‘Window into the future’

As cases climb in Americas, health agency warns Europe’s surge could be mirrored in US

By Paulina Villegas and Paulina Firozi
The Washington Post

Global health leaders are urging caution as the holiday season gets underway, pointing to a 23% spike in coronavirus cases across the Americas in the past week, a surge that follows spikes in Europe — which officials warn could be a “window into the future for the Americas.”

“Time and again, we’ve seen how the infection dynamics in Europe are mirrored here several weeks later,” Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization, said during a Wednesday briefing. “The future is unfolding before us, and it must be a wake-up call for our region because we are even more vulnerable.”

On the same day, the head of the World Health Organization urged against complacency, expressing concern about a “false sense of security that vaccines have ended the pandemic and that people who are vaccinated do not need to take any other precautions.”

WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said: “While Europe is again the epicenter of the pandemic, no country or region is out of the woods.”

He underlined the trouble in Europe, where the agency reports nearly 60% of worldwide coronavirus deaths were concentrated from Nov. 15 to 21. In that time, the WHO said new cases jumped 11%.

Countries in Europe have been implementing new lockdowns and restrictions — an effort to reduce numbers ahead of the end-of-year holidays.

The PAHO pointed to upward trends in new cases in the United

SEE SURGE ON PAGE 5

Ukraine’s
Zelensky:
Russia is plotting coup

By David L. Stern
The Washington Post

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Friday that a group of Russians and Ukrainians are planning to stage a coup d’état in Ukraine next month, and are trying to enlist the help of the country’s richest man, Rinat Akhmetov.

Zelensky, speaking at a “press marathon” for local and international media, said that audio recordings, obtained by Ukraine’s security services, caught plotters discussing their plans and mentioning Akhmetov’s name. Akhmetov was not involved in the actual coup plot, however, Zelensky said.

“I believe [Akhmetov] is being dragged into the war against Ukraine,” Zelensky said. “This will be a big mistake, because you cannot fight against your people.”

Zelensky said that the alleged coup was being planned for Dec. 1 or 2. He did not provide further details, however.

Ukrainian media in recent weeks have commented on the growing tensions between Zelensky and Akhmetov. Zelensky has launched a “de-oligarchization” campaign to reduce the political influence of Ukraine’s richest people, who control key sections of the economy.

Akhmetov, a coal and steel tycoon, also owns media holdings, which in recent weeks have increased their criticism of Zelensky and his administration.
South Korea to launch task force on banning dog meat

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea on Thursday said it will launch a task force to consider outlawing dog meat consumption after the country’s president offered to look into ending the centuries-old practice.

Restaurants that serve dog meat are dwindling in South Korea as younger people find dog meat a less appetizing dining option and pets are growing in popularity. Recent surveys indicate increasing voices saying that it’s difficult now to see dog meat consumption as just traditional food culture,” Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, the country’s No. 2 official, said ahead of the statement’s release.

The government says the initiative, the first of its kind, with pet animals has risen rapidly and public interest in animal rights and welfare has grown in our country, there have been increasing voices saying that it’s difficult now to see dog meat consumption as just traditional food culture,” Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, the country’s No. 2 official, said ahead of the statement’s release.

“As the number of families with pet animals has risen rapidly and public interest in animal rights and welfare has grown in our country, there have been increasing voices saying that it’s difficult now to see dog meat consumption as just traditional food culture,” Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, the country’s No. 2 official, said ahead of the statement’s release.

The government says the initiative, the first of its kind, doesn’t necessarily guarantee the banning of dog meat.

EXCHANGE RATES

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Military rates
Afghan girl from famous magazine cover portrait is evacuated to Italy

By Lee Keath
Associated Press

KABUL in Afghanistan — Not long ago, Ferishta Salihi and her family had enough for a decent life. Her husband was working and earned a good salary. She could send several of her daughters to private schools.

But now, after her husband lost his job following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, she was living with hundreds of other Afghans, registering with the U.N.’s World Food Program to receive food and cash that her family desperately needs just for survival.

“We have lost everything. We’ve lost our minds,” Salihi said after her registration was complete. “My husband’s income is very low and we have not been able to pay for our children’s school fees.

In a matter of months as Afghanistan’s economy cratered, many stable, middle-class families like Salihi’s have plummeted into desperation, uncertain of how they will pay for their next meal. That is one reason the United Nations is raising alarm over a humanitarian crisis with 22% of the population of 38 million already near famine and another 36% facing acute food insecurity — mainly because people can’t pay for food.

The economy was already in trouble under the previous, U.S.-backed government, which often could not feed its people, and the situation was worsened by the coronavirus pandemic and by a punishing drought that drove up food prices. Already in 2020, nearly half of Afghanistan’s population was living in poverty.

Then the world’s shutdown of funding to Afghanistan after the Taliban’s Aug. 15 seizure of power pulled the rug out from under the country’s small middle class. International funding once paid for much of the government budget — and without it, the Taliban have largely been unable to pay salaries or provide public services. The international community has not recognized Taliban rule, demanding the militants form a more inclusive government and respect human rights.

International aid also fueled projects around the country that provided jobs, most of which are now on hold. The country’s banks are cut off from the international banking system, further snarling the private sector. The country’s economy is estimated to have contracted 40% in just three months.

Hospitals are seeing increasing numbers of emaciated, malnourished children, mostly from the country’s poorest families who were already barely getting by.

Now families that have seen their once-stable livelihoods wrecked also find themselves with nothing and must scrape for ways to cover costs of food, rent and medical expenses.

Salihi’s husband once made around 24,000 Afghanis ($264) a month working in the logistics department at the World Bank’s office in Kabul. But after the Taliban took power, the World Bank halted its projects. The 39-year-old Salihi said her husband was told not to come to the office and he hasn’t received his salary since.

Now she is the family’s only source of income. One of her neighbors has a business selling nuts, so they give her bags of nuts to sell at home and she then sells the shells to people who use them to burn for fuel.

Her husband, she said, spends his day walking around the district looking for work. “All he can do is measure the streets with his steps,” she said, using an expression for someone with nothing to do.

The U.S. and other international donors are funneling money to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid through U.N. agencies, which ensure the money doesn’t go into the coffers of the Taliban government. The main focus has been on two tracks. The U.N. Development Program, World Health Organization and UNICEF are working to directly pay salaries to doctors and nurses around the country to keep the health sector from collapsing. The WFP, meanwhile, is providing direct cash aid and food to families, trying to keep them above water.

The WFP has had to ramp up its program dramatically. In 2020, it provided aid to 9 million people, up from the year before. So far this year, that number has risen to nearly 14 million, and the rate has risen sharply each month since August. Next year, the agency aims to provide for more than 23 million people, and it says it needs $220 million a month to do so.

It’s not just the poorest of the poor, usually based in rural areas, who need help. “There’s a new urban class of people who up until the summer would have been drawing a salary ... and now are facing hunger for the first time,” said Saad Khadral, the WFP spokesperson for Afghanistan.

“People are now having to scavenge for food, they’re skipping meals and mothers are forced to reduce portions of food,” she said.

Last week, hundreds of men and women lined up in a gymnasium in a west Kabul neighborhood to receive a cash distribution — 3,500 afghanis a month, about $38.

Nouria Sarvari, a 45-year-old woman who was waiting in line, used to work at the Higher Education Ministry. After the Taliban came to power, they told most women government employees to stay home. Sarvari said she hasn’t received a salary since and she’s struggling to keep food on the table for her three children still living with her.

Her 14-year-old son, Sajjad, sells plastic bags in the market for a little cash. Sarvari says she depends on help from neighbors. “I buy from shopkeepers on credit. I owe so many shopkeepers, and most of what I receive today will just go to paying what I owe,” she said.

Samim Hassanzwai said his life has been overturned completely over the past year. His father and mother both died of COVID-19, he said. His father was an officer in the intelligence agency and his mother was a translator for an American agency.

Hassanzwai, 29, had been working for the American agency in 2020, and since then hasn’t gotten a salary since the Taliban came to power. Now he’s jobless with his wife and three children as well as his four younger sisters all dependent on him.

“I had a job, my mother had a job, my father had his duties. We were doing fine with money,” he said. “Now everything is finished.”
New virus variant emerges in Africa

By Rap Casert
Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The discovery of a new coronavirus variant sent a chill through much of the world Friday as nations raced to halt air travel, markets plunged and scientists held emergency meetings to weigh the exact risks, which were largely unknown.

Medical experts, including the World Health Organization, warned against any overreaction before the variant that originated in southern Africa was better understood. But a jittery world feared the worst nearly two years after COVID-19 emerged and triggered a pandemic that has killed more than 5 million people around the globe.

British Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers that the new version may be transmissible than the delta variant and render vaccines less effective.

“We must move quickly and at the earliest possible moment,” Javid said.

Some nations moved to stop air travel from southern Africa, and stocks plunged in Asia, Europe and the United States. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 800 points at the start of trading. The price of oil plunged 7%.

“The last thing we need is to bring in a new variant that will cause even more problems,” German Health Minister Jens Spahn said amid a massive spike in cases in the 27-nation European Union, which recommended a ban on flights from southern African nations.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said flights “should be suspended until we have a clearer understanding about the danger posed by this new variant, and travelers returning from this region should respect strict quarantine rules.”

She insisted on extreme caution, warning that “mutations could lead to the emergence and spread of even more concerning variants of the virus that could spread worldwide within a few months.

Belgium became the first European Union country to announce a case of the variant. It involved a person who came from abroad.

“It’s a suspiscious variant. We don’t know if it’s a very dangerous variant,” Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke said.

Israel, one of the world’s most vaccinated countries, announced Friday that it also detected the country’s first case of the new variant in a traveler who returned from Malawi. The traveler and two other suspected cases were placed in isolation. Israel said all three were vaccinated, but officials were looking into the travelers’ exact vaccination status.

The new variant immediately stoked fears of more pandemic-related economic turmoil.

“Investors are likely to shoot first and ask questions later until more is known,” said Jeffrey Halley of foreign exchange broker Oanda.

Oil prices plunged, with U.S. crude off 6.7% at $73.22 per barrel and the international Brent benchmark off 5.6% at $77.64, both unusually large moves for a single day. The pandemic caused oil prices to plunge during the initial outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 because travel restrictions reduced demand for fuel.

Airlines shares were hammered, with Lufthansa off 12.4%, IAG, parent of British Airways and Iberia, off 14.4%, Air France-KLM down 8.9% and easyJet falling 10.9%.

Speaking before the EU announcement, Dr. Michael Ryan, the head of emergencies at the WHO, warned against “knee-jerk measures.

“Travel bans on countries that reported the new variant. In a statement, it said past pandemic experience has shown that such travel bans have “not yielded a meaningful outcome.”

The U.K. banned flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries effective at noon on Friday and announced that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would be asked to take a coronavirus test.

Germany said its flight ban from South Africa will only be able to transport German citizens home, and travelers will need to go into quarantine for 14 days whether they are vaccinated or not.

“These measures are reasonable and targeted in the light of the recent situation in southern Africa,” said German Health Minister Jens Spahn.

People wait to get vaccinated at a shopping mall in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday.

German air force assisting with transfer of ICU patients

By Frank Jordans
Associated Press

BERLIN — The German air force will begin assisting with the transfer of intensive care patients Friday as the government warned the situation in the country is more serious than at any point in the pandemic.

Citing the sharp rise in cases, Health Minister Jens Spahn said contacts between people need to be sharply reduced to curb the spread of the virus.

“The situation is dramatically serious, more serious than it’s been at any point in the pandemic,” he told reporters in Berlin.

Spahn said Germany was having to organize large-scale transfers of patients within the country for the first time since the outbreak began in early 2020.

German news agency dpa reported that a Luftwaffe A310 medevac plane was expected to fly seriously ill patients from the southern town of Memmingen to North Rhine-Westphalia state Friday afternoon.

Hospitals in the southern and eastern regions of Germany have warned they are running out of intensive care beds because of the large number of seriously ill COVID-19 patients.

The country’s disease control agency said 76,414 newly confirmed cases were reported in the past 24 hours. The Robert Koch Institute, a government agency, said Germany also had 357 new deaths from COVID-19, taking the total since the start of the outbreak to 100,476.

Responding to a newly discovered variant that’s been spreading in South Africa, Spahn said air lines coming from that country would only be able to transport German citizens. Travelers will need to go into quarantine for 14 days whether they are vaccinated or not, he said.

“The last thing we need is to bring in a new variant that will cause even more problems,” he said.
Experts to review safety of Merck COVID pill

BY MATTHEW PERRONE
The Associated Press

Federal health regulators say an experimental COVID-19 pill from Merck is effective against the virus, but they will seek input from outside experts on risks of birth defects and other potential problems during pregnancy.

The Food and Drug Administration posted its concerns about the pill ahead of a public meeting next week where academic and other experts will weigh in on its safety and effectiveness. The agency isn’t required to follow the group’s advice.

FDA scientists said their review identified several potential risks, including possible toxicity and birth defects. Given those risks the FDA will ask its advisers whether the drug should never be given during pregnancy or whether it could be made available in certain cases.

Under that scenario, the FDA said the drug would carry warnings about risks during pregnancy, but doctors would still have the option to prescribe it in certain cases where its benefits could outweigh its risks for patients.

Given the safety concerns, the FDA said Merck agreed the drug wouldn’t be used in children.

Additionally, the FDA flagged a concern that Merck’s drug led to small changes in the coronavirus’ signature spike protein, which it uses to penetrate human cells.

Theoretically, the FDA cautioned, those changes could lead to dangerous new variants.

Regulators also noted that Merck collected far less safety data overall on its drug than was gathered for other COVID-19 therapies.

The FDA will ask its independent advisers to discuss all those issues and then vote on whether the drug’s overall benefits outweigh its risks.

All COVID-19 drugs currently authorized by the FDA require an injection or IV and can only be given by health professionals. If authorized, Merck’s drug would be the first that U.S. patients could take at home to ease symptoms and speed recovery. It is already authorized for emergency use in the U.K.

The meeting marks the first time regulators have publicly reviewed a new drug for COVID-19, reflecting the intense interest and scrutiny of a pill that could be soon used by millions of Americans.

The drug, molnupiravir, has been shown to significantly cut the rate of hospitalizations and deaths among people with mild-to-moderate coronavirus infections.

Merck’s drug uses a novel approach to fight COVID-19. It appears to target the virus’ genetic code to the point that it can’t reproduce itself.

But that genetic effect has raised concerns that in rare cases the drug could cause birth defects or tumors.

Pregnant women were excluded from Merck’s study. And both women and men in the study were instructed to use contraception or abstain from sex.

For its part, Merck says results from two company studies in rodents show “molnupiravir does not cause mutations or damage to DNA in these animal models.” The company said the rodents received higher doses for longer periods of time than humans who will take the drug.

FDA reviewers also confirmed previously reported interim results from Merck that the pill cut the risk of hospitalization and death by about half among patients with early symptoms of COVID-19 who faced increased risk due to health problems.

However, on Friday morning Merck announced updated results from the same study that would offer a smaller benefit from the drug.

Among more than 1,400 adults in a company study, molnupiravir reduced the combined risk of hospitalization and death by 30%, less than the 50% initially reported based on incomplete results.

Nearly 7% of patients who received Merck’s drug within five days of COVID-19 symptoms ended up in the hospital and one died.

That compared to 10% of patients hospitalized who were taking the placebo and nine deaths.

FROM PAGE 1

States and Canada, with a “two-to-threefold increase in new infections over the last week” in Canada’s Yukon and Northwest territories.

In the United States, new daily reported cases have increased 8% in the past week, and deaths have grown 9%, according to tracking by The Washington Post. In that time, hospitalizations have inched up 6%.

The situation is particularly dire in pockets of the nation. In Michigan, which leads the nation in COVID hospitalizations, the unvaccinated COVID-19 patients are swarming emergency departments and driving capacity to grueling levels.

In Canada, there was a 5% increase as of Wednesday in new confirmed cases over the past two weeks, compared with the previous two weeks, according to Our World in Data, which cites data gathered by Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Systems Science and Engineering.

During the Thanksgiving eve briefing, health officials urged that mitigation measures—including mask-wearing, social distancing and staying away from crowds—should be kept up regardless of vaccination status.

“During these holiday periods, not just for Thanksgiving in the U.S., of course, but through the end of the year, it’s really important that all of us continue to take measures to keep us and our loved ones safe,” said Maria Van Kerkhove, an epidemiologist leading WHO’s coronavirus response.

The briefing during the briefing. “Those of you who have access to vaccines, who are offered vaccination, please get vaccinated when it’s your turn.”

In the United States, slightly more than 59% of the entire population is fully vaccinated, according to tracking by The Post. More than 19% has been fully vaccinated and has received a booster shot.

As of Nov. 19, about three-quarters of the total population of Canada is fully vaccinated, according to the government dashboard.

In South America, many countries are reporting an increase in cases, including in the Southern Cone, with the highest spikes in Bolivia and Paraguay. Central America is the only area to have experienced a drop in new infections.

Bolivia has reported a 50% increase as of Wednesday in new confirmed cases over the past 14 days, compared with the previous 14 days, according to Our World in Data, which cites data gathered by Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Systems Science and Engineering.

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Black Friday begins despite pandemic woes

By Anne D'Innocenzo

NEW YORK — Retailers are expected to usher in the unofficial start to the holiday shopping season Friday with bigger crowds than last year in a closer step toward normalcy. But the fallout from the pandemic continues to weigh on businesses and shoppers’ minds.

Buoyed by solid hiring, healthy pay gains and substantial savings, customers are returning to stores and splurging on all types of items. But the spike has also resulted in limited selection across the board as suppliers and retailers have been caught flat-footed.

Shortages of shipping containers and truckers have delayed deliveries while inflation continues to creep. The combination of not finding the right item at the right price — in addition to a labor shortage that makes it more difficult for businesses to respond to customers — could make for a less festive mood.

At Macy’s Herald Square store in Manhattan, shelves were stocked and shoppers were steadily streaming in at 6:30 a.m., a half hour after the doors opened.

Aniva Pavlowitski got to Macy’s just ahead of the 6 a.m. opening with plans to buy shoes and coats. “Everything is expensive,” she said.

Shoppers are expected to pay on average between 5% to 17% more for toys, clothing, appliances, TVs and other purchases on Black Friday this year compared with last year, according to Aurelien Duthoit, senior sector advisor at Allianz Research, with the biggest price increases on TVs. That’s because whatever discounts available will be applied to goods that already cost more.

“I think it is going to be a messy holiday season,” said Neil Saunders, managing director at Global Data Retail. “It will be a bit frustrating for retailers, consumers and the workers. We are going to see long lines. We are going to see messier stores. We are going to see delays as you collect online orders.”

Big retailers have been preparing for the holiday season, trying to find workarounds to supply chain hold-ups. Some of the biggest U.S. retailers are rerouting goods to less congested ports, even chartering their own vessels.

“We are deep and we are ready,” Macy’s CEO Jeff Gennette told The Associated Press, noting inventory levels are up 20% compared to last year. “We are in good shape.”

While Black Friday has a strong hold on Americans’ imaginations as a day of crazed shopping, it has lost stature over the last decade as stores opened on Thanksgiving and shopping shifted to Amazon and other online retailers. Stores diluted the day’s importance further by advertising Black Friday sales on more and more days.

The pandemic led many retailers to close stores on Thanksgiving Day and push discounts on their websites, starting as early as October. That’s continuing this year, although there are deals in stores as well.

Still, some experts believe Black Friday will again be the busiest shopping day this year.

Animal center where burned cub escaped given donations

By Scott Sonner

RENO, Nev. — Private donors’ new pledge to match $500,000 in contributions for a $1 million expansion at a Lake Tahoe wildlife rescue center is bringing smiles back to staff and volunteers, who have been on an emotional roller-coaster since a bear cub being treated for severe wildfire burns made a much-publicized escape this summer.

The Lake Tahoe Wildlife Center has been making repairs directed by California regulators since Tamarack — named after the wildfire that blazed across more than 100 square miles in the Sierra and severely burned the cub’s paws — tunneled under an electric fence and fled to the wild.

It was the first escape in the 45-year-history of the center in South Lake Tahoe, Calif.

Two days later, volunteers spotted and photographed a cub clinging to a tree 40 feet up in a nearby forest. They became convinced it was the 6-month-old escapee, decided to leave him alone and now believe he’s doing just fine.

The contribution the Bentley Foundation and MB Buckeye announced this week may just be the happy ending they’ve been looking for.

“We’ve turned the corner,” center spokesman Greg Erfani told The Associated Press. As of Wednesday, they were only $30,000 short of the $1.05 million needed to begin construction in the spring and finish by the end of 2022.

“It’s going to build the first animal hospital in the Lake Tahoe area,” he said.

The center has continued to rescue smaller animals and recently released seven rehabilitated coyote pups. But it’s been prohibited from accepting big-game including bears since the California Department of Fish and Wildlife declared in October that it had to make improvements to its enclosures and fencing.

Upon completion, CDWF will perform a site inspection and evaluate (the center’s) request to renew its agreement to temporarily possess and rehabilitate injured and orphaned black bear cubs,” department spokesman Peter Tiira said in an email to AP on Wednesday.

Erfani said supply-chain challenges have delayed immediate repairs but the center should be fully up and running by next month, bears and all.

The expansion includes the hospital with two large recovery rooms, surgery and X-ray areas, individual care buildings for different species and a small dormitory for staff providing round-the-clock care — all at the place young Tamarack briefly called home.

The tale of his rescue-turned-escape began July 26 when a homeowner in Markleville, Calif., spotted the cub crawling on his knees because his paws were so badly burned.

Photos of the bandaged black bear at the rescue center flooded social media and drew mention in international news coverage of the devastating fire that forced thousands of evacuations.

“Tamarack was sort of the first ‘feel good story’ to come out of the fire. It was all destruction and heartbeat, and then there’s this little guy that had survived,” Erfani said this week. “Then, of course, that little stinker was not going to be caged. He just wanted out.”

The center announced his escape Aug. 3, warning anyone who spotted him to stay away and report sightings to wildlife officials.

“We got lambasted on social media. People were being nasty,” Erfani recalled. “It was very emotional for us because we had connections with him. A lot of people were really upset.”

Meanwhile, the center was doing everything it could to corral the cub, even sending up heat-seeking drones sometimes used to find lost hikers, Erfani said.

It paid off with the sighting of the cub clinging to the tree. “We like to believe he’s out there now in the wild, living the bear’s life.”
Map debate over majority-minority areas

By David Eggert and Nicholas Riccardi
Associated Press

DETROIT — Adam Hollier is a lieutenant in the Army Reserve, a paratrooper, a Democrat and a Black man. He is also a state senator who represents a majority-Black district that stretches across the southeastern edge of Michigan, a region that has been economically battered and resilient hometown. That critical mass of Black voters, Hollier argues, ensures he has a chance to be elected and give voice to people who have long been ignored by the political system.

Rebecca Szetela is a lawyer who describes herself as an independent, and a white woman who chairs Michigan’s new Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission. Its job is to redraw the lines of legislative seats to promote more partisan competition in a state where Republicans have dominated the Legislature for decades. The best ways to do that, and empower minority voters, Szetela and other commissioners argue, is putting some of the majority-Black neighborhoods in Hollier’s district in other seats, where they may have more say over Michigan’s leadership.

For Hollier’s 2nd Senate District, that means some of its Detroit neighborhoods would begrafted on to mostly white districts, and his own seat would stretch across Eight Mile Road, the infamous boundary between Detroit and its first-ring, majority-white suburbs. Its Black voting-age population would drop to 42%.

Hollier, like other Black lawmakers, is furious, saying that move jeopardizes Black elected officials. “By and large, Black people vote for Black people and white people vote for white people,” Hollier said. “It’s just the reality. It’s got nothing to do with me. Draw maps that majority-Black communities can win.”

Whether Hollier is right is at the heart of a heated debate over how to ensure racial and ethnic minority communities can elect the officeholders of their choice. The fight is complicated and wonky — like most surrounding the once-a-decade redistricting process. But the stakes are clear: Black, Latino and Asian Americans are underrepresented in state legislatures.

For decades, the widely accepted strategy was to group together Black voters so they comprised a majority in a statehouse or congressional district. That principle was enshrined in the federal Voting Rights Act, which requires the creation of districts with a majority or plurality of Black — or other minority racial or ethnic group — voters in places where the white population has a history of preventing them from electing their chosen representatives.

That strategy was reinforced by partisan politics. Republicans have been happy to draw districts with large numbers of Black voters because Black voters overwhelmingly favor Democrats. The effect was to pack Democrats into just a few districts and leave other parts of the state more safely Republican.

“I think we’re in a new age now,” said Bakari Sellers, an African American former South Carolina state legislator. “If you’re talented enough, you can win in a 30-35% Black district. ... We can be more competitive around the country.”

The risks in balancing the racial composition of districts were illustrated in this month’s Virginia elections. Two Black Democratic delegates narrowly lost their seats in districts that are still majority African American — but had recently been redrawn to have fewer Black voters. Control of the House of Delegates will come down to two other races that are in recounts.

Jonathan Cervas, one of the experts who redrew the Virginia districts in 2019, said the aim was to rectify what a court had found was discrimination against Black voters. He argued that the Voting Rights Act does not guarantee Black legislators will always be reelected. “The problem is the Democrats had a bad election,” Cervas said.

Va. wants man to return jobless benefits

By Sarah Rankin
Associated Press

ABINGDON, Va. — For 26 years, Ernest Ray worked at a company in southwest Virginia that made compressors, in a physically demanding job that involved night shifts alongside machines that were complicated machinery at Bristol Compressors.

Ray worked at a company in southwest Virginia that made compressors, in a physical-demanding job that involved night shifts alongside machines that were complicated machinery at Bristol to comply with the state’s weekly work-search documentation requirements. He didn’t have a computer to do the paperwork online.

When his benefits ran out in May 2019, staff instructed him for reasons that are unclear to keep reporting his work-search details. Ray then missed one week due to a minor illness. After producing a doctor’s note, he received a notice saying he had been deemed unable to work — an applicant must be eligible to work to receive benefits — “due to medical reasons” and had received his payments in error. The state wanted the money back.

Like the other who doesn’t like children and the librarian who doesn’t like books, this is an agency that doesn’t like the people that its supposed to serve,” said Hugh O’Donnell, who has done decades of unemployment compensation work.

The agency has been under scrutiny for the past year and a half for a reason that Ray’s interviews with attorneys and state audits show the agency was plagued with a wide range of problems before the pandemic; they were simply brought to the forefront when hundreds of thousands of workers suddenly needed help.

Republican Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin campaigned on a promise to overhaul the agency, and Virginia Labor Secretary Megan Healy, who oversees it now, also says some problems are structural. She says the agency has long lacked sufficient resources thanks to a complicated federal funding formula that pays out less when the economy is strong and has also penalized the agency’s inefficiencies.

Outside reviews have warned of problems going back nearly a decade, including major records-management issues, low staff morale and unclean facilities.

“Our system is just broken. There’s no other way to describe it,” said Martin Wegbroit, director of litigation at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society.

For Ray, the struggles with the agency began well before it was flooded with pandemic-related claims.

Deaf since birth, Ray spent decades making complicated machinery at Bristol Compressors.

Ray made about $36,000 a year in his last year of work at the company, which closed despite receiving millions in taxpayer-funded incentives. Ray’s wages qualified him for $378 a week for 24 weeks, according to records in his case.

Ray, 57, began receiving those benefits without issue, started looking for a new job and meanwhile drove about 30 miles each way to an employment commission office in
Female inmates sue over trans inmates in jails

By Andrew Sheeler
The Sacramento Bee
SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A woman’s rights group is suing the state to overturn a new law that requires prisons to house transgender and gender nonbinary inmates in facilities that correspond to their gender identities, alleging the practice puts incarcerated people in danger.

The Women’s Liberation Front filed a lawsuit last week in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California on behalf of several incarcerated women as well as a group, Woman II Woman, that advocates on behalf of incarcerated women.

Two of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, both incarcerated women, allege they were sexually assaulted by inmates who identify as transgender or gender nonbinary.

The lawsuit said that one of the alleged assaults occurred after the law went into effect, while the other alleged assault does not specify when it occurred.

Several of the plaintiffs report being victims of domestic violence in the past. Several of the plaintiffs also cite their religious beliefs, which they argue are impaired by being placed in shared custody with transgender inmates.

Amie Ichikawa of the group Woman II Woman said she was shocked when she first read the bill that later became law, adding that she wasn’t alone.

“We’ve gotten so many calls, letters, different messages of women feeling forgotten, completely excluded,” Ichikawa said.

Ichikawa said that she supports transgender women being safe behind bars, but not in a way that she said allows sexual predators to slip in under the umbrella of transgender identity.

“They’re about making sure everybody is being safe here,” Ichikawa said.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokesperson Terry Thornton said on Tuesday that the department has not yet been served with the lawsuit, and that the department does not comment on pending litigation.

“However, the department is committed to providing a safe, humane, rehabilitative and secure environment for all people in its custody. Federal and state laws impose legal obligations related to the treatment of people in custody with specific provisions for gender non-conforming people,” Thornton said.

According to the department, 291 people housed at male correctional institutions in the state have requested to be transferred to a female correctional institution.

Of those, 41 transfer requests have been approved, six have been denied, 10 have been withdrawn and the rest remain under review by the department.

In addition, seven incarcerated people at female institutions have requested transfer to a male institution. All of those transfer requests remain under review.

The author of the law, state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, characterized the lawsuit and its advocates as transphobic in their portrayal of transgender inmates as potential threats. The California Family Council, a conservative group that lobbied against the law, also promoted the lawsuit this week.

“We need to lose the editorial commentary and claim that basically all trans women are sexual predators is false.”

Sen. Scott Wiener
D-San Francisco

Washington state faces threat of more ‘atmospheric rivers,’ floods

Associated Press

SEATTLE — A week and a half after damaging floods in Washington state, forecasters warned that multiple “atmospheric rivers” threaten to once again drench the Pacific Northwest beginning Thanksgiving Day.

More moisture from atmospheric rivers — huge plumes of moisture extending over the Pacific and into the Northwest — is expected to bring up to 3 inches of rain in some areas hit by the recent flooding, forecasters said.

Officials from the National Weather Service predict periods of moderate to heavy rain through Wednesday, as the first in a series of systems moves across the region.

The state is assessing millions of dollars in damage from the last atmospheric rivers.

In northwest Washington’s Whatcom County, officials say damage costs could reach as high as $50 million.

Whatcom County officials said that the damage for recent flooding was estimated at $15 million to $20 million for houses, “tens of millions of dollars” for public infrastructure and up to $20 million for area business centers, the Bellingham Herald reported on Tuesday.

Rain drenched the county for three days and the Nooksack River surged over its banks Nov. 14, inundating the communities of Everson, Nooksack and Sumas.

During that time the U.S.-Canadian border closed in the small city of Sumas, three bridges in Bellingham were closed and landslides blocked Interstate 5 south of Bellingham.

Jon Hutchings, director of the Whatcom County Public Works Department, said it’s been 30-plus years since flooding of this scale hit the area.

Meanwhile, damage assessments have continued in 13 other western Washington counties that Gov. Jay Inslee declared as disaster areas with the hope of getting federal aid.

Montgomery faces fine, lawsuit for dropping Confederate street name

By Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Alabama’s capital last month removed the Confederate president’s name from an avenue and renamed it after a lawyer known for his work during the civil rights movement.

Now the state attorney general says the city must pay a fine or face a lawsuit for violating state law protecting Confederate monuments and other long-standing memorials.

Montgomery last month changed the name of Jeff Davis Avenue to Fred D. Gray Avenue. Gray, who grew up on that same street, represented Rosa Parks and others in cases that fought Deep South segregation practices and was dubbed by Martin Luther King Jr. as “the chief counsel for the protest movement.”

The Alabama attorney general’s office sent a Nov. 5 letter to Montgomery officials saying the city must pay a $25,000 fine by Dec. 8, “otherwise, the attorney general will file suit on behalf of the state.”

Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed said changing the name was the right thing to do.

“I was important that we show, not only our residents here, but people from afar that this is a new Montgomery,” Reed, the city’s first Black mayor, said in a telephone interview. It was Reed’s suggestion to rename the street after Gray.

We want to honor those heroes that have fought to make this union as perfect as it can be. When I see a lot of the Confederate symbols that we have in the city, it sends a message that we are focused on the lost cause as opposed to those things that bring us together under the stars and stripes.”

The Alabama Memorial Preservation Act forbids the removal or alteration of monuments and memorials — including a memorial street or memorial building — that have stood for more than 40 years. While the law does not specifically mention memorials to the Confederacy, lawmakers approved the measure in 2017 as some cities began taking down Confederate monuments. Violations carry a $25,000 fine.
Thai chain’s cannabis pizza: trendy but won’t get you high

Associated Press

BANGKOK — One of Thailand’s major fast food chains has been promoting its “Crazy Happy Pizza” this month, an under-the-radar product topped with a cannabis leaf. It’s legal but won’t get you high.

Veterans of the backpacker trail, familiar with the legendary pizza parlors of neighboring Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh that offer powerful marijuana as an optional condiment, might feel downright cheated. “Of course, they cannot get high,” Panusak Suensatboon, general manager of The Pizza Company, said in an interview this week. “It’s just a marketing campaign. And you can taste the cannabis and then if you have enough, you maybe get a bit sleepy.”

The Crazy Happy Pizza is a mashup of toppings evoking the flavors of Thailand’s famous Tom Yum Gai soup along with a deep-fried cannabis leaf on top. Cannabis is also infused into the cheese crust and there’s chopped cannabis in the dipping sauce. A 9-inch pie costs 499 baht (about $15). Customers preferring a do-it-yourself variety can choose their own toppings, with a 100 baht ($3) surcharge for two or three cannabis leaves.

The cannabis plant has been used for two major purposes: as hemp for making rope and clothing, and as an intoxicating drug, known as pot, ganja and dagga. In recent years, a kind of middle-ground product has emerged: cannabidiol, or CBD, a chemical found in cannabis that can be processed into what is touted as a cure-all medicine. CBD can be separated out from tetrahydrocannabinol — THC — the chemical in cannabis that produces you high.

CBD has legitimized products made with cannabis, drawing on the mystique of marijuana without flouting the law or raising major health questions. It’s become a boom industry, especially in the United States.

Recreational marijuana is still illegal in Thailand, and can earn you a fine and time in jail, even though drug laws have been liberalized in the past few years. Cannabis is regulated for medicinal use, and individuals are allowed to grow a small number of plants for their own consumption.

Despite deal, Sudanese rally to demand military rulers leave

Associated Press

CAIRO — Thousands of Sudanese took to the streets on Thursday in the capital of Khartoum, renewing their demand for a fully civilian government and denouncing the country’s military rulers who were behind the October coup.

Since the takeover, protesters have repeatedly taken to the streets in some of the largest demonstrations in the past years. Sudanese security forces have cracked down on the rallies and have killed more than 40 protesters so far, according to activist groups.

Meanwhile, the Sudanese Doctors Committee, which is part of the pro-democracy movement, said that 17 people were killed in clashes between Arab and non-Arab tribes in the restive province of West Darfur last week. The tribal violence is unrelated to the anti-coup protests.

The U.N. mission to Sudan on Thursday expressed serious concern over reports of the killings in the Darfur area of Jebel Moon. It appeared that reports of the violence were only now emerging due to the near-complete communications blackout imposed after the coup.

Thursday’s demonstrations followed the military’s signing of a power-sharing deal with the prime minister, after he was released from house arrest and reinstated by the generals as head of government. The agreement came almost a month after the generals orchestrated the coup that deposed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and detained dozens of politicians and activists.

Hamdok’s reinstatement was the biggest concession made by the military since its Oct. 25 coup but leaves the country’s transition to democracy mired in crisis. Sudan’s key pro-democracy groups and political parties have dismissed the deal as falling short of their demands for a fully civilian rule.

Sudan has been struggling with its transition to a democratic government since the overthrow of autocrat Omar al-Bashir in 2019, following a mass uprising against three decades of his rule.

France lashes out at Britain in wake of migrant deaths

Associated Press

CALAIS, France — The already fractious relationship between France and Britain spiralled further downward into anger and incomprehension Friday, with the two erstwhile European partners at loggerheads about how to stop migrants from embarking on dangerous crossings of the English Channel that killed at least 27 people in a sinking this week.

Even as the British government insisted that the two countries “remain close friends and partners,” their words, acts and disputes over migration, fishing and how to rebuild a working relationship in the wake of Britain’s exit from the EU increasingly suggested otherwise.

President Emmanuel Macron scolded Prime Minister Boris Johnson for making public a letter that the British leader sent to the French leader on Thursday. Most notably, Johnson proposed that France take back migrants who illegally cross the Channel from France to British shores. Macron’s spokesman quickly and summarily dismissed the idea, and the French president made his displeasure clear that Johnson posted the letter — addressed “Dear Emmanuel” — on Twitter. “I am surprised by methods when they are not serious,” Macron said on a visit to Italy. “You don’t communicate from a leader to another on these matters via tweets and letters that are made public. We are not whistleblowers.”

“Come on, come on,” Macron added.

The letter and France’s response were the latest crossing of swords between two nations with a storied history of break-ups, make-ups and, not infrequently, of revelling in rubbing each up in the wrong way. The economic, political, social and psychological earthquake of Britain’s divorce from the EU has made cross-Channel cooperation harder still, and further complicated the long love-hate relationship between Paris and London.

Even in the wake of the deadliest migrant accident to date in the Channel, Macron and Johnson appeared increasingly to be talking past each other — or, in Paris’ case, barely willing to talk at all. Macron’s government’s spokesman, Gabriel Attal, said Johnson’s point-person on immigration, Home Secretary Priti Patel, was no longer welcome at a meeting Sunday of European ministers who’ll explore ways to crack down on migrant-smuggling networks.

Attal described Johnson’s letter as “fundamentally mediocre and totally uncalled-for in its manner.” Suggesting British duplicity, Attal also said it “doesn’t correspond at all” with discussions that Johnson and Macron had Wednes- day after the sinking of an inflatable craft laden with migrants off the northern French coast.

“We are sick of double-speak,” Attal said.

And he dismissed Johnson’s proposal that France take back migrants who cross illegally to British shores as “clearly not what we need to solve this problem.”

Thousands of protesters take to the streets to renew their demand for a civilian government in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, on Thursday.

Osman Ali/AP

 Thousands of protesters take to the streets to renew their demand for a civilian government in the Sudanese capi- tal Khartoum, on Thursday.
Solomon Islands riots fade, stress lingers

Associated Press
CANBERRA, Australia — Violence receded Friday in the capital of the Solomon Islands, but the government showed no signs of addressing the underlying grievances that sparked two days of riots, including concerns about the country’s increasing links with China.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare sought to deflect attention from domestic issues by blaming outside interference for stirring up the protesters, with a thinly veiled reference to Taiwan and the United States.

External pressures were a “very big … influence. I don’t want to name names. We’ll leave it there,” Sogavare said.

Honiana’s Chinatown and its downtown precinct were focuses of rioters, looters and protesters who demanded the resignation of Sogavare, who has been prime minister intermittently since 2000.

Sogavare has been widely criticized by leaders of the country’s most populous island of Malaita for a 2019 decision to drop diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of mainland China. His government, meanwhile, has been upset over corruption and Chinese businesses giving jobs to foreigners instead of locals.

Protesters break into Lebanese ministry as economic crisis rises

Associated Press
BEIRUT — A small group of protesters broke into a ministry building in Beirut early Friday and removed a photo of the president from one of its main rooms, as the Lebanese pound hit new lows amid a worsening economic and political stalemate.

The nearly dozen protesters who entered the Ministry of Social Affairs said conditions in the crisis-hit country have become unbearable as a result of the rapid economic collapse and ongoing crash of the pound, which reached 35,000 to the U.S. dollar. The previous record was 25,000.

Prices have been skyrocketing in recent weeks as the government lifted subsidies on fuel and some medicines, making them out of reach of many in Lebanon.

The minimum monthly wage is now worth about $27.

The protesters were referring to the start of nationwide protests on Oct. 17, 2019 against the country’s ruling class. They are blamed for decades of corruption and mismanagement that threw the small nation into its worst economic and financial crisis in its modern history.

“Those who usurped public money cannot conduct reforms,” shouted one of the protesters before leaving the building following police intervention. “We have hit rock bottom. Things cannot get worse.”

The crisis has been made worse by the coronavirus and the Aug. 4, 2020, port blast that killed 216, wounded more than 6,000 and destroyed part of the capital.

In other parts of the country, protesters placed posters that read “the mafia that destroyed the Lebanese pound” outside some branches of local banks, state-run National News Agency said.

1 rescued in Russia coal mine accident

Associated Press
MOSCOW — Rescuers have found a survivor in a Siberian coal mine where dozens of miners are presumed dead after a devastating methane explosion, a top local official announced Friday.

Sergei Tsvilyov, governor of the Kemerovo region where the mine is located, said on the messaging app Telegram that the survivor was found in the Listvyazhnaya mine in southwestern Siberia, and “he is being taken to the hospital.”

Acting Emergency Minister Alexander Chupriyan said the man found in the mine was rescuer Alexander Zakovryashin who had been presumed dead. “I can consider it a miracle,” Chupriyan said.

Zakovryashin was conscious when rescuers found him and has been hospitalized with carbon monoxide poisoning of moderate severity, according to emergency officials.

The authorities had confirmed 14 fatalities on Thursday — 11 miners were found dead and three rescuers died later while searching for others who were trapped at a remote section of the mine. Six more bodies were recovered on Friday morning, and 31 people remain missing.

Gov. Tsvilyov said finding other survivors at this point was highly unlikely.

Hours after a methane gas explosion and fire filled the mine with toxic fumes on Thursday, rescuers were forced to halt the search because of a buildup of methane and carbon monoxide gas from the fire. A total of 239 people were rescued from the mine; 63 of them, as of Friday morning, have sought medical assistance, according to Kemerovo officials.

Authorities have put the death toll at 52 on Thursday evening, saying that there was no chance of finding any more survivors. Rescuers have found 55 bodies, the report said.

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"So everyone’s pointing fingers, but some fingers also need to be pointed at the political leaders of the Solomon Islands."

The Solomon Islands, with a population of about 700,000, are located about 1,000 miles northeast of Australia. Internationally they are probably still best known for the bloody fighting that took place there during World War II between the United States and Japan.

Riots and looting erupted Wednesday out of a peaceful protest in Honiara, primarily of people from Malaita demonstrating over a number of grievances. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the demonstrators, who set fire to the National Parliament, a police station and many other buildings.

Protesters defied a lockdown declared by Sogavare on Wednesday to take to the streets again on Thursday.

Critics also blamed the unrest on complaints of a lack of government services and accountability, corruption and Chinese businesses giving jobs to foreigners instead of locals.
AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Fire unveils thousands of illegal marijuana plants

CA REDLANDS — Authorities said they found more than 11,000 marijuana plants at an illegal growing operation Wednesday after one of the buildings caught fire.

The blaze was reported at about 4:30 a.m. on San Timoteo Canyon Road in Redlands, east of Los Angeles. Firefighters needed about an hour to douse the flames and they discovered the marijuana operation, police said.

The blaze apparently started in a living section of an outbuilding that was gutted and a second outbuilding was damaged, police said.

Marijuana plants were found in the second building and thousands more were in a third building that wasn't damaged, police said.

Police photos showed rows of plants in containers inside a building that appeared to have a sophisticated growing system.

Man arrested for carrying gun in sheriff's office

AZ ARIZONA CITY — An Arizona City man who is prohibited from carrying guns was arrested for allegedly bringing a firearm into a sheriff's substation.

Authorities allege the 38-year-old man entered the sheriff's substation in Arizona City to report to a harassment complaint that had been filed against him. Staff noticed he was carrying a handgun in his front pocket near his waist, which he gave to a deputy upon request.

The deputy later discovered the man was not allowed to carry guns, and the man allegedly admitted to having several prior felony convictions that prohibit firearm possession unless he gets his civil rights restored, the Arizona City Independent reported.

Prosecutors drop 33 more cases over thefts

NE LINCOLN — The number of criminal cases that have been dismissed because of the theft of $1.2 million worth of drugs from the Nebraska State Patrol evidence room has grown to nearly 100.

The Lincoln Journal-Star reports that prosecutors in Lincoln have dropped another 33 felony cases, adding to the 66 dismissals that occurred before the end of October.

And more could be coming as 13 other counties in the region undertake reviews.

On Sept. 24, Lincoln Police and the head of the Nebraska State Patrol, Col. John Bolduc, announced the arrest of a former State Patrol evidence technician, Anna Idigwe, who they alleged conspired with her boyfriend, George Weaver Jr., to sell drugs stolen from the evidence room.

Chief Deputy Lancaster County Attorney Bruce Prenda said attorney next year to a review of 117 closed cases.

Lancaster County Public Defender Joe Ngro said those cases could include people still serving sentences. If so, attorneys in his office may soon be filing post-conviction motions to vacate their sentences.

To grandmother's house we go

Maggie Breen, 14, from Brattleboro, Vt., takes her horse on a 4½-mile ride through the backroads of Brattleboro to get to her grandmother's house for Thanksgiving on Wednesday. Breen said she wanted to ride to her grandmother's house on a horse for the past year.

The Census

$10K

The amount of cash a historically Black medical college in Tennessee is giving students as an early Thanksgiving gift.

Meharry Medical College President James E.K. Hildreth announced the gift. The money comes from the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, part of a federal coronavirus aid package. Schools across the country have used their money to wipe out student debts, offer free tuition and give cash grants such as the one at Meharry. In a video message to the Nashville school's 956 students, Hildreth said they can manage their money however they choose, but he strongly urged them to use it for their education and training.

$1K reward is offered for stolen dog collar

OH MARION — A radio station serving U.S. President Warren G. Harding's Ohio hometown says a reward of $1,000 is offered by one of its listeners is providing new hope of finding a long lost dog collar stolen from his historic home.

Scott Spears, host of a morning radio show on WVGH-FM in Marion, near the 29th president's birthplace, said the donor of the $1,000 reward asked to remain anonymous. Spears told listeners of the offer on "Now With Scott Spears" last week.

He said the station has deposited the money in a local bank and will act as an intermediary on any tips offered to solve the mystery.

The antique collar belonged to Harding's Airedale terrier. It was the only thing stolen from his historic home.

Made in 1923, the collar has the name "Adder" engraved on it in raised letters surrounded by hearts.
Santa’s wish list for safety

Wary of COVID, many mall Kris Kringle will still be masked, distanced this year

By Leanne Italie
Associated Press

Santa is back this year, but he pleads caution as he continues to tiptoe through the pandemic.

“Be smart. Be caring. If you have the tiniest tickle in your throat, the tiniest feeling, worry about yourself and worry about everybody else, and know Santa will always be there next year,” said 57-year-old Kevin Chesney, who’s been donning the big red suit since he was a kid. Amid a downturn in jolly old elves — about 15% fewer in one large database — Chesney is busier than ever from his North Pole in Moorristown, N.J. The photo studio where he works quickly sold out its 4,500 appointments to sit with him and the seven other Santas in the studio’s stable.

“They’re among the brave in Santa’s ranks with full-contact visits, lap sitting included, though Chesney wears a mask until just before the photos are taken.

Other Santas might not be wearing masks or plastic face shields, or hanging out in protective snow globes like many did last year, but it seems 50-50 this season that they’re not quite ready for hugs, whispers in their ears for secret wishes and kids crying or sobbing on their knees.

Some Santas will remain behind barriers that popped up last year for safety. At Minnesota’s Mall of America, the big man will be housed in a log cabin behind a window with guests seated on benches in front of him. At 169 locations for the outdoor retailers Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s, benches will also be used, with plastic partitions deployed at some stores for Santa’s photo ops.

Other retailers and Santa hosts are offering the option of no or full contact, even when appointments to dates aren’t in place. And many require or encourage reservations online to cut down on the number of people waiting.

More than 10 million U.S. households visited Santa in a mall or store in 2019, according to GlobalData Retail’s managing director, Neil Saunders. Nearly 73% of them also spent money at nearby restaurants or stores, he said. Last year, the company’s research found that 6.1 million households visited Santa, with fewer retailers and malls offering the holiday star in person. Of those visitors, 62% ate or shopped nearby.

Saunders said projections this year have about 8.9 million households expected to visit Santa in person, with virtual visits still a big option.

“Lingering concerns about the virus and ongoing restrictions in some states and localities continue to act as a brake on visiting Santa in person,” he said.

Chris Landtroop, a spokeswoman for Santa vendor Cherry Hill Programs, is optimistic. The new rollout of vaccinations for children 5 to 11 will certainly help.

“Santa is so back and we are super excited about that. Last year was incredibly tough,” Landtroop said.

The company has been sourcing Santas all year for the 800 malls, big-box stores and other locations it serves, with options for no-contact visits, too. Cherry Hill requires its Santas and other employees to be vaccinated and those with exemptions to be tested regularly.

“%At the end of the day, we want guests to feel comfortable,” Landtroop said.

Luther Landon has been providing the Santa Experience at Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn., for nearly two decades. Last year, he hit on the log cabin idea but was shut down after a day due to the pandemic. He pivoted to virtual Santa and this year will offer both.

“We think that it would be very irresponsible of us to just ignore it and pretend like everything’s back to normal,” he said of the pandemic. “We’ve hidden some microphones so Santa can hear just fine. I know from our Santa community and knowing so many other Santas that the majority of them are reluctant, highly reluctant, to go back to the way it was before the pandemic. But we also have some who are just like, you know what, I don’t care. Having both of those groups is what’s happening in the country, too.”

Russell Hurd in Roxye City, Texas, has been playing Santa since 2017, after he retired from the Army. He’ll be in his red suit to go with his long — and very real — white beard at the Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center near Dallas. His visits with the throngs are distanced and masks are required. He longs for that to end.

“The way it used to be, it’s meaningful for us Santas, too. I mean, we’re human beings. We crave that interaction, but for now we do what we can,” Hurd said.

Hurd is unvaccinated and tests regularly for COVID-19.

“I know a lot of unvaccinated Santas across the country. I mean, it’s not just Texas,” he said.

Count American Dream, a mega mall of 3 million square feet in East Rutherford, N.J., is among retailers offering distanced Santa. He’ll be on ice, skating the indoor rink with visitors, and also topping around with guests in hot pink golf carts.

At Macy’s stores, Santa will be making his list and checking it twice from behind a desk, with guests seated on the other side.

“We’re encouraging everyone to maintain masking throughout their visits,” said Kathleen Wright, senior manager at Macy’s Branded Entertainment. “Santa has been a part of the Macy’s tradition since 1862, so we’re overjoyed that we can safely continue the tradition this year.”

At Oakbrook Center, a mall in suburban Chicago owned by Brookfield Properties, Santa’s spot is a tricked-out motor home with his fans allowed inside. Santa will be at 117 of 132 malls Brookfield owns in 43 states. The company is following local mandates on safety protocols but will distance anyone who asks. The same goes for CBL Properties, which owns 63 malls in 24 states and offered Santa visits from a safe distance last year.

“We’re bringing back a more traditional Santa experience this year,” said CBL spokesman Stacey Keating. “Visitors who wish to do so will be able to sit on Santa’s lap or on Santa’s bench. Masks will not be required at the set or during photos unless there’s a local mandate in place.”

And bonus: “We’re also bringing back pet photo nights with Santa,” she said, “as well as Santa Cares, a reservation-only event that caters to those with sensory sensitivities and for whom the traditional experience may be too overwhelming.”

The pandemic has taken its toll on Santa in other ways.

Stephen Arnold, the 71-year-old head of IBRBS (formerly the International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas) said his organization of about 2,000 Santas and Mrs. Clauses has lost 57 Santas to COVID-19.

“Most of us are overweight, diabetic, with heart conditions,” said Arnold, a long-time Santa working this year both virtually and in person in Memphis, Tenn.

“I mean, we’re prime targets for a disease like COVID.”
Lin-Manuel Miranda draws from cross-cultural influences to become one of Disney’s go-to songwriters

Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote eight songs for “Encanto,” told a collaborator that he wanted to write the definitive Latin America Disney musical.

There’s more to “Encanto” than meets the eye. A sleeper hit of the holidays, the film’s songs have grated into the nostalgia playlist of many Millennials and Zoomers, a fact that was not lost on the man who started writing them — Lin-Manuel Miranda.

The film’s score is a near perfect marriage of cross-cultural influences, a character arc that undercuts itself, and a sense that the action of the film is driven by the music itself. It’s a rare feat for a modern animated musical, and it’s all thanks to Miranda, who has become one of Disney’s go-to songwriters. Before he was even a consultant on the project, the filmmaker asked Miranda to pen songs for the film. And while the results have been mixed, the project has allowed Miranda to flex his creative muscles in a number of ways.

Miranda was introduced to Disney by his wife, actress Carmen Ejogo, who had worked on the film’s soundtrack. They met at a party, and Miranda was immediately drawn to the project, which explores the story of a family who possesses extraordinary gifts but must learn to use them for the good of the community.

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But he realized early on that the project was not just about writing songs, but also about creating a world that was true to the cultures represented in the story. And he knew that in order to do that, he had to learn about the cultures that he was representing.

He started by researching the culture of the story, which is set in the Andes, a region of Colombia that is known for its rich musical traditions. He then began writing songs that reflected the culture, and he worked closely with the filmmakers to make sure that the songs were authentic.

The result is a film that is both charming and moving, and that has resonated with audiences around the world. And it’s all thanks to Miranda, who has shown that he is more than just a singer — he is a writer, a director, and a storyteller.

Miranda is now working on a new project, and he is already planning his next move. He is determined to continue to push the boundaries of what he can do, and he is eager to see where the future takes him.

But for now, he is enjoying the success of “Encanto,” and he is grateful for the opportunity to work with such talented people. He is looking forward to seeing what the future holds, and he is excited to see where his career takes him next.
Sometimes, gifting is a crap shoot. You dig around and hope for the best, and you just might come up with gold.

Here’s some serendipitous inspiration for those in need:

**VAN LIFE:** Whether in vans, campers or school buses, the pandemic grew a new crop of folks who took off on wheels after tricking out their rides. Why not gift a van-life adventure? A company outside Boston, Walden Campervans, has nicely done rentals with solar and hot water systems — and plenty of add-ons, including toilets. One of their rides is pet-friendly with a cozy crate. Gift cards can be had and never expire. A three-night minimum rental is required. The maximum is 30 days. No one-way trips. Prices are generally in the $300-a-night range, depending on van, season and extras. Waldencampervans.com.

**ANIMATRONIC PETS:** Isolation, loneliness, cognitive decline. The pandemic hasn’t been easy on anybody, including dementia patients. Why not give a gift of companionship with an animatronic dog or cat? Research is encouraging that such toys can do a world of good without the responsibility of a real pet. One brand, Ageless Innovation, offers several with built-in sensors that respond to motion and touch. The heartbeat can be felt and their coats are lifelike. The cats purr and the dogs can bark back in response to a voice. Dogs are $139.99 and cats $124.99. Kids might like them, too. Joyforall.com.

**CARGO BIKES** (above): They’re the rage among climate lovers the world over, or parents looking for a new way to haul both groceries and kids. Amsterdam-based Urban Arrow has a nice selection of electric cargo bikes, from the huge, three-wheeled Tender (can carry a boatload) to the compact yet still useful Shorty. Add-on accessories include rain covers, a poncho that connects to the rain covers, and a baby seat adapter with suspension to smooth out bumps. Sold through a network of dealers. These things are heavy and pricey — $6,000 to $7,000 for the Family model, depending on the motor — but may please just the right giftee. Urbanarrow.com.

**BLACK HAIR:** “There is something radical about loving your hair in a world that tells you not to; it shows an incredible amount of strength and self-love.” So wrote St. Clair Detrick-Jules in the introduction to her book, “My Beautiful Black Hair.” The film-maker and photographer turned to friends and strangers for 101 natural hair journeys. The book is part love letter to her younger sister, Khloe, who struggled after white classmates called her hair ugly. Detrick-Jules combines the candid portraits she took and narratives she collected with letters of inspiration to her sibling written by some of the women. Chronical Books. $24.95.

Gifts that run the gamut from van adventures to James Bond
Gamut: Consider hot sauce and self-heating coffee cans

FROM PAGE 14

HOT SAUCE: Alice Cooper and hot sauce is a pairing that doesn’t roll off the tongue, but in the world of celebrity deals in the food and beverage industry, why not the 73-year-old rocker? Turns out, the OG has always been something of a hot sauce fan and was hands-on in developing three of his own named for some of his hits: Welcome to My Nightmare (mild), Poison (reaper hot) and No More Mr. Nice Guy (medium). Cooper’s favorite part of the process? “Tasting the sauces as we went along to get them right,” he said via email. Made from reaper peppers, one of the hottest around. $29.95 for all three. Also sold separately. UnitedSauces.com, TheChivery.com and other top retailers.

HUES & CUES: This vibrant, color-guessing game took flight on TikTok and has made its way into the hearts of families. It’s also a great party game. A cue master pulls a card and lends clues on one of 480 hues displayed on the board without using the actual names of primary colors. So no red, blue, yellow, etc. Play takes about 30 minutes for three to 10 people. It looks complicated but is amazingly simple — for folks with vocabularies that differentiate hues, anyway. Guessing “grape” or “apple” won’t get the job done. $24.99 from The Op. Widely available.


HYDROW ROWER: The company that makes this high-end home rowing machine calls it the Peloton of rowers. It’s sleek, quiet and — for $38 a month — comes with a Peloton-like membership full of pre-loaded watery workouts and live events displayed on a 22-inch touchscreen. It’s heavy at 145 pounds but folds upright for storage with the help of a kit, sold separately. It uses an electromagnetic fabric strip as the drag mechanism to simulate the pull of water. The drag is screen controlled. It requires Wi-Fi but is not enabled for third-party apps like Netflix or Spotify. $2,295 with free standard delivery included. Hydrow.com.

HIGH BREW: You may have heard of this Austin, Texas-based company selling cold brew coffee in cans, but you might not be familiar with its self-heating version. The can uses a solid-state chemical reaction to warm the liquid. Simply twist the bottom of the can, wait two minutes and shake gently three times to distribute the heat. Pull the tab on the lid, which looks like a regular go cup top, and enjoy. $20 for a four-pack. Six packs are $30. Highbrew.com.


THEO GEAR: Until we meet again, Ted Lasso, Warner Bros. Consumer Products has a shop full of gift options for the super fan. There’s the AFC Richmond V-neck sweater for $59.95, a team jersey for the same price, and a nice selection of hoodies, shorts, T-shirts and accessories, from socks to a “Be a Goldfish” mug. Go to the Ted Lasso shop at Wbshop.com while we wait for Season 3 of the Apple TV+ hit show.
**A universe of things to be thankful for**

**By David Von Drehle**

_The Washington Post_

When I was a boy, my large family passed a spoon around the table after Thanksgiving feast. Each in turn, we held the utensil like a microphone and declared what we were thankful for. Today, I can have these words, more or less, as my spoon, and I’m thankful to all who do me the honor of reading. Especially those regulars who endure the duds, the errors in typing, the disagreement. Let us all participate with me in this communication of writer and reader.

I remain thankful for the things I mentioned half a century ago. A home to live in. Food to eat. Mom and Dad, long gone from the holiday table but frequent visitors to my thoughts and dreams. Raising my own kids has opened my eyes to how utterly unprepared parents are; each child is unprepared. We don’t shape them so much as we discover them, and try to do as little damage as possible in the process. I would have more forgiven than I had realized how often I would end up seeking forgiveness.

Robert Emmons is a leader in the emerging science of gratitude. Research done by Emmons and others confirms what many of us already know: gratitude makes us feel more pleasant, less overwhelmed by stress. The act of writing down blessings in a daily journal is linked to lower blood pressure, a faster heart rate, fewer symptoms of depression.

Though I am a journalist, I’ve never been a journalist. Rather than write out my gratitude, I endeavor to make it my first effort of each day, sitting in the edge of the bed, clearing the cobwebs just after the alarm. I’m back for another day, I tell myself. “Every morning began with infinite promise,” Robert D. Richardson wrote of Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Any book may be read, any idea thought, any action taken. Anything that has ever been possible to human beings is possible to us every time the clock says six in the morning. On a day different from the one now breaking, Shakespeare sat down to begin Hamlet.”

I am thankful for such days, each one a chance to do better. Although I don’t plan to read Sonnets, I am grateful to William Shakespeare, a world that shares with Shakespeare, with Toni Morrison, with a glorious novelist new to me named Anne Griffin. It’s a world supplied with precisely the right amount of gravity and atmosphere, enough water and sunlight but not too much of either. Scientists have gazed thousands of light-years in search of another such place, and still, this is the only one for sure, a beautiful lifeboat in an oceanic emptiness. I’m grateful to all who are working to preserve it.

One recent morning as I opened my bleary eyes, I thought how lucky I am to have them. These exquisite organs through which energy moves in tiny waves — billions of a meter from wave peak to wave peak — registers light waves. Considering the infinitesimal differences in wavelength, the eye sorts the entire visible spectrum and renders every shade of every sunspot, every mountain peak and sea-kissed beach, every leaping ballerina, every scrabbling quarterback and the welcome in every loved one’s face.

I listened to my wife’s breathing and felt thankful for her. These improbable conceptions — tiny chambers of flesh membrane, tiny bones and tubes of liquid — somehow transmit longer waves of energy to form all the blessings of sound, from Beethoven to Gladys Knight, from a baby’s laughter to the thunder and patter of a rainstorm.

Two eyes and two ears: four miracles in the first 10 seconds of my day. Yet consider the wisdom of Helen Keller, who lost both sight and hearing only to absorb from her teacher that “the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched, but just felt in the heart.” Keller’s life teaches that gratitude is a muscle. It strengthens us with use. Emmons has found that grateful people ripen even in hardship. They are energized by adversity. They grow deeper through loss.

Ultimately, gratitude is somehow linked with hope and hope is the prerequisite of action. One must be grateful for the earth before one can save it. One must be thankful for beauty before one can spread it. Science shows that pleasure is fleeting, so an ungrateful person can have all the wealth dreams of, and bask in it for an hour, yet feel empty again tomorrow.

By contrast, gratitude can make a legacy from almost nothing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned and ultimately martyred by the Nazis, left riches to the world. “In ordinary life,” he observed, “we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.”

_Happy Thanksgiving._

_Washington Post columnist David Von Drehle is the author of _Triangile: The Fire That Changed America._

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**Taking time to reflect can benefit weary caregivers**

**By Peter Rosener**

_Chicago Tribune_

While the public face of Thanksgiving projects a Norman Rockwell painting, stress and anxiety can be a daily companion of the holiday for many of America’s millions of family caregivers.

Numerous caregivers fear that this may be the last Thanksgiving with their loved ones. Others feel obliged to get it right and make sure all traditions are followed. Underestimating everything lies an ample supply of guilt over missteps and things undone.

Fear and guilt surround those caring for chronically impaired loved ones. Caregivers often find themselves caring into the darkness of isolation, resentment and responsibility.

Caregivers too often send us into warp speed. The faster the pace, however, the worse the collateral. Caregivers essentially have earned the right to do all things, to live in the present, deal with the moment, make sure all traditions are followed. Unprepared, untrained caregivers often envision the crash before it happens and choose to live in future wreckage.

Like an amputee with phantom pain from a limb no longer there, caregivers hurt in reverse, and act to get to — or indeed may never happen. Slowing down allows us to live in the present, deal with the moment, and respond without reacting.

Drivers using high beam lights in a fog quickly find themselves blinded by the glare. Trying to peer too far ahead does the same for caregivers. With compromised vision and a treacherous road, the rule of thumb is “to go at the speed you’re comfortable slamming into the ditch at.” The hustle of shopping and attempting to fulfill every request by a loved one leads caregivers to drive recklessly until the inevitable occurs, driving tardi or safely always trusts burning in the cab of a tow truck or the back of an ambulance. If the pace of the holiday causes us to plop down at the table — not the menu or the venue.

Not only millions of family caregivers daily face severe challenges, but they also struggle against lapsing into self-pity and anger. Caregiving is one of the greatest stressors one can face, and it is an act of courage, patience, and perseverance.

Many caregivers take a break on this Thanksgiving day — not the menu or the venue. At this year’s table — whether in the dining room, a restaurant, diner, hospital, rehab center or hospice — grab the hand next to yours a bit tighter. If alone, clasp your own as you give thanks. Take an extra moment to identify one thing for which to be grateful if it helps, use the alphabet, and find something that starts with “A.” Identify something or someone that begins with each successive letter and offer thanks. In only a matter of moments, watch how your demeanor changes, your stress level lowers, and your heart receives the air it needs so desperately.

Grief and gratitude are not mutually exclusive — and postponing either only diminishes one’s quality of life. While the heartache associated with caregiving seems to leave little room for feeling grateful, even dire circumstances cannot drive away all beauty or soul-stirring moments. Gratitude defines the Thanksgiving holiday — not the menu or the venue.

This year’s table setting includes a universe of things to be thankful for. A universe of things to be thankful for.
1 Confronted
6 Pester
12 Teeny
13 Heeded
14 For now
15 Heated (up)
16 Hereditary unit
17 Morays
19 Unpaid TV ad
20 Authentic
22 Mound stat
24 Physique
27 Recognized
29 Jazz singer James
32 Alvin Ailey, for one
35 Designer Chanel
36 Bar
37 NFL measures
38 Half a ton
40 Fed. accident investigator
42 TV’s Romano
44 Against
46 Bern’s river
50 Delphi figure
52 Type of acid
54 High nests
55 Cave
56 Speed checkers
57 Feel

ACROSS

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13 Heeded
14 For now
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DOWN

1 Blaze
2 Shortly
3 More darling
4 Summer in Arles
5 Carriage
6 Wolf’s cry
7 Humiliate
8 Sun. talk
9 Tea’s companion
10 Sediment
11 Icelandic saga
12 Fuel stat
13 Flush
14 For now
15 Pester
16 Hereditary unit
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11-27 CRYPTOQUIP

“BDRRTIQ GZ ECI QGGB” MGZK
RDQISEIR VE ECI FDTTUKI’M
SVEQGKQVWCIQ: “YV WYVHIQ, YWYVHIQ.”

Yesterday’s Cryptoquip: A NOVICE GUITAR STUDENT SENT A MESSAGE TO A PROFESSIONAL PLAYER SAYING “I NEED STRUM ADVICE.”

Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: Y equals M
Thursday's scores

SOUTH Alabama St. 70, Mississippi St. 71
Fresno St. 40, San Jose St. 9

SOUTHEAST Navy (2-6) at Georgia Tech (6-9)
Wake Forest (9-2) at Boston College (6-10)
Houston (10-3) at UConn (10-3)
Louisiana-Lafayette (2-11) at South Carolina (11-2)
W. Kentucky (7-4) at Marshall (7-4)
Charlottesville (6-9) at Duke (8-5)
Georgia Southern (3-9) at Appalachian St. (2-10)
CU (1-0) at Southern Miss. (2-9)
Vanderbilt (2-11) at Tennessee (9-4)
Virginia Tech (5-6) at Virginia (6-8)
Clemson-Montreal (4-7) at South Carolina (7-7)

Thursday's college basketball.

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No Thanksgiving benchmark

**BY STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

Bruce Boudreau does not believe in the NHL’s Thanksgiving rule.

Which teams occupied playoff spots on the annual U.S. holiday had long been a strong indicator of who makes and misses the postseason. Recent 82-game seasons have put cracks in that theory, and a number of high-profile injuries and COVID-19 protocol absences make it even less of a factor this year.

“It’s an inordinate amount of injuries that seems to (happen) every day and with the COVID and everything else, the deadline seems a little premature, I would think,” Boudreau said. “But you’re asking the wrong guy. I’ve always believed you could make the play-offs.”

Boudreau coached the Anaheim Ducks to the Pacific Division title in 2015-16 after sitting four points out of a playoff spot on Thanksgiving. He also took over the Washington Capitals when they were last in the league on Thanksgiving in 2007 and won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the year for guiding them to the Southeast Division championship.

Is there a team that could pull off a similar worst-to-first run this season? Maybe the New York Islanders from last place in the Metropolitan Division — considering they opened with a 13-game road swing in February — and will they get it?

New York Islanders left wing Matt Martin says there isn’t a sense of panic about the Islanders being last in the Metropolitan Division. “But there should be a sense of urgency. We know we’re a good hockey club.”

Ray Ferraro is more worried about the Islanders than, say, the Pittsburgh Penguins, who also lost 10 of their first 15 games without center Evgeni Malkin and were missing captain Sidney Crosby for long stretches before a winning streak boosted their chances. The former player-turned-ESPN analyst thinks the offseason attrition and a number of high-profile injuries and COVID-19 absences make it even less of a factor this year.

“I’ve got to believe the Islanders are better than their record shows,” Boudreau said. “That’s a team that can easily go on a seven-game win streak over the course of the year and be right back.”

If the Islanders or Boston in the East or Colorado in the West are going to get into playoff position, someone has to falter. Maybe the young Rangers or Blue Jackets in the East or Anaheim or Nashville in the West.

“It’s going to be hard for Anaheim to make as big a step as they’ve taken already apparently in the first 20 games,” Ferraro said. “Troy Terry’s not going to score every game, although it sure seems like he’s going to. They’re going to need offense past that top line, and will they get it?”

The past two times the NHL had an 82-game season, teams in playoff position on Thanksgiving actually made the postseason in 2015-16 and 2017-18, including the Vegas Golden Knights in their inaugural year. The expansion Seattle Kraken would need a Boudreau-esque leap from 10 points out to do the same thing.

That’s unlikely but not impossible given all the uncertainty and the extra variable of the Olympic break in February.

“I think there’s an unpredictability to the season,” Ferraro said. “I think there’s some wild swings that could happen to teams, more so this year than would have been in the past.”

**Ovi 31-for-31**

Alex Ovechkin’s goal against the Kraken on Sunday completed his sweep of scoring against each of the NHL’s other 31 teams. The Washington Capitals captain has his most against the Tampa Bay Lightning: 49 in 74 regular-season games.

**Game of the week**

The Rangers visit Boston for the NHL’s annual “Thanksgiving Showdown” matinee on Friday.

**AROUND THE LEAGUE**

**Scores**

**Sunday’s games**

Washington at Carolina

Tampa Bay at Minnesota

N.Y. Islanders at N.Y. Rangers

Philadelphia at New Jersey

San Jose at Chicago

Vancouver at Boston

Toronto at Anaheim

**Scoring leaders**

**Through Thursday**

Leon Draisaitl, EDM 19 3 17 3 20 4 20 40

Connor McDavid, EDM 19 3 17 3 20 4 20 40

Alex Ovechkin, WSH 20 15 18 33

Nemaz Kadri, COL 16 7 18 25

Evgeny Kuznetsov, WSH 20 7 17 24

Johnny Gaudreau, CGY 20 9 14 23

Ellis Lindholm, CGY 19 8 12 22

Steven Stamkos, TB 18 10 12 22

Tray Terry, ANA 19 12 10 22

Kyle Connor, WPG 19 10 10 22

**No Thanksgiving benchmark**

Injuries, COVID-19 throw wrench into usual comparison

**By Stephen Whyno**

Associated Press

Bruce Boudreau does not believe in the NHL’s Thanksgiving rule.

Which teams occupied playoff spots on the annual U.S. holiday had long been a strong indicator of who makes and misses the postseason. Recent 82-game seasons have put cracks in that theory, and a number of high-profile injuries and COVID-19 protocol absences make it even less of a factor this year.

“It’s an inordinate amount of injuries that seems to (happen) every day and with the COVID and everything else, the deadline seems a little premature, I would think,” Boudreau said. “But you’re asking the wrong guy. I’ve always believed you could make the play-offs.”

Boudreau coached the Anaheim Ducks to the Pacific Division title in 2015-16 after sitting four points out of a playoff spot on Thanksgiving. He also took over the Washington Capitals when they were last in the league on Thanksgiving in 2007 and won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the year for guiding them to the Southeast Division championship.

Is there a team that could pull off a similar worst-to-first run this season? Maybe the New York Islanders from last place in the Metropolitan Division — considering they opened with a 13-game road swing in February — and will they get it?

New York Islanders left wing Matt Martin says there isn’t a sense of panic about the Islanders being last in the Metropolitan Division. “But there should be a sense of urgency. We know we’re a good hockey club.”

Ray Ferraro is more worried about the Islanders than, say, the Pittsburgh Penguins, who also lost 10 of their first 15 games without center Evgeni Malkin and were missing captain Sidney Crosby for long stretches before a winning streak boosted their chances. The former player-turned-ESPN analyst thinks the offseason attrition and a number of high-profile injuries and COVID-19 absences make it even less of a factor this year.

“I’ve got to believe the Islanders are better than their record shows,” Boudreau said. “That’s a team that can easily go on a seven-game win streak over the course of the year and be right back.”

If the Islanders or Boston in the East or Colorado in the West are going to get into playoff position, someone has to falter. Maybe the young Rangers or Blue Jackets in the East or Anaheim or Nashville in the West.

“It’s going to be hard for Anaheim to make as big a step as they’ve taken already apparently in the first 20 games,” Ferraro said. “Troy Terry’s not going to score every game, although it sure seems like he’s going to. They’re going to need offense past that top line, and will they get it?”

The past two times the NHL had an 82-game season, teams in playoff position on Thanksgiving actually made the postseason in 2015-16 and 2017-18, including the Vegas Golden Knights in their inaugural year. The expansion Seattle Kraken would need a Boudreau-esque leap from 10 points out to do the same thing.

That’s unlikely but not impossible given all the uncertainty and the extra variable of the Olympic break in February.

“I think there’s an unpredictability to the season,” Ferraro said. “I think there’s some wild swings that could happen to teams, more so this year than would have been in the past.”

**Ovi 31-for-31**

Alex Ovechkin’s goal against the Kraken on Sunday completed his sweep of scoring against each of the NHL’s other 31 teams. The Washington Capitals captain has his most against the Tampa Bay Lightning: 49 in 74 regular-season games.

**Game of the week**

The Rangers visit Boston for the NHL’s annual “Thanksgiving Showdown” matinee on Friday.
Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Nelly Joseph and Walter Clayton Jr. made key free throws in the final seconds to lift Iona over No. 10 Alabama 72-68 in an opening-round game at the ESPN Events Invitational on Thursday night.

Clayton got an offensive rebound and made one of two free throws to make it 70-68 with 20 seconds left. After Jahvon Quinerly missed a shot for Alabama, Joseph secured the win with two free throws with 9 seconds remaining.

Tyson Jolly had 13 points, Elijah Joiner 12 and Quinn Slazinski 11 for Iona (6-6). Alabama (4-1) got 19 points from Jaden Shackelford. Quinerly added 18 points and eight rebounds for USC (4-0).

Michigan State 64, No. 22 Connecticut 60: At Paradise Island, Bahamas, A.J. Hoggard hit 10-minute span in the second half, carrying a 10-point margin heading into the final minutes.

Chevez Goodwin had 10 points and eight rebounds for USC (4-0). MikeObi was 9-for-13 from the field and finished with a career-high 18 points and 10 rebounds for Saint Joseph’s (2-2). Taylor Funk added 12 points and eight rebounds.

Mississippi running back Snoop Conner, right, runs past Mississippi State safety Fred Peters during the second half of their game Thursday in Starkville, Miss. The Rebels won 31-21.

By Chris Burrows

STARKVILLE, Miss. — Snoop Conner ran for two touchdowns and No. 8 Mississippi scored 21 straight points to beat Mississippi State 31-21 on Thursday night in a windy, rainy and cold Egg Bowl.

“Let me say it right now. Ole Miss has a defense,” Mississippi coach Lane Kiffin said. “It wasn’t easy. But our players found a way to win and that’s what matters. We’re at 10 wins and that sounds really cool.”

“Snoop Conner ran for a touchdown and passed for 229 yards to help Ole Miss (10-2, 6-2 Southeastern Conference) overcome an early 6-3 deficit for a 24-6 lead early in the fourth quarter. Corral was 25-for-33 with an interception.

“I was with this team when we were 5-5 and we had losing records. It was in us. We just needed people to bring it out of us,” Corral said. “We bonded together and we’re stronger. And it shows.”

The Rebels had 388 yards of total offense, with Conner scoring twice on 1-yard runs during the decisive outburst. He rushed for 60 yards on 16 carries.

Donatario Drummond had 13 receptions for 133 yards, and Jerrion Ealy scored on a 15-yard run to make it 31-13 with 5:35 left.

Mississippi State’s Will Rogers was 38-for-58 for 336 yards and an 11-yard touchdown pass to Jaden Walley in the fourth quarter. The Bulldogs (7-5, 4-4) added an 11-yard touchdown run by Jo’quavious Marks with 2:27 remaining, but could not pull within single digits.

“The stat sheet looks pretty good,” Mississippi State coach Mike Leach said. “We played hard. But they made more key plays and that’s the difference.”

The Bulldogs had 420 yards of total offense, primarily in the final period in the belated rally, but had trouble translating yards into points.

Vital series

Trailing 10-6 in the second period, Mississippi State missed an opportunity to take the lead before halftime, dropping three potential touchdown passes. Lideatrick Griffin and Jo’quavious Marks could not hold on to accurate tosses from Rogers inside the red zone, followed by a missed field-goal attempt. The empty scoring drive loomed large as Ole Miss built a 24-6 cushion early in the fourth quarter.

“Let me say it right now. Ole Miss has a defense,” Corral said. “That’s something we couldn’t say in the past. But they’ve carried us during these last five weeks, made some breaks and they showed that this is a team thing.”
Rivalries carry title aspirations

By Ralph D. Russo

No rivalry has produced more big games than Michigan-Ohio State. The Wolverines and Buckeyes get together Saturday for their annual Big Ten grudge match and it will be the 24th time for their annual Big Ten grudge match. Buckeyes get together Saturday for their annual Big Ten grudge match. Ohio State possesses the best offense in the country, fueled by a Heisman Trophy contender at quarterback.

C.J. Stroud has thrown 36 touchdown passes and completed 71.1% of his passes, guiding an offense that averages almost 8 yards per play.

The Wolverines have two of the nation's best pass rushers in Aidan Hutchinson and David Ajabo (combined 20 sacks), but the real counter for Michigan is its powerful running game.

Hassan Haskins (1,063 yards rushing and 13 touchdowns) and Blake Corum (5.96 yards per carry) are the one-two punch.

The winner takes the Big Ten East, a spot in the conference title game and will be a step away from the College Football Playoff.

And then there is the already-baked-in intrigue of The Game: Ohio State has won eight straight, including all five since Jim Harbaugh has become Michigan coach.

Heisman watch

Will Anderson Jr., OL, Alabama: The Heisman race clarified last week with Stroud and No. 3 Alabama's Bryce Young taking the role of favorites, but Young's teammate deserves attention.

Anderson has been the most consistently dominant player in the country this season, with 26.5 tackles for loss, including 13.5 sacks. The NCAA record for tackles for loss in a season is 32 by George Selvie of USF in 2007.

In the Iron Bowl, Anderson has a chance to feast on an Auburn offense that has gotten outs of sorts with a backup quarterback during a three-game losing streak.

Numbers to know

2-14 — Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy's record against Oklahoma. The seventh-ranked Cowboys have not beaten the Sooners since 2006, a three-game losing streak.

10 — Number of consecutive seasons Clemson has won the Atlantic Coast Conference title game. That streak is not quite dead yet for a Tigers team that had three losses before November.

6 — Number of consecutive wins Arkansas has had since Saban's firing, culminating in a 10-2 win over LSU.

Third-ranked Alabama flawed but battle-tested

By John Zenor

This Alabama team is still winning football games but that aura of seemingly invincibility that normally looms over the Crimson Tide is long gone.

Last year Alabama made it look so easy in its season-long romp to the national championship, being truly challenged only once. That was in the Southeastern Conference championship game against Florida.

The third-ranked Crimson Tide have been beaten once this season — a three-point loss at No. 14 Texas A&M — and three of Alabama's 10 wins have come by a touchdown or less entering Saturday's visit to rival Auburn.

Alabama coach Nick Saban has insisted the issues preventing the Tide from putting teams away so easily are fixable, though they're case, but Buckeyes-Wolverines gets the slight nod because of the greater likelihood of offensive fireworks.

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Allen leads Bills past Saints

By BRETT MARTELL

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Josh Allen and the mercurial Buffalo Bills swung back to a better version of themselves against the reeling New Orleans Saints.

Allen passed for 260 yards and four touchdowns, and the Bills throttled New Orleans in a 31-6 victory over the winless NFL's Saints. The Bills are 7-4.

“Coach always talks about play-off caliber and that's the team we want to be,” Allen said. “We want to be the best versions of ourselves every time we step on the field.”

Dawson Knox caught two touchdowns and star receiver Michael Thomas, who has not played all season, also due to significant changes at quarterback.

New Orleans went 5-2 in games started by QB Jameis Winston, who took over this season for the retired Drew Brees. But Winston went out for the season with a knee injury during New Orleans’ most recent victory on Oct. 31 and the Saints have lost every game Sieiman has started.

Saints coach Sean Payton’s urgency to sustain drives against the high-powered Bills was evident in his decision to call a running play on fourth-and-2 near midfield and to later run a fake punt. Both failed, with the run losing yards and punter Blake Gillikin’s pass sailing high and wide of intended receiver Lil’Jordan Humphrey.

“Going in, we felt like we had to be a little bit more aggressive,” because of how capable the Bills are offensively, Payton said. “We weren’t going to be able to win a game scoring 14 points or 17 points against a team like this.”

Siemian finished 17-for-29 passing for 163 yards, one TD and one interception.

Santos, Bears keep Lions winless

By LARRY LAGE

Associated Press

DETROIT — Matt Nagy still has a job and perhaps his team has a shot to salvage its season.

Cairo Santos made a 28-yard game-ending field goal to give the slumping Chicago Bears a 16-14 victory over the winless Detroit Lions on Thursday.

The Bears (4-7) ended a five-game losing streak under Nagy, who was answering questions about his job status less than 48 hours before kickoff.

Nagy said team chairman George McCaskey told him on Wednesday thePatch.com report that the fourth-year coach was told he will no longer coach after the game in Detroit was not accurate.

“We’ve been through some stuff, some distractions, the last couple days,” Nagy acknowledged. “I’m just happy where they are, what type of fighters they are, what type of winners they are.

Meanwhile, the Lions (0-10-1) showed no one in the NFL comes up short quite as they do.

“First, you have to learn how not to lose,” said Detroit quarterback Jared Goff, who returned from a one-game absence because of an oblique injury.

Detroit made many mistakes early and late, to extend its winning streak to 15 games since beating the Bills on the road nearly a year ago. The Lions had 10 penalties, including three in a row when they were at midfield that ended their chance to score on their last possession.

“Having second-and-25 or third-and-32 definitely shrinks your playbook,” first-year coach Dan Campbell lamented.

Andy Dalton, starting in place of injured rookie Justin Fields, led the Bears on an 18-play, 69-yard drive that took the final 8:30 off the clock.

Dalton converted a third-and-5 with a 13-yard pass to Damien Byrd to get the Bears to midfield. Detroit later helped out, giving them 5 yards on a penalty for calling consecutive time-outs without a play in between.

“I knew it was a penalty, but we had half of our guys with one call and half with another,” Campbell said. “I either could call the timeout, knowing it would be a penalty, or stand there and watch them score a touchdown.”

On the next snap, Dalton converted third-and-4 with a 7-yard pass to Byrd. With only one time-out left, Dalton was able

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Chicago Bears kicker Cairo Santos (2) is surrounded by teammates after kicking the game-winning field goal with time expiring during Thursday’s game against the Lions in Detroit.

Bills wide receiver Stefon Diggs eats a turkey leg Thursday’s game in New Orleans.
Penalties help Raiders top Cowboys in OT

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Derek Carr and the Las Vegas Raiders got the third-down help they needed from Dallas cornerba...
Sizing up the field
Parity across the league means wide-open race to Super Bowl

By ROH MAADDI
Associated Press

Close games and unpredictable outcomes have been a staple this NFL season.
Thanksgiving Day was the latest example.
The Bears beat the Lions on a last-second field goal. The Raiders upset the Cowboys on a field goal in overtime.
The league and the networks must love it, and fans stay entertained.
Going into Thursday, the 23 games decided by a winning score on the final play were the most such games through Week 11 in league history. Victories by Chicago and Las Vegas increased that total to 25.
So far, 39 games have been decided by a game-winning score in the final two minutes of regulation or in overtime.
Thrilling finishes are exciting for everyone except writers who have to rewrite their stories at the end of games.
There’s more parity now than anytime in recent years, and it’s a wide-open race to the Big Game.
Last week, three teams without a winning record beat a club that was in first place or tied for first. Since Week 9, that’s now happened 12 times.

SEE FIELD ON PAGE 23

INSIDE
Cowboys’ 4th pass interference penalty of game sets up Raiders’ OT win

Pictured, from top: Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen; Tampa Bay Buccaneers QB Tom Brady; Kansas City Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes; Dallas Cowboys QB Dak Prescott.

AP photos

Playoff berth no certainty for third-ranked ’Bama

Tough to compare
Injuries, COVID-19 might make this year exception to ‘Thanksgiving rule’

NFL: ON FOOTBALL

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