional office that the administration might have turned down the I-10 project because it didn't have enough "multimodal" components.

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"What does that even mean?" she said. "... They were looking to fund projects that have bike paths and trailways instead of a major interstate?"

Testifying in March before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg assured Arizona Democratic U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly that he understood the state's unique highway needs and that his department wouldn't "stand in the way of a capacity expansion where it's appropriate."

Some Republicans, however, remain skeptical, in part due to a memo the Federal Highway Administration distributed in December 2021, a month after Biden signed the bill. The document suggested states should usually "prioritize the repair, rehabilitation, reconstruction, replacement, and maintenance of existing transportation infrastructure" over new road construction.

Although administration officials dismissed the memo as an internal communication, not a policy decision, critics alleged they were trying to circumvent Congress and influence highway construction decisions traditionally left to states under their formula funding.

Last month the Government Accountability Office concluded the memo carried the same weight as a formal rule, which Congress could challenge by passing a resolution of disapproval. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, the ranking Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, pledged to write one.

According to figures the Federal Highway Administration provided to The Associated Press, 12 capacity-expansion projects have received funding through previous competitive grants since the memo was issued. States also have used their formula funding toward 763 such projects totaling \$7.1 billion.

As for the Arizona project, some state officials have expressed plans to move ahead on their own if they can't secure federal money — although they're not giving up on that, either. Considering that one crash can back up traffic for miles between the state's two largest cities, they say it remains a top priority.

McFarland, the Casa Grande mayor, said perhaps the next application will stress some of the other components of the \$360 million request besides the highway widening — including bike lanes that tribal leaders have long sought for some of the overpasses.

"If you read the tea leaves, you can see where they're at," McFarland said. "... It's a competitive process. You don't always get it the first time you ask for it. So, ask again."

Experts urge better opioid rescue drug access to save lives

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and SHARON JOHNSON Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — Jessie Blanchard started small nearly five years ago, just trying to get enough of the rescue drug naloxone that reverses opioid overdoses to keep her daughter from dying from an overdose.

She pleaded with colleagues at the college where she's an adjunct teacher in Albany, Georgia, to use their prescription benefits to get two doses every six months.

Now she loads her Jeep every week and heads out with a few other volunteers to bring the antidote — commonly known by its brand name Narcan — to hundreds of others in the town of 70,000.

At parking lots and intersections she also supplies clean needles, fentanyl test strips and a nonjudgmental sounding board — an effort now partly funded by a state government grant. At least nine times in December alone, Blanchard said, rescue drugs she provided were used to reverse overdoses.

"I've got story-after-story, story-after-story of people coming up to me," said Blanchard, a nurse whose organization is called 229 Safer Living Access, a reference to the Albany area code the group's work covers. "They say, 'Miss Jessie, they had to Narcan me the other day and I'd have died if it wasn't for you.'"

Naloxone, available as a nasal spray and in an injectable form, is a key tool in the battle against a nationwide overdose crisis linked to the deaths of more than 100,000 people annually in the U.S. State and federal policy changes have removed some major obstacles to getting it into the hands of police, firefighters, people who use drugs and their loved ones. But it's still often frustratingly inaccessible in the moments when overdoses happen.

Stephen Murray, an overdose survivor and former paramedic who researches overdoses at Boston Medical

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Center, is so committed to naloxone access that he proclaims it on his personalized license plate: NARCAN. "My vision for it is to be in every 24-hour gas station in the state, free or 25 cents a dose," he said. "It'll be between the Tylenol and the condoms. ... It has to be just as easy as buying heroin, basically."

There's more naloxone than ever thanks to federal and state policies, and groups like Blanchard's that distribute it in their communities. It's available free in old newspaper vending boxes in Michigan, which now hold naloxone kits, and in a vending machine in Philadelphia. One group, NEXT Distro, mails it nationwide for free. But Murray's vision is not close to being realized in most places.

An influx of money is on the way, intended to help deal with the national overdose crisis that killed 107,000 people in 2021 — the highest tally ever — most involving fentanyl and other powerful illicit synthetic opioids.

Drug makers, distribution companies and pharmacies have settled lawsuits with state and local governments, and the first funding totaling more than \$50 billion is going out. Most of it must be used to address the opioid epidemic, though exactly how will be up to governments receiving the money. Some settlements are being delivered partly in doses of naloxone.

In a 2021 report, public health experts convened by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health listed expanding naloxone access as the first strategy for using settlement funds, noting that 40% of overdose deaths happen when someone else is present and possibly able to administer the life-saving drug.

As with other harm-reduction strategies, there's been pushback from those who believe making naloxone available enables drug use. But Jeff Breedlove, policy chief for the Georgia Council for Recovery, said he no longer sees that as much of an issue.

Instead, he said, funding and distribution programs remain spotty because they don't have enough support from government and private groups such as chambers of commerce. "Until they treat it like an epidemic," Breedlove said, "we will continue to have more and more funerals."

Since 2016, the federal government has allowed and encouraged federal funds to be used to buy naloxone.

Officials in every state have given standing orders to pharmacies allowing people to buy it, even without prescriptions.

That's a major factor for the massive increase in how much has been distributed through retail pharmacies. A report by the American Medical Association and IQVIA Institute for Human Data Science found there were just over 1,000 orders filled in 2012. By 2021, it was nearly 1.2 million.

But not all pharmacies carry it. And it comes at a cost: For those without insurance coverage, it can be around \$50 for two doses.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is considering allowing some forms of naloxone to be sold over-the-counter without a prescription, a move that could lower the cost.

Randy Anderson, who is in recovery himself and works as a recovery consultant, said he's handed out some 100,000 doses of naloxone in Minnesota. He believes from his time using drugs that pharmacy availability doesn't do much to help people who need it most.

"There was no way I would spend \$10 for something to save my life when I needed that money to buy drugs," he said.

Aside from cost, there are other barriers to getting naloxone to drug users.

In Alabama, for instance, a pharmacist, physician or public health nurse must be involved in the distribution. But the state does have a program to mail the antidote to anyone who requests it.

Maya Doe-Simkins, a co-director of Remedy Alliance/For The People, which helps provide naloxone to groups working to prevent overdose deaths, said programs don't always prioritize getting the antidote to people who use drugs.

"If they're not matched up and directed where they should be, we're going to see more and more naloxone sitting on the shelves of church basements, expiring," she said.

Colin Dwyer, a former social entrepreneur-in-residence at the Stanford School of Business, founded the Overdose Crisis Response Fund to try to boost small distribution efforts across the country, including Blanchard's in Albany.

"All I actually care about is what has the probability of saving the most lives the fastest," Dwyer said.

One of his grantees, Talia Rogers, distributes naloxone and other supplies in Kirksville, Missouri, through

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a one-person operation, Show Me Harm Reduction, which she initially funded with money she made working as a nanny.

She's now a consultant for the Missouri Institute of Mental Health and gets naloxone through the state's use of a federal grant.

"If they're not getting Narcan or naloxone through me, they're not getting it," Rogers said.

Ron Stewart, an emergency preparedness planner for Adair County, which includes Kirksville, said it provides naloxone only to first responders now, but he's hopeful a state program will soon make it available to the public, too.

In Albany, Blanchard gets naloxone through Georgia Opioid Prevention, which receives a state grant.

In 2022, she handed out more than 1,800 doses — far more than the public health district for Southwest Georgia, which gave out 280 doses to people who showed up at health department offices in an isolated corner of Albany and to community organizations.

One of her clients, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Jomo, because he uses illegal drugs, said he's glad for the supplies. "Because this is something we're going to do anyway," he said.

Blanchard said 26 people have come to her group for help getting into treatment programs, and 19 are currently not using.

She recalled her desperation in 2018, trying to help her daughter, then a teenager. Now 22, her daughter is still using.

"She's so beautiful and so perfect," Blanchard said. "And because of harm reduction, she's still alive and she's healthy and she's thriving."

Concerns over prayer breakfast lead Congress to take it over

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The National Prayer Breakfast, one of the most visible and long-standing events that brings religion and politics together in Washington, is splitting from the private religious group that had overseen it for decades, due to concerns the gathering had become too divisive.

The organizer and host for this year's breakfast, scheduled for Thursday, will be the National Prayer Breakfast Foundation, headed by former Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark.

Sen. Chris Coons, a regular participant and chairman of the Senate ethics committee, said the move was prompted in part by concerns in recent years that members of Congress did not know important details about the larger multiday gathering.

Coons, D-Del., said that in the past, he and Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, the committee's vice chairman, had questions about who was invited and how money was being raised.

The annual event "went on several days, had thousands of people attending, and a very large and somewhat complex organization," Coons said in an interview. "Some questions had been raised about our ability as members of Congress to say that we knew exactly how it was being organized, who was being invited, how it was being funded. Many of us who'd been in leadership roles really couldn't answer those questions."

That led to lawmakers deciding to take over organizing for the prayer breakfast itself.

Pryor, president of the new foundation, said the COVID-19 shutdown gave members a chance to "reset" the breakfast and return it to its origins — a change he said had been discussed for years.

"The whole reason the House and Senate wanted to do this was to return it to its roots, when House members and Senate members can come together and pray for the president, pray for his family and administration, pray for our government, the world," Pryor said.

Pryor said members of Congress, the president, vice president and other administration officials and their guests are invited to Thursday's prayer breakfast, which will be held at the visitors' center at the Capitol. He anticipated between 200 and 300 people would attend.

Pryor said he hoped the smaller event will regain the intimacy that is similar to the weekly nondenominational prayer gatherings on Capitol Hill. Groups of senators and representatives have long held unofficial

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meetings for fellowship and to temporarily set aside political differences.

The prayer breakfast addressed by the president has been the highlight of a multiday event for 70 years. Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first president to attend, in February 1953, and every president since has spoken at the gathering.

The larger event, put on by a private religious group called the International Foundation, has always been centered around "the person and principles of Jesus, with a focus on praying for leaders of our nation and from around the world," the group's spokesman, A. Larry Ross, said in an email.

More than 1,400 people are registered for the two-day event, with one-third of those from outside the United States.

President Joe Biden, who has spoken at the breakfast the past two years, is set to do so again. In 2021, he made remarks from the White House during a virtual breakfast the month after the building was attacked by supporters of former President Donald Trump intent on trying to stop the certification of the 2020 election.

At last year's address from the Capitol, Biden talked about the need for members of Congress to know one another more personally.

"It's hard to really dislike someone when you know what they're going through is the same thing you're going through," he said.

In recent years, questions about the International Foundation, its funding and attendees had led some to reconsider the involvement of Congress.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., stopped coming in 2016 because the event "had become an entertainment and lobbying extravaganza rather than an opportunity for spiritual reflection," a Kaine spokeswoman wrote in an emailed response to questions. Kaine will attend Thursday.

The gathering came under heightened criticism in 2018 when Maria Butina, a Russian operative, pleaded guilty in 2018 to conspiring to infiltrate conservative U.S. political groups with the aim of advancing Russian interests. According to court documents, she attended two breakfasts in hopes of setting up unofficial connections between Russian and U.S. officials.

It took on political undertones with Trump shattering the custom of the address being a respite from partisan bickering. He used his 2020 speech to criticize his first impeachment and attack political opponents, including Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, and then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Earlier this month, the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent a letter signed by 30 groups to the White House and members of Congress asking them to boycott the event because of questions about the International Foundation.

The organization's co-president, Annie Laurie Gaylor, said the foundation's basic concerns with the breakfast remain despite the split with the larger religious gathering.

"For decades, FFRF has protested the appearance of the National Prayer Breakfast being a quasi-governmental gathering, which pressures the president and Congress to put on a display of piety that sends a message that the United States is a Christian nation," she wrote.

Novak Djokovic claims 10th Australian Open title, 22nd Slam

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic climbed into the Rod Laver Arena stands to celebrate his 10th Australian Open championship and record-tying 22nd Grand Slam title Sunday and, after jumping and pumping his fists with his team, he collapsed onto his back, crying.

When he returned to the playing surface, Djokovic sat on his sideline bench, buried his face in a white towel and sobbed some more.

This trip to Australia was far more successful than that of a year ago — when he was deported because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19 — although difficult in its own ways: a bad hamstring; some off-court tumult involving his father. Yet Djokovic accomplished all he could have possibly wanted in his return: He resumed his winning ways at Melbourne Park and made it back to the top of tennis, declaring:

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"This probably is the, I would say, biggest victory of my life."

Only briefly challenged in the final, Djokovic was simply better at the most crucial moments and beat Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6 (4), 7-6 (5). As a bonus, Djokovic will vault from No. 5 to No. 1 in the ATP rankings, a spot he already has held for more weeks than any other man.

"This has been one of the most challenging tournaments I've ever played in my life, considering the circumstances. Not playing last year; coming back this year," Djokovic said, wearing a zip-up white jacket with a "22" on his chest. "And I want to thank all the people that made me feel welcome, made me feel comfortable, to be in Melbourne, to be in Australia."

The 35-year-old from Serbia stretched his unbeaten streak in Melbourne to 28 matches, the longest run there in the Open era, which dates to 1968. He adds trophy No. 10 to the seven from Wimbledon, three from the U.S. Open — where he also was absent last year because of no coronavirus shots — and two from the French Open, to match rival Rafael Nadal for the most by a man.

Only two women — Margaret Court, with 24, and Serena Williams, with 23 — are ahead of him.

This was also the 93rd ATP tour-level title for Djokovic, breaking a tie with Nadal for the fourth-most.

"I would like to thank you for pushing our sport so far," Tsitsipas told Djokovic.

"He is the greatest," Tsitsipas said, "that has ever held a tennis racket."

Djokovic was participating in his 33rd major final, Tsitsipas in his second — and the 24-year-old from Greece also lost the other, at the 2021 French Open, to Djokovic.

On a cool evening under a cloud-filled sky, and with a soundtrack of chants from supporters of both men prompting repeated pleas for quiet from the chair umpire, Djokovic was superior throughout, especially so in the two tiebreakers.

He took a 4-1 lead in the first, then reeled off the last three points. He led 5-0 in the closing tiebreaker and, when it finished, he pointed to his temple before screaming, a prelude to all of the tears.

"Very emotional for us. Very emotional for him," said Djokovic's coach, Goran Ivanisevic. "It's a great achievement. It was a really tough three weeks for him. He managed to overcome everything."

Djokovic acknowledged all of the issues created strain for him.

"It took an enormous amount of mental and emotional energy," Djokovic said, "to really keep it tight, keep my focus."

Keep in mind: It's not as though Tsitsipas played all that poorly, other than a rash of early miscues that seemed to be more a product of tension than anything. It's that Djokovic was too unyielding. Too accurate with his strokes, making merely 22 unforced errors, 20 fewer than his foe. Too speedy and flexible on the run (other than when, moving to his left, Djokovic took a tumble).

"I did everything possible," said Tsitsipas, who also would have moved to No. 1 with a victory, replacing Carlos Alcaraz, who sat out the Australian Open with a leg injury.

Perhaps. Yet Djokovic pushes and pushes and pushes some more, until it's the opponent who is something less than perfect on one swing, either missing or providing an opening to pounce.

That's what happened when Tsitsipas held his first break point — which was also a set point — while ahead 5-4 in the second and Djokovic serving at 30-40. Might this be a fulcrum? Might Djokovic relent? Might Tsitsipas surge?

Uh, no.

A 15-stroke point concluded with Djokovic smacking a cross-court forehand winner that felt like a statement. Two misses by Tsitsipas followed: A backhand long, a forehand wide. Those felt like capitulation. Even when Tsitsipas actually did break in the third, Djokovic broke right back.

There has been more than forehands and backhands on Djokovic's mind over the past two weeks.

There was the not-so-small matter of last year's legal saga — he has alternately acknowledged the whole thing served as a form of motivation but also said the other day, "I'm over it" — and curiosity about the sort of reception he would get when allowed to enter Australia because pandemic restrictions were eased.

He heard a ton of loud support, but also dealt with some persistent heckling while competing, including applause after faults Sunday.

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There was the sore left hamstring that has been heavily bandaged for every match — until the final, that is, when only a single piece of beige athletic tape was visible.

And then there was the matter of his father, Srdjan, being filmed with a group waving Russian flags — one with an image of Vladimir Putin — after Djokovic's quarterfinal. The tournament banned spectators from carrying flags of Russia or Belarus, saying they would cause disruption because of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Djokovic and his father said Srdjan thought he was with Serbian fans.

Still, Srdjan Djokovic did not attend his son's semifinal or the final.

"We both agreed," said the younger Djokovic, who did meet up with Dad for a hug after Sunday's match, "it would probably be better that he is not there."

No matter all of it, Djokovic excelled — as he so often does.

"It's been a long journey," he said, "but a very special one."

Shiffrin must wait for record win 86 but takes slalom title

SPINDLERUV MLYN, Czech Republic (AP) — A shake of the head, lips pouting... but then all smiles.

Mikaela Shiffrin was quick to take the positives after realizing she had to wait for at least five more weeks before tying the World Cup record for most career wins with victory No. 86.

The American skier finished runner-up to Germany's Lena Dürr in a slalom Sunday, the last World Cup race before the world championships, and remained one victory short of Ingemar Stenmark's total on the all-time overall winners list among men and women. The Swede competed in the 1970s and '80s.

"Life has changed me, but I feel my skiing has improved over the last years," Shiffrin said. "And I'm maybe a better skier than I've ever been in my life. And that's pretty cool."

Even though it didn't happen Sunday, Shiffrin has returned to winning races at a similar pace to that of the 2018-19 season. She racked up a record 17 victories that year, and has already picked up 11 wins from 23 starts in the current season, including three in the past six days.

Shiffrin's next chance to break Stenmark's record will be in March when she resumes World Cup racing after the Feb. 6-19 worlds in France. World championship races do not count toward World Cup wins.

"I don't have any expectations going into it," Shiffrin said about her next World Cup event, which will be either at the speed races in Kvitfjell, Norway on March 4-5 or tech races in Are, Sweden the following week.

"It's just like every race of the season, trying to take it all in and enjoy — enjoy my skiing, enjoy when the other athletes are skiing better. Because there is always something to learn from that."

Shiffrin had broken a tie on the all-time women's list with former American teammate Lindsey Vonn last Tuesday. Vonn had 82 wins when she retired in 2019.

Shiffrin, however, still set a record Sunday.

Her second place gave her an insurmountable lead in the season-long slalom standings with two races to spare. Her closest challenger, Wendy Holdener, failed to qualify for the second run and didn't score World Cup points.

It made Shiffrin the first woman to win seven season titles in slalom, surpassing Swiss standout Vreni Schneider, who won it six times in the 1980s and '90s.

The women's record for most titles in any discipline is held by Vonn, who won eight crystal globes as the best downhill skier of the season.

Racing at the resort near the Czech-Polish border where she had her World Cup debut as a 15-year-old almost 12 years ago, Shiffrin dominated a slalom on the same course Saturday, posting the fastest times in both runs for her career win 85.

On Sunday, Shiffrin held a commanding first-run lead of 0.67 seconds over Dürr, but posted only the 14th-fastest time in the final run and was edged by 0.06 by the German skier.

"I felt like the first run I skied very well, and I actually skied quite well in the second as well," Shiffrin said. "And six-tenths is actually not so much time. Lena has been strong all season and she deserves to win."

It was Dürr's second World Cup victory, coming 10 years to the day after she won a city event in Moscow.

"Crazy that today is the day," Dürr said. "It took me a while, I just tried to risk it all. I had a little mistake

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down in the flat and I just thought: 'Go all-in.'"

It was the first slalom victory for the German women's team since Maria Höfl-Riesch triumphed in Levi, Finland, in November 2012.

Zrinka Ljutic was 0.49 behind in third for her first career World Cup podium. The Croatian skier won the junior world title in slalom this month.

Shiffrin's long-term main rival in slalom, Olympic champion Petra Vlhová of Slovakia, was fifth after the opening run but had a series of uncharacteristic mistakes in the second as she dropped to 13th, more than two seconds behind Dürr and Shiffrin.

It ended a 17-race series in slalom in which Vlhová had not finished worse than fourth.

Sunday's slalom was the last women's World Cup race before the worlds, which open with the women's combined event in Méribel on Monday Feb. 6.

Russians gone from Ukraine village, fear and hardship remain

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KALYNIVSKE, Ukraine (AP) — When night falls in Tatiana Trofimenko's village in southern Ukraine, she pours sunflower oil that aid groups gave her into a jar and seals it with a wick-fitted lid. A flick of a match, and the make-do candle is lit.

"This is our electricity," Trofimenko, 68, says.

It has been over 11 weeks since Ukrainian forces wrested back her village in Kherson province from Russian occupation. But liberation has not diminished the hardship for residents of Kalynivske, both those returning home and the ones who never left. In the peak of winter, the remote area not far from an active front line has no power or water. The sounds of war are never far.

Russian forces withdrew from the western side of the Dnieper River, which bisects the province, but remain in control of the eastern side. A near constant barrage of fire from only a few kilometers away, and the danger of leftover mines leaving many Ukrainians too scared to venture out, has rendered normalcy an elusive dream and cast a pall over their military's strategic victory.

Still, residents have slowly trickled back to Kalynivske, preferring to live without basic services, dependent on humanitarian aid and under the constant threat of bombardment than as displaced people elsewhere in their country. Staying is an act of defiance against the relentless Russian attacks intended to make the area unlivable, they say.

"This territory is liberated. I feel it," Trofimenko says. "Before, there were no people on the streets. They were empty. Some people evacuated, some people hid in their houses."

"When you go out on the street now, you see happy people walking around," she says.

The Associated Press followed a United Nations humanitarian aid convoy into the village on Saturday, when blankets, solar lamps, jerrycans, bed linens and warm clothes were delivered to the local warehouse of a distribution center.

Russian forces captured Kherson province in the early days of the war. The majority of the nearly 1,000 residents in Kalynivske remained in their homes throughout the occupation. Most were too fragile or ill to leave, others did not have the means to escape.

Gennadiy Shaposhnikov lies on the sofa in a dark room, plates piled up beside him.

The 83-year old's advanced cancer is so painful it is hard for him to speak. When a mortar destroyed the back of his house, neighbors rushed to his rescue and patched it up with tarps. They still come by every day, to make sure he is fed and taken care of.

"Visit again, soon," is all he can muster to say to them.

Oleksandra Hryhoryna, 75, moved in with a neighbor when the missiles devastated her small house near the village center. Her frail figure steps over the spent shells and shrapnel that cover her front yard. She struggles up the pile of bricks, what remains of the stairs, leading to her front door.

She came to the aid distribution center pulling her bicycle and left with a bag full of tinned food, her main source of sustenance these days.

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But it's the lack of electricity that is the major problem, Hryhoryna explains. "We are using handmade candles with oil and survive that way," she says.

The main road that leads to her home is littered with the remnants of the war, an eerie museum of what was and what everyone here hopes will never return. Destroyed Russian tanks rust away in the fields. Cylindrical anti-tank missiles gleam, embedded in grassy patches. Occasionally, there is the tail end of a cluster munition lodged into the earth.

Bright red signs emblazoned with a skull warn passersby not to get too close.

The Russians left empty ammunition boxes, trenches and tarp-covered tents during their rapid retreat. A jacket and, some kilometers away, men's underwear hangs on the bare branches. And with the Russians waging ongoing attacks to win back the lost ground in Kherson, it is sometimes hard for terrorized residents to feel as if the occupying forces ever left.

"I'm very afraid," says Trofimenko. "Even sometimes I'm screaming. I'm very, very scared. And I'm worried about us getting shelled again and for (the fighting) to start again. This is the most terrible thing that exists."

The deprivation suffered in the village is mirrored all over Kherson, from the provincial capital of the same name to the constellation of villages divided by tracts of farmland that surround it. Ukrainian troops reclaimed the territory west of the Dnieper River in November after a major counteroffensive led to a Russian troop withdrawal, hailed as one of the greatest Ukrainian victories of the war that's now in its 12th month..

The U.N. ramped up assistance, supporting 133,000 individuals in Kherson with cash assistance, and 150,000 with food. Many villagers in Kalynivske say the food aid is the only reason they have something to eat.

"One of the biggest challenges is that the people who are there are the most vulnerable. It's mainly the elderly, many who have a certain kind of disability, people who could not leave the area, and are really reliant on aid organizations and local authorities who are working around the clock," says Saviano Abreu, a spokesperson for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The shelling is constant.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry reports near daily incidents of shelling in Kherson city and surrounding villages, including rocket, artillery and mortar attacks. Most fall closer to the river banks nearer to the front line, but, that doesn't mean those living further away feel any safer. On Friday, a missile fell in the village of Kochubeivka, north of Kalynivske, killing one person.

"Kherson managed to resume most of the essential services, but the problem is the hostilities keep creating challenges to ensure they are sustained," Abreu says. "Since December, it's getting worse and worse. The number of attacks and hostilities there is only increasing."

Without electricity, there is no means to pump piped drinking water. Many line up to fetch well water, but a lot is needed to perform daily functions, residents complain.

To keep warm, many forage around the village for firewood, a task that presents danger post-occupation.

Everyone in Kalynivske knows the story of Nina Zvarech. She went looking for firewood in the nearby forest and was killed when she stepped on a mine.

Her body lay there for over a month because her relatives were too afraid to go and find her.

Classified docs probe pushes Biden think tank into spotlight

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Joe Biden contemplated his next move in 2017 after decades in government, he considered a familiar path — creating a Washington-based think tank to focus on international affairs and diplomacy. It proved an easy sell and a lucrative one, too.

Soft landings in the capital are common for officials with a resume like Biden's, and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement was born, with a grand view of the Capitol.

The former vice president brought with him trusted staff and boxes of files. Now, a small batch of those files is at the center of controversy because some were classified documents that Biden had no right to

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retain.

The gloss of Ivy League academia and high-minded ambitions has been dulled by this month's disclosure that the sensitive documents were found last fall in a locked closet as Biden lawyers were packing up his former office at the center. That discovery is posing a test for Biden just as he is contemplating a 2024 reelection campaign.

It turns out politics have been part of the equation all along.

In an early meeting at the center in February 2018, Biden told longtime foreign policy aides — many of them from the Obama-Biden administration — that he was keeping his options open for a potential presidential campaign in 2020 and that he would welcome them joining his team if he decided to run.

Sure enough, after hosting a handful of forums at the center and speaking a few times on the University of Pennsylvania's main campus, Biden announced his candidacy in April 2019. And after that he was rarely at the Capitol Hill center, which has continued to function quietly since its namesake leader moved on.

Its relatively low profile is now history.

Congressional Republicans are asking questions about the center's budget and hiring practices and the FBI may want to search the premises for more documents, as it did Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware.

Affiliated with the Philadelphia school, the Penn Biden Center says it was founded on the principle that "a democratic, open, secure, tolerant, and interconnected world benefits all Americans."

According to Biden's tax returns, the university paid him roughly \$900,000 over about two years, starting just after he left office when Donald Trump and Mike Pence took over the White House. In addition to the center, Biden also held roles at the school where he would speak on campus.

While the center's staff continued to conduct research, serve as experts for the media and write columns on foreign policy after Biden's departure, there is no new work listed on the center's website for the past 10 or so months.

Elliott Abrams, who has held foreign policy positions for presidents in the Reagan, George W. Bush and Trump administrations, said it has not developed as an influential think tank.

"It started as a parking space for Biden people until he ran for president, and never really outgrew that start," Abrams said.

Plenty of current Biden allies at the White House cycled through the think tank, according to public records and the Penn Biden Center website.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken was the center's managing director from May 2017 through June 2019. Michael Carpenter had the managing director's role before he was named U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Other center employees included Steve Ricchetti, now a senior counselor to Biden. There are at least seven other Biden staffers who were at the center and are now involved in national security matters in the administration.

Even Amy Gutmann, the university's president at the time who helped launch the center, now works for him. She's the U.S. ambassador to Germany.

Biden himself has a long history with the Ivy League school; his late son Beau, daughter Ashley, and granddaughter Naomi are all graduates. Biden received an honorary degree from Penn in 2013 after he gave the commencement address.

Biden frequently worked out of the center on Constitution Avenue as he quietly planned his presidential run, according to his aides, but he did not spend time there after he announced his candidacy. His lawyers had finally gotten around to clearing out the office when they came across the classified documents last November.

Biden told reporters he was surprised to learn the documents were there. The records were immediately turned over to the Justice Department, but the discovery of records there and at Biden's home has led to an investigation by a special counsel appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland.

Trump, too, faces a special counsel inquiry related to classified documents. In his case, FBI agents executed a warrant that showed they were investigating possible crimes including the willful retention of

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national defense information and efforts to obstruct the federal probe. Biden voluntarily allowed the FBI search of his home.

Former officials from all levels of government discover they are in possession of classified material and turn them over to the authorities at least several times a year, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of classified documents.

Still, the existence of the documents at the Penn Biden Center has trained unwanted criticism on the think tank, particularly by House Republicans investigating the mishandling of classified materials. They have requested a list of all center employees, including dates of employment and salaries, visitor logs and documents and communications related to security.

A conservative legal group led by former Trump advisers has complained to the IRS about the center's hiring of Biden and his allies.

The chairman of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., has suggested that some of the tens of millions of dollars in foreign gifts to the university from patrons in China went to the Penn Biden Center.

Donors from Ireland, Hong Kong, Canada, India, Japan and Brazil also contributed to the university in recent years, though the House has focused on donations from China.

A statement from university said the school would address the committee's questions in a timely way, but that it has never solicited gifts for the center. There were three unsolicited gifts from two donors that totaled \$1,100.

The budget for the center comes solely from university funds. The total academic operating budget for the university is roughly \$4 billion. Penn Biden Center officials did not say how much of that goes to center operations.

"It is important to reiterate that the Penn Biden Center has never solicited or received any gifts from any Chinese or other foreign entity," according to the statement from the Penn Biden Center.

Today in History: JAN 30, Tet Offensive begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Jan. 30, the 30th day of 2023. There are 335 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

On this date:

In 1649, England's King Charles I was executed for high treason.

In 1911, James White, an intellectually disabled Black young man who'd been convicted of rape for having sex with a 14-year-old white girl when he was 16, was publicly hanged in Bell County, Kentucky.

In 1945, during World War II, a Soviet submarine torpedoed the German ship MV Wilhelm Gustloff in the Baltic Sea with the loss of more than 9,000 lives, most of them war refugees; roughly 1,000 people survived.

In 1948, Indian political and spiritual leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, 78, was shot and killed in New Delhi by Nathuram Godse (neh-too-RAHM' gahd-SAY'), a Hindu extremist. (Godse and a co-conspirator were later executed.)

In 1968, the Tet Offensive began during the Vietnam War as Communist forces launched surprise attacks against South Vietnamese towns and cities; although the Communists were beaten back, the offensive was seen as a major setback for the U.S. and its allies.

In 1969, The Beatles staged an impromptu concert atop Apple headquarters in London; it was the group's last public performance.

In 1972, 13 Roman Catholic civil rights marchers were shot to death by British soldiers in Northern Ireland on what became known as "Bloody Sunday."

In 1981, an estimated 2 million New Yorkers turned out for a ticker tape parade honoring the American

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hostages freed from Iran.

In 1993, Los Angeles inaugurated its Metro Red Line, the city's first modern subway.

In 2005, Iraqis voted in their country's first free election in a half-century; President George W. Bush called the balloting a resounding success.

In 2006, Coretta Scott King, widow of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., died in Rosarito Beach, Mexico, at age 78.

In 2020, health officials reported the first known case in which the new coronavirus was spread from one person to another in the United States. The World Health Organization declared the virus outbreak, which had reached more than a dozen countries, to be a global emergency. Russia ordered the closure of its 2,600-mile-long land border with China in an effort to limit the spread of the virus. President Donald Trump described the handful of U.S. cases of the virus as a "very little problem" and said those people were "recuperating successfully." The State Department advised U.S. citizens against traveling to China.

Ten years ago: In a dramatic appeal before the Senate Judiciary Committee, wounded former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords urged Congress to enact tougher curbs on guns, saying, "too many children are dying" without them. Israel conducted a rare airstrike on a military target inside Syria amid fears President Bashar Assad's regime could provide powerful weapons to the Islamic militant group Hezbollah. Patty Andrews, 94, the last surviving member of the singing Andrews Sisters trio, died in the Los Angeles suburb of Northridge.

Five years ago: In his first State of the Union address, President Donald Trump called on Congress to make good on long-standing promises to fix a fractured immigration system and issued ominous warnings about deadly gangs, the scourge of drugs and violent immigrants living in the country illegally; the speech also included calls for optimism amid a growing economy. In the Democratic response, Massachusetts Rep. Joe Kennedy III said soaring stock prices had boosted investor portfolios and corporate profits but had not eased the anxieties of middle-class families. The body of 35-year-old actor Mark Salling, a former cast member on the TV show "Glee," was found in a riverbed area of Los Angeles in what a coroner determined was suicide by hanging; Salling's death came a few weeks after he pleaded guilty to possession of child pornography.

One year ago: Matching the biggest comeback in an AFC championship game, the Cincinnati Bengals rallied from an 18-point hole to stun the Kansas City Chiefs 27-24 in overtime. The Los Angeles Rams rallied from a 10-point deficit in the fourth quarter to secure a spot in the Super Bowl at their home stadium with a 20-17 victory over the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC championship game. (The Rams would beat the Bengals 23-20 in the Super Bowl two weeks later.) Spotify said it would add content advisories before podcasts discussing the coronavirus; the move followed protests of the music streaming service that were kicked off by singer Neil Young over the spread of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation.

Today's birthdays: Actor Gene Hackman is 93. Actor Vanessa Redgrave is 86. Country singer Jeanne Pruett is 86. Country singer Norma Jean is 85. Horn player William King of The Commodores is 74. Musician Phil Collins is 72. Actor Charles S. Dutton ("Roc") is 72. Actor Ann Dowd ("The Handmaid's Tale") is 67. Comedian Brett Butler ("Anger Management," "Grace Under Fire") is 65. Singer Jody Watley is 64. Actor Wayne Wilderson ("Veep") is 57. Country singer Tammy Cochran is 51. Actor Christian Bale is 49. Guitarist Carl Broemel of My Morning Jacket is 49. Actor Olivia Colman is 49. Singer Josh Kelley is 43. Actor Wilmer Valderrama ("That '70s Show") is 43. Actor Mary Hollis Inboden ("The Real O'Neals") is 37. Actor Kylie Bunbury ("Big Sky," "Pitch") is 34. Actor Jake Thomas ("Lizzie McGuire," "AI") is 33. Actor Danielle Campbell ("Tell Me A Story," "The Originals") is 28.