

Virginia's 1st female Lt. gov. takes her seat in the Senate

By SARAH RANKIN

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — History-making Republican Winsome Earle-Sears began her tenure presiding over the Virginia Senate on Monday as the state's first woman to serve as lieutenant governor and the first Black woman to hold statewide office.

"This indeed is an historic moment," said Sen. Mark Obenshain, who gave a speech welcoming the presiding officer who will be referred to as madam president. A standing ovation followed from members of both parties and guests in the gallery.

Earle-Sears, a former member of the state House who last year returned from a nearly 20-year absence from elected office to

win election, did not give lengthy prepared remarks. She acknowledged her husband, a daughter, a staffer and a family friend who were visiting in the gallery and tweeted that it was "a privilege to serve the people of the Commonwealth."

Earle-Sears was part of a GOP sweep of Virginia's top offices in November. She was sworn in Saturday, along with Gov. Glenn Youngkin and Attorney Gen. Jason Miyares. The party will also enjoy a new majority in the House of Delegates, meaning Democrats' sole remaining hold on power in Richmond will be in the Senate, where their majority is a razor-thin 21-19.

Earle-Sears will cast tie-



breaking votes as she oversees the procedural flow of the chamber. The lieutenant

governor is also second in line to the governorship, and the part-time position

is often a steppingstone to higher office.

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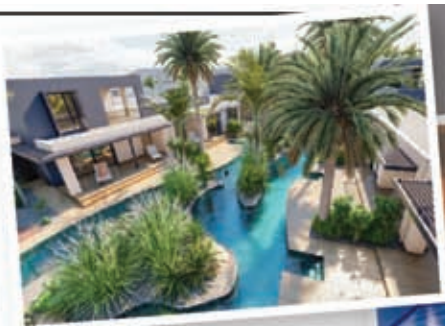
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Continued from Front

Earle-Sears takes over the role from previous Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, who did not seek reelection and instead unsuccessfully ran for the Democratic nomination for governor.

A Marine veteran who immigrated to the United States from Jamaica as a child, Earle-Sears defeated Democrat Hala Ayala last year to become only the second woman in Virginia's long history to serve in a statewide office. Attorney Gen. Mary Sue Terry,

who was elected in 1985, was the first.

A staunch conservative who speaks frequently about her Christian faith, Earle-Sears has made history as a woman in politics before.

She got her start in elected office in 2001 when she stunned both parties by defeating a 10-term Democrat in an overwhelmingly blue district to become the first Black Republican woman elected to the House of Delegates.

She served just one term

before deciding not to seek reelection. After moving, she unsuccessfully challenged U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott in a race The Associated Press described at the time as "a campaign of raw invective."

She went on to serve on the State Board of Education and more recently as the national chair of an organization dedicated to reelecting former President Donald Trump. She's also led a men's prison ministry, served as director of a women's homeless

shelter and run a plumbing and electrical supply company. Earle-Sears used the last name Sears during her campaign. Chris Saxman, her transition director, said Earle-Sears is her preference moving forward.

Monday marked the fourth day of this year's 60-day legislative session. Most legislation is continuing to make its way through the subcommittee and committee process. Because of the split party control of the General Assembly, lawmakers will be forced

to find compromise on issues ranging from education to public safety to the state's spending plan.

Youngkin, a political newcomer and former private equity executive, was scheduled to give his first address to lawmakers later Monday afternoon.

Monday also marked a traditional day of advocacy at the Capitol. The Martin Luther King Jr. holiday has long offered a chance for Virginia residents, often with a day off work, to meet with lawmakers. □

On MLK Day, Biden says Americans must commit to King's work



By JEFF MARTIN and MICHAEL WARREN undefined ATLANTA (AP) — Americans must commit to the unfinished work of Martin Luther King Jr., delivering jobs and justice and protecting "the sacred right to vote, a right from which all other rights flow," President Joe Biden said Monday.

Martin Luther King Day is a moment when a mirror is held up to America, the president said in a video address.

"It's time for every elected official in America to make it clear where they stand," Biden said. "It's time for every American to stand up. Speak out, be heard. Where do you stand?"

Major holiday events included marches in several

cities and the annual Martin Luther King Jr. service at the slain civil rights leader's Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock is the senior pastor. Pews have been packed by politicians in past years, but given the pandemic, many offered pre-recorded speeches instead.

This holiday marks what would have been the 93rd birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was just 39 when he was assassinated in 1968 while helping sanitation workers strike for better pay and workplace safety in Memphis, Tennessee.

King's eldest son criticized Biden and Congress as a whole on Monday for fail-

ing to pass voting rights legislation, even as 19 Republican-led states have made it harder to vote in response to former President Donald Trump's false claims about election-rigging.

"You were successful with infrastructure, which is a great thing -- but we need you to use that same energy to ensure that all Americans have the same unencumbered right to vote," Martin Luther King III said.

Senate Republicans remain unified in opposition to the Democrats' voting bills. Biden described their stonewalling as part of "a true attack on our democracy, from the Jan. 6 insurrection to the onslaught of Republican anti-voting laws in an number of states."

"It's no longer just about who gets to vote. It's about who gets to count the vote. And whether your vote counts at all. It's about two insidious things: voter suppression and election subversion," Biden said.

Vice President Kamala Harris sent a to the Ebenezer service, saying that "in Georgia and across our nation, anti-voter laws are being passed that could make it more difficult for as

many as 55 million Americans to vote ... that is one out of six people in our country."

"We know that this assault on our freedom to vote will be felt by every American, in every community, in every political party," she said. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the Senate's only Black Republican, countered with a series of King Day-themed videos he said would emphasize positive developments on civil rights. Scott sidestepped criticism about GOP actions and accused Democrats of labeling his party members as racists.

"To compare or conflate people who oppose his positions as being racists and traitors to the country is not only insulting and infuriating, it's dead wrong," Scott told The Associated Press.

Warnock, now running for reelection as Georgia's first Black senator, said in his speech to the sparse crowd at Ebenezer that "everybody loves Dr. King, they just don't always love what he represents."

"Let the word go forth, you can not remember Dr. King and dismember his legacy at the same time," Warnock said. "If you will speak

his name you have to stand up for voting rights, you have to stand up on behalf of the poor and the oppressed and the disenfranchised."

King, who delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech while leading the 1963 March on Washington and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, considered racial equality inseparable from alleviating poverty and stopping war. His insistence on non-violent protest continues to influence activists pushing for civil rights and social change.

The U.S. economy "has never worked fairly for Black Americans — or, really, for any American of color," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a speech delivered Monday, one of many by national leaders acknowledging unmet needs for racial equality on Martin Luther King Day.

Yellen referred to King's famous speech in remarks she recorded for delivery at the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network breakfast in Washington, noting the financial metaphor he used when describing the founding fathers' promises of equality. □

Texas rabbi says he, 2 hostages escaped synagogue standoff

By JAKE BLEIBERG and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press COLLEYVILLE, Texas (AP) —

The rabbi of a Texas synagogue said Monday that he threw a chair at the gunman and then escaped with two other hostages after a 10-hour standoff, crediting past security training for getting himself and his congregation out safely. Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker told "CBS Mornings" that he let the gunman in Saturday because he appeared to need shelter. He said the man was not threatening or suspicious at first. Later, he heard a gun click as he was praying.

Another man held hostage, Jeffrey R. Cohen, described the ordeal on Facebook.

"First of all, we escaped. We weren't released or freed," Cohen said.

Cohen said the men worked to keep the gunman engaged. They talked to the gunman, he lectured them. At one point as the situation devolved, Cohen said the gunman told them to get on their knees. Cohen recalled rearing up in his chair and slowly moving his head and mouthing "no." As the gunman moved to sit back down, Cohen said Cytron-Walker yelled to run.

"The exit wasn't too far away," Cytron-Walker said. "I told them to go. I threw a chair at the gunman, and I headed for the door. And all three of us were able to get out without even a shot being fired."

Authorities identified the hostage-taker as 44-year-old British national Malik Faisal Akram, who was killed Saturday night after the last hostages ran out of Congregation Beth Israel around 9 p.m.

The FBI on Sunday night issued a statement calling the ordeal "a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted" and said the Joint Terrorism Task Force is investigating. The agency noted that Akram spoke repeatedly during negotiations about a prisoner who is serving an 86-year sentence in the U.S.

Akram could be heard



ranting on a Facebook livestream of the services and demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist suspected of having ties to al-Qaida who was convicted of trying to kill U.S. Army officers in Afghanistan.

The investigation stretched to England, where late Sunday police in Manchester announced that two teenagers were in custody in connection with the standoff. Greater Manchester Police tweeted that counter-terrorism officers had made the arrests but did not say whether the pair faced any charges.

Video of the standoff's end from Dallas TV station WFAA showed people running out a door of the synagogue, and then a man holding a gun opening the same door just seconds later before he turned around and closed it. Moments later, several shots and then an explosion could be heard. Authorities have declined to say who shot Akram, saying it was still under investigation.

President Joe Biden called the episode an act of terror. Speaking to reporters in Philadelphia on Sunday, Biden said Akram allegedly purchased a weapon on the streets.

Federal investigators believe Akram purchased the handgun used in the hostage taking in a private

sale, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation is ongoing. Akram arrived in the U.S. at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York about two weeks ago, a law enforcement official said.

Akram arrived in the U.S. recently on a tourist visa from Great Britain, according to a U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the information was not intended to be public. London's Metropolitan Police said in a statement that its counter-terrorism police were liaising with U.S. authorities about the incident. U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel told the House of Commons on Monday that she had spoken to her U.S. counterpart, Alejandro Mayorkas, and offered "the full support" of the police and security services in Britain in the investigation.

It wasn't clear why Akram chose the synagogue, though the prison where Siddiqui is serving her sentence is in nearby Fort Worth.

Michael Finfer, the president of the congregation, said in a statement "there was a one in a million chance that the gunman picked our congregation." Akram used his phone during the course of negotiations to communicate with people other than law enforcement, according to a law enforcement official who was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation by name and spoke on condition of anonymity. Multiple people heard the hostage-taker refer to Siddiqui as his "sister" on the livestream. But John Floyd, board chair for the Houston chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations — the nation's largest Muslim advocacy group — said Siddiqui's brother, Mohammad Siddiqui, was not involved.

Texas resident Victoria Francis, who said she watched about an hour of the livestream, said she heard the man rant against America and claim he had a bomb. Biden said there were apparently no explosives, despite the threats.

"He was just all over the map. He was pretty irritated and the more irritated he got, he'd make more threats, like 'I'm the guy with the bomb. If you make a mistake, this is all on you.' And he'd laugh at that," Francis said. "He was clearly in extreme distress."

Colleyville, a community of about 26,000 people, is about 15 miles (23 kilometers) northeast of Fort Worth. Reached outside his home Sunday, Cytron-Walker declined to speak at length about the episode. "It's a little overwhelming as you can imagine.

It was not fun yesterday," he told the AP.

Andrew Marc Paley, a Dallas rabbi who was called to the scene to help families and hostages upon their release, said Cytron-Walker acted as a calm and comforting presence. The first hostage was released shortly after 5 p.m. That was around the time food was delivered to those inside the synagogue, but Paley said he did not know if it was part of the negotiations.

Cytron-Walker said his congregation had received training from local authorities and the Secure Community Network, which was founded in 2004 by a coalition of Jewish organizations and describes itself as "the official safety and security organization" of the Jewish community in North America. Michael Masters, the CEO of the organization, said the congregation had provided security training in August and had not been previously aware of Akram. The standoff led authorities to tighten security in other places, including New York City, where police said that they increased their presence "at key Jewish institutions" out of an abundance of caution. □



How's he doing? Americans weigh in on Biden's performance

By The Associated Press undefined

President Joe Biden took office at a particularly polarized time in American history, so it's not surprising that citizens are divided on his performance at the one-year mark.

A Georgia history teacher who voted for Biden would give him a "C" grade, faulting the president for not pushing earlier to end the filibuster in the Senate but supportive of his Build Back Better plan.

A retired nurse in Iowa who supported Pete Buttigieg in the Democratic primary says she's been impressed by the way Biden has upheld the dignity of the office.

A registered independent in Arizona who voted for former President Donald Trump says Biden's first year has been "pretty bad," citing the shutdown of the Keystone XL oil pipeline and the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal.

Here's what else Americans have to say about the job Biden has done so far:

THE TRUMP-TO-BIDEN VOTER

Craig Prichard believes Donald Trump should be in jail. But he's far from your typical anti-Trumper: He voted for him in 2016.

But not in 2020. "No, sir," says the 65-year-old self-described independent from Des Moines, Iowa.

Prichard is still angry at Trump over the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, saying he believes the former president caused it. But it was Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic that led Prichard to vote for Biden in 2020.

"Trump wanted to make it look like COVID was going away," Prichard says. "That wasn't the way to take care of it."

Prichard, who for 40 years built farm machinery, worked construction and eventually retired after a stint at a meatpacking plant last year, says Biden is "handling COVID as well as he can" while juggling a number of other issues.

"Biden, you can tell he's trying to handle the pandemic, food prices, gas prices,



Russia, all at the same time, and he doesn't seem to care how he looks," Prichard says. "Because it's not real good right now for him, even though there's less people dying than if Trump were there."

"Trump, turns out, only cared about how he looked," Prichard says.

THE TEACHER WHO GIVES BIDEN A 'C' GRADE

Kai Uchimura, a high school history teacher who lives in Decatur, Georgia, voted for Biden in 2020. He'd give him a "C" grade so far.

Uchimura, 26, describes himself as leaning left on most issues, though he is not a registered Democrat. He says he supports Biden's social policy bill that remains stalled in Congress, but thinks Democrats have done a poor job of explaining its benefits.

"That Build Back Better plan, it seemed like no one knew what was in the bill except for the cost," he says.

He also faults Biden for not pushing earlier to end the filibuster in the Senate that requires 60 votes to advance most legislation. Last week, for the first time, Biden directly advocated eliminating the filibuster in order to debate and vote on election and voting rights legislation.

"I know that when he was coming into office, he had this message of trying to unite the country and extend a hand across the

aisle," Uchimura says. "But I wish he would have recognized earlier that this era of bipartisanship seems to be pretty much on thin ice."

THE BIDEN VOTER WHO DEcriES POLARIZATION

Lynn Manning-John, a school principal on a Native American reservation on the Nevada-Idaho border, is pleased with Biden's first year in office but worries his presidency has further polarized her community. At a Walmart in Elko County, Nevada, a ranching region that heavily supported the former president, she's overheard customers complain about how Biden's agenda has permeated "Trump country."

"There is just a reluctance to support the current president," the 45-year-old independent voter says. "There's pushback towards anything that he puts forward, even if it's good and common sense." She was especially happy with Biden's nomination of Deb Haaland, a fellow Native American, as interior secretary. The superintendent and five out of seven school board members in Elko County resigned last year during protests from parents' groups opposed to lesson plans about equity and diversity in the parts of the county outside the Duck Valley Indian Reservation.

Manning-John sees the resignations and the parents' demands as an outgrowth

of the backlash to Biden's 2020 victory.

Biden's election win is still unreal to many Americans, she says.

"And the absolute revolt that has come about since absolutely goes directly to the school boards," she says.

THE BIDEN VOTER WARY OF LIBERALS

Patrick Sweeney voted for Biden but has been disappointed the president hasn't pushed back more against the left wing of the Democratic Party.

"I wish he would claim and stake out the middle ground, and be more that, 'This is what the Democratic Party represents,'" says Sweeney, a 62-year-old retired educator in a Phoenix suburb who is not affiliated with a political party.

"So much of the conversation seems to get focused on the extreme left wing of the Democratic Party and progressive positions," Sweeney says. "I think he needs to be more front and center in countering that." Sweeney is pleased with the infrastructure bill Biden signed into law but wishes he'd stopped there instead of pushing a massive increase in social service spending.

"I was enthusiastic about the original infrastructure plan," Sweeney says. "I think it's long overdue, and I was really glad to see it, and I think that could've and

should've been a great accomplishment. Get the bulldozers and shovels rolling and get to work. She adds: "The Build Back Better plan, I think there's too much in there that I don't see the need for it, or I don't know that the federal government is the solution for it."

THE TRUMP VOTER WHO'S NOT IMPRESSED

Eric Ollarsaba says Biden's presidency has been "pretty bad." But the 33-year-old Trump voter isn't surprised.

"He's pretty much doing exactly what I expected him to do," says Ollarsaba, a registered independent who lives in Phoenix and works at an online car retailer. "He's a career politician."

He is disappointed Biden shut the Keystone XL oil pipeline, and he was appalled by the chaotic U.S. military exit from Afghanistan.

"We're probably going to be reliant on other countries for energy, which I could potentially see leading to another conflict, or us involving ourselves in another war," Ollarsaba says. "I think we still needed a U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Not major military operations, but we still need a presence and I think that would make that region — at least for the United States — a little less dangerous."

The U.S. should not have had to rely on the Taliban's cooperation to evacuate Americans from Afghanistan, he says. He worries ceding influence there will allow terrorist groups to gain a foothold.

THE DEMOCRAT WHO PREFERRED MAYOR PETE

Biden wasn't Kathleen Paul's first pick. The 74-year-old retired nurse liked Pete Buttigieg in the Democratic primary.

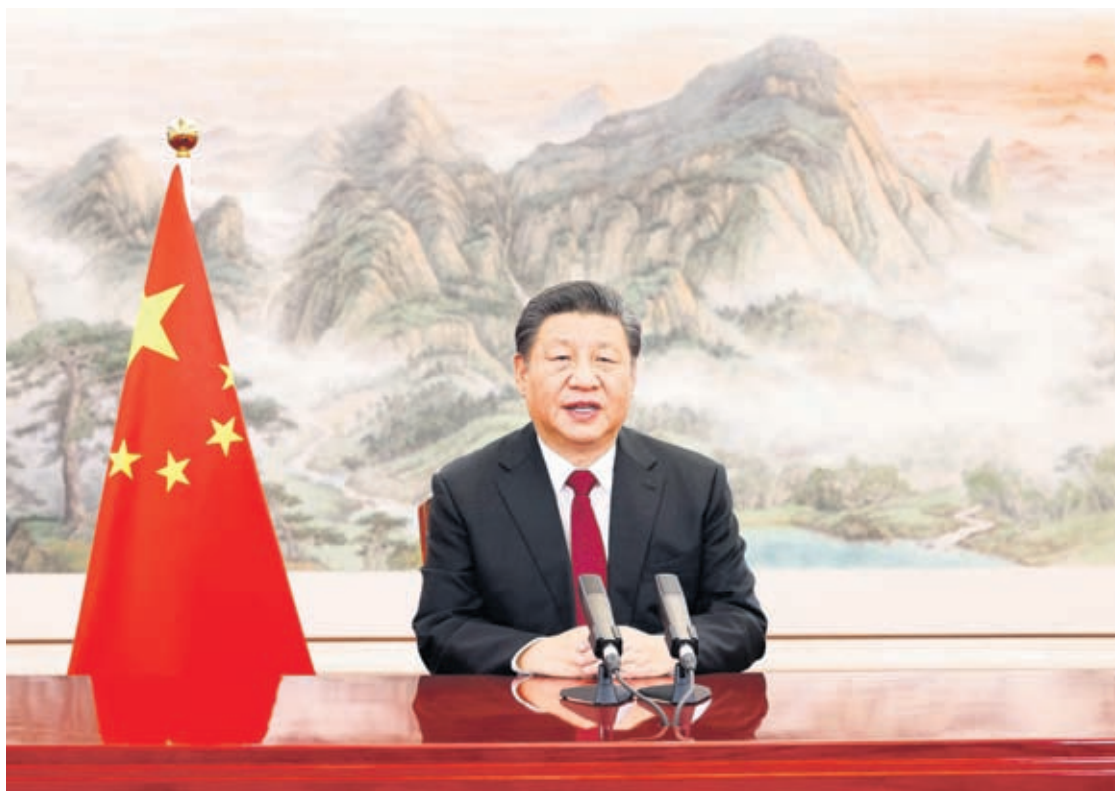
"I thought Biden was sort of 'Jokin' Joe,'" Paul says. "He said things that were so off-the-cuff when (Barack) Obama was president. I thought, 'Can we really take this guy seriously?'" Turns out, a bit to her surprise, she can. □

China's Xi rejects 'Cold War mentality,' pushes cooperation

By JAMEY KEATEN

GENEVA (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping called Monday for greater world cooperation against COVID-19 and said China would send an additional 1 billion doses of vaccine to other countries, while urging other powers to discard a "Cold-War mentality" at a time of rising geopolitical tensions — a veiled swipe at the United States.

The Chinese leader touted his country's efforts to share vaccines, fight climate change and promote development at home and abroad as he delivered the opening speech of a virtual gathering hosted by the World Economic Forum. The online event is being held in place of its annual January meeting in Davos, Switzerland, because of health concerns linked to the coronavirus pandemic. The global outbreak that has claimed over 5.5 million lives and upended the world economy was another theme. In a panel session on the virus, Moderna's CEO said the vaccine maker was working on a single-shot booster for both COVID-19 and the flu, while U.S. infectious diseases expert Dr. Anthony Fauci lamented as "very disturbing" the reluctance of many Americans to follow basic measures like mask-wearing and getting vaccinated.



"This is such a formidable virus," Fauci said, noting the difficulty in achieving herd immunity against COVID-19 because of the tendency of immunity to fade, even after vaccination. "You make the virus have an advantage when you don't implement in a unified way all the very well-recognized public health measures, particularly the vaccines." Xi, who hasn't left China since the coronavirus emerged in early 2020, said in his speech that China has exported over 2 billion doses of its COVID-19 vaccines to over 120 countries and international institutions. He announced plans to provide an additional 1

billion — including a donation of 600 million doses to Africa and an extra 150 million to Southeast Asia.

By comparison, managers of the U.N.-backed COVAX program to ship vaccines to developing countries announced over the weekend that it has now delivered 1 billion vaccine doses.

Xi touched on standard themes from previous talks to international audiences, including responding to trading partners' complaints by promising to open China's state-dominated economy wider to private and foreign competition.

His comments come as

tensions between the United States and China have simmered on topics like Taiwan, intellectual property, trade, human rights and the South China Sea.

"We need to discard Cold War mentality and seek peaceful coexistence and win-win outcomes. Our world today is far from being tranquil," said Xi, through a translator. "Protectionism and unilateralism can protect no one. They ultimately hurt the interests of others as well as one's own. Even worse are the practices of hegemony and bullying, which run counter to the tide of history."

"A zero-sum approach that enlarges one's own gain at

the expense of others will not help," he added. "The right way forward for humanity is peaceful development and win-win cooperation."

Xi said China "stands ready to work with" other governments on climate but announced no new initiatives and offered no resources. He said it was up to developed countries to provide money and technology.

After Xi spoke, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said during a session on the future of COVID-19 that he hoped the U.S.-based company would have a combined vaccine booster ready to test in advanced research in the second quarter, saying a best-case scenario would be if the single shot covering both flu and COVID-19 would be ready for use next year.

"I don't think it would happen in every country, but we believe it's possible to happen in some countries next year," Bancel said.

Moderna has been heavily criticized for prioritizing distribution of its COVID-19 vaccines to rich countries; only a fraction of its supply has gone to poor countries via COVAX. He said the company was aiming to make about 2 to 3 billion doses this year and hopes to have data from a new vaccine tweaked to address the omicron variant in March. □

COVID program delivers 1 billion doses to poorer countries

BERLIN (AP) — The World Health Organization said Sunday that a U.N.-backed program shipping coronavirus vaccines to many poor countries has now delivered 1 billion doses, but that milestone "is only a reminder of the work that remains" after hoarding and stockpiling in rich countries. A shipment of 1.1 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Rwanda on Saturday included the billionth dose supplied via the COVAX program, the U.N. health agency said.

WHO has long criticized unequal distribution of vaccines and called for manufacturers and other coun-

tries to prioritize COVAX. It said that, as of Thursday, 36 of its 194 member countries had vaccinated less than 10% of their population and 88 had vaccinated less than 40%.

The program has made deliveries to 144 countries so far, "but the work that has gone into this milestone is only a reminder of the work that remains," WHO said in a statement.

"COVAX's ambition was compromised by hoarding/stockpiling in rich countries, catastrophic outbreaks leading to borders and supply being locked," it added. "And a lack of sharing of licenses, technology

and know-how by pharmaceutical companies meant manufacturing capacity went unused."

At the end of December, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged everyone to make a "new year's resolution" to get behind a campaign to vaccinate 70% of countries' populations by the beginning of July. In a newspaper interview published Sunday, Germany's new international development minister said she wants to use her country's presidency this year of the Group of Seven industrial nations to ensure that COVAX gets the resources it



needs in 2022.

"Unfortunately, there are still too few countries participating in the financing of the global vaccination campaign," Svenja Schulze

was quoted as telling the Funke newspaper group. "Alongside Sweden, Norway, Canada and the U.S., we are the ones who are giving most. □

Omicron slamming S. American hospitals as workers fall ill



By DÉBORA ÁLVARES and
ALMUDENA CALATRAVA
Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — The coronavirus' omicron variant starting to barrel across South America is pressuring hospitals whose employees are taking sick leave, leaving facilities understaffed to cope with COVID-19's third wave.

A major hospital in Bolivia's largest city stopped admitting new patients due to lack of personnel, and one of Brazil's most populous states canceled scheduled surgeries for a month. Argentina's federation of private healthcare providers told the AP it estimates about 15% of its health workers currently have the virus.

The third wave "is affecting the health team a lot, from the cleaning staff to the technicians, with a high percentage of sick people, despite having a complete vaccination schedule," said Jorge Coronel, president of Argentina's medical confederation. "While symptoms are mostly mild to moderate, that group needs to be isolated."

It wasn't supposed to be this way: South America's vaccine uptake was eager once shots were avail-

able. About two-thirds of its roughly 435 million residents are fully immunized, the highest percentage for any global region, according to Our World in Data. And health workers in Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina have already been receiving booster shots.

But the omicron variant is defying vaccines, sending case numbers surging. Argentina saw an average 112,000 daily confirmed cases in the week through Jan. 16, up from 3,700 a month earlier. Brazil's health ministry is still recovering from a hack that left coronavirus data incomplete; even so, it shows a jump to an average 69,000 daily cases in the same seven-day period, up 1,900% from the month before.

Omicron spreads even easier than other strains, and is already dominant in many countries — among them, Brazil and some parts of Argentina. It also more easily infects those who have already been vaccinated or infected by earlier versions of the virus. Early studies show omicron is less likely to cause serious diseases than the delta variant, and vaccination and booster shots still offer strong protection against serious illness, hos-

pitalization and death.

Lesser severity leaves South America's residents loath to give up their long-awaited summer that, so they were told, would mark a return to normality after full vaccination. The enduring pandemic often seems an afterthought to people who are out and about, and don't glimpse how omicron has started affecting medical staff. Beaches were packed this weekend in Argentina and Brazil.

Matías Fernández Norte, a surgeon at the Hospital de Clínicas in Buenos Aires, told the AP that the high number of professionals on leave has generated "physical and spiritual fatigue, in addition to the stress of dealing with a patient on the edge."

"You feel like you are living a parallel reality. In the street you meet a world that doesn't seem to feel the pandemic," he said. "Sometimes it feels like people have forgotten. Unfortunately, that's what we feel."

Brazil's council of state health secretariats estimates that between 10% and 20% of all professionals in the health network — including doctors, nurses, nurse technicians, ambulance drivers and others in direct contact with patients — have taken sick leave since the last week of 2021.

"We are having trouble making the schedules," said the council's director, Carlos Lula.

The press office of Rio de Janeiro state's health secretariat told the AP that about 5,500 professionals have left their jobs since

December. All elective surgeries scheduled in the state health network have been suspended for four weeks. As for urgent care, relocations and overtime are being used as stopgap measures.

"Forty percent of our staff is on sick leave," Marcia Fernandes Lucas, health secretary for the municipality of Sao Joao de Meriti, in Rio's metropolitan region, told the AP in her office. "We are able to work with these 60% by redeploying them (between health centers)."

Public hospitals in Bolivia are operating at 50-70% capacity due to the high number of infections among health care workers, according to the Bolivian doctors' union. In Santa Cruz, the country's most populous city, the Children's Hospital is overwhelmed — but less by its number of patients than the amount of staff falling ill, according to Freddy Rojas, its vice director. Last week, the facility stopped admitting new patients.

"There has been a collapse, because we don't have replacements," said José Luis Guaman, interim president of the doctors' union in Santa Cruz.

Such is the risk of medical services grinding to a halt in Argentina's Buenos Aires province — the country's most populous — that health workers have been allowed to return to work even if coming into contact with someone infected, provided they are asymptomatic and vaccinated. Other provinces in Argentina are expected to adopt the same rules in the

coming days, in line with the health ministry's recently-issued guidelines.

Similar measures are being enacted by authorities in France and the U.S., where omicron has been putting hospital systems to the test for weeks.

Chile has seen a constant increase in its number of cases, prompting the reactivation of public- and private-sector hospital beds, but so far the country hasn't experienced hospital overload. Peru has also seen case its numbers rise, but its facilities aren't yet suffering.

The Pan American Health Organization said Wednesday it expects omicron to become the predominant coronavirus variant in the Americas in the coming week. Ten countries in the region — especially in the Caribbean — didn't reach the goal set by the World Health Organization to have 40% of citizens fully vaccinated by end-2021.

While a smaller fraction of people develop serious illness from the highly-transmissible variant, the crush of contagion and resulting strain on hospitals means omicron shouldn't be underestimated, said Lula, of the Brazilian health secretariat council.

"People have to understand that the argument that omicron is 'mild' is false," Lula said. —

Calatrava reported from Buenos Aires. Reporters Carlos Valdez and Paola Flores contributed to this report from La Paz, Bolivia, Mario Lobão from Rio de Janeiro, Patricia Luna and Eva Vergara from Santiago, Chile, and Franklin Briceño from Lima, Peru. □

Out of this world: 555.55-carat black diamond lands in Dubai

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Auction house Sotheby's Dubai has unveiled a diamond that's literally from out of this world.

Sotheby's calls the 555.55-carat black diamond — believed to have come from outer space — "The Enigma." The rare gem was shown off on Monday to journalists as part of a tour in Dubai and Los Angeles before it is due to be auctioned off in February in London.

Sotheby's expects the diamond to be sold for at least 5 million British pounds (\$6.8 million). The auction house plans to accept cryptocurrency

as a possible payment as well.

Sophie Stevens, a jewelry specialist at Sotheby's Dubai, told The Associated Press that the number five bears an importance significance to the diamond, which has 55 facets as well.

"The shape of the diamond is based on the Middle-Eastern palm symbol of the Khamsa, which stands for strength and it stands for protection," she said. Khamsa in Arabic means five.

"So there's a nice theme of the number five running throughout the diamond," she added.

Stevens also said the black diamond is likely

from outer space.

"With the carbonado diamonds, we believe that they were formed through extraterrestrial origins, with meteorites colliding with the Earth and either forming chemical vapor disposition or indeed coming from the meteorites themselves," she said.

Black diamonds, also known as carbonado, are extremely rare, and are found naturally only in Brazil and Central Africa. The cosmic origin theory is based on their carbon isotopes and high hydrogen content. □



Typhoons, wildfires, missiles: Teen flies solo round world

BRUSSELS (AP) — Avoid typhoon in the Philippines. Check.

Steer clear of massive California wildfires. Check.

Keep away from test missiles in North Korea. What? Wait.

As teenage pilot Zara Rutherford flew ever onward in a record-challenging global odyssey, she met little as strange or scary as when she tried to squeeze in between North Korean airspace and a massive cloud threatening to cut off passage for her ultralight plane.

"Well, they test missiles once in a while without warning," Rutherford said. More importantly, she was just 15 minutes from flying over one of the last places one should enter uninvited.

So she radioed her control team to ask if she could cut the corner over the isolationist communist dictatorship to get to Seoul. "Straight away they said: 'Whatever you do, do not go into North Korean airspace!'" Fortunately the clouds cooperated enough and she didn't have to continue the crash course in applied geopolitics.

At the age of 19, she is set to land her single-seater Shark sport aircraft in Kortrijk, Belgium, on Monday, more than 150 days after setting out to become the youngest woman to circumnavigate the world solo. American aviator Shaesta Waiz was 30 when she set the previous benchmark.

Flying runs in her blood since both her parents are pilots and she has been traveling in small planes

since she was 6. At 14, she started flying herself and about 130 hours of solo flights prepped her for the record attempt, which she hopes will also have a bigger meaning.

With the final touchdown in a plane that looks like a fly among the giants parked at an airport like New York's JFK, the Belgian-British teenager wants to infuse young women and girls worldwide with the spirit of aviation — and an enthusiasm for studies in the exact sciences, mathematics, engineering and technology.

Two mathematical statistic stands out for her — only 5% of commercial pilots and 15% of computer scientists are women.

"The gender gap is huge," she said.

Yet once the canopy closed over her cockpit and another six- to eight-hour flight began, lofty thoughts of global outreach receded as she concentrated on one lonely individual — herself.

Using Visual Flight Rules, basically going on sight only, danger lurked even closer than when she would be able to use fancy navigational instruments to lead her through the night, clouds or fog.

Crossing northern California from Palo Alto towards Seattle, she headed into the huge wildfires blighting the area. The higher she climbed to avoid the smoke — up to 10,000 feet — the tougher it was to keep her eyes on the ground.

"The smoke was building up and up, to the point that the whole cabin stank of

smoke and I could not see anything but a burnished orange color," Rutherford said. She had to abort her route and make an unscheduled landing in Redding, California.

Over Siberia, the light played tricks on her vision, sometimes casting doubt whether she saw mountains or clouds. "And for me clouds are a really big deal. Especially in Russia," with its biting cold. Cutting through such clouds, too much ice might build up on her wings, paralyzing control. "At that point your plane is no longer a plane," she said.

That, or any other mishap, could have happened on a section of the route where she once saw only one village in six hours.

"I realized if something goes wrong, I'm hours and hours and hours away from rescue and it was -35 C (-31 F) on the ground. And so I thought, actually, I don't know how long I can survive -35," Rutherford said.

She didn't have to find out. The project would have been tough enough in normal times, but the pandemic added another complication — which indirectly led to the North Korean adventure.

Alternative plans to go over China to Seoul were ditched when the Chinese refused permission citing COVID-19, which, Rutherford said, "was slightly frustrating because I'm in the plane at 6,000 feet (around 1,800 meters). I'd be very impressed if I could pass on COVID like this."

Overall, bad weather, a flat



tire and visa issues added another two months to the planned three-month project. The Associated Press spoke to Rutherford by tele-

phone in Crete, Greece, and even there, the weather over the Balkans was so awful it delayed her for days. □

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LOCAL



Tropic lockdown: My family vacation in quarantine

By Shawna Cohen

Days before Omicron makes national headlines, I book my family of four a last-minute getaway to Aruba. Life is returning to normal; we can finally dine indoors and the hair salon is no longer considered a Petri dish of bacteria. The kids are back in school. Face-to-face meetings aren't taboo. People are wearing pants!

There's the guilt factor, too. Our kids, ages 16 and 12, have missed so many milestones, so much normalcy, that we're compensating for lost time. The last time my youngest had a full year of school, he was in Grade 4. He's now in junior high. My oldest feels robbed of his high school years, and rightfully so.

"It's too much of a risk," my husband tells me in mid-December, just days before departure. He's refer-



ring to COVID, of course. What if one of us gets sick there? Is this the responsible time to be travelling? Truth be told, I'd grappled with the same decision. We've

been strong believers in masks and vaccines since day one. Our entire family has followed the rules. After much deliberation, we decide to go for it. We've

already paid for flights and a time-share — more important, we need it for our mental health. I try on old swimsuits and purchase the perfect beach read ("Mary Jane" by Jessica Anya Blau).

We arrive and have five blissful days on the beach. Morning walks before breakfast. Afternoons playing football in the warm Caribbean Sea and strolling along the shoreline to meet friends. Dinners are always al fresco. My boys are off their screens for hours at a time — no negotiation required.

Then, on day six, my younger son, Isaac, tests positive for COVID.

I'm worried about his health, first and foremost, but also how we'll get home and if we'll catch it from him. I'm also concerned about where we'll be required to quarantine. I'm imagining Toronto's government-approved quarantine hotels of months past, where air travellers were required to isolate, to the tune of \$3,000, while awaiting negative COVID test results. Reports were dire: waiting up to a full day for inedible food, no access to luggage, lack of diapers for children. Some claimed it's where you'd go to get COVID (outbreaks were common). A New York Times reporter likened it to doing time at a "Canadian Alcatraz."

Google can't calm my nerves. There's little information about where COVID-positive visitors go. "Guests will be transported to a designated isolation location," reads the Aruba Tourism Authority website. Discussion groups on TripAdvisor are equally vague.

The next 24-plus hours are spent in isolation. We order in meals and hang out on the balcony. Things could be worse: I've got snacks and the third season of

"Succession" on my iPad. Most important, Isaac continues to be asymptomatic — a huge relief. The following morning, my husband and older son fly home. We are all due to check out of our time-share that day, but the front desk staff are reassuring: "Stay as long as you need," they tell me. "We'll give you a 'distress rate,' which is the lowest rate possible. Can I drop anything off? Are you hungry?"

Finally, 36 hours after the positive test result, I get a call from Aruba's department of public health. The lovely woman on the phone asks if we're OK, tells me how sorry she is that our vacation has been cut short. I feel like I'm speaking to a family member. She informs me that a "private concierge" will be in touch to arrange relocation, as well as a doctor, but I should reach out if there's anything I need before then. Because Isaac is asymptomatic, our quarantine will last for seven days rather than 10.

Moments later, a message from "Private Concierge Nicole" pops up on my WhatsApp. She informs me she has a two-bedroom apartment available and what time would we like to be picked up? Is 2 p.m. convenient? The accommodation and transfer are included in Aruba Visitors Insurance, she tells us, then sends links to restaurants that deliver in the area. She even shares the name of a grocery delivery guy. I am slowly falling in love with Nicole.

The phone rings. It's Dr. Bakker, from MedCare, who asks how Isaac's feeling and just as important, "How are you? No, really, how are YOU?" I want to lie on the couch and tell her about my childhood. She gives me her number and says to call or text any time.

Continued on Page 9




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Continued from Page 8

Later that afternoon, a van comes to pick us up. A large security guard knocks on the door, hands us N95 masks and plastic gloves, and takes our suitcases. We follow him and a bellhop down the hallway, as a hotel employee fumigates behind us. It's a full-on COVID walk of shame.

Our driver, Alan, is friendly and warm. "It's going to be OK, buddy," he tells Isaac more than once. I thank him for putting his own health at risk to drive us to this secret location. "We're all in this together," he says wistfully.

Another WhatsApp comes in. This time it's from the property manager of our new digs. She's sorry we have to meet under these conditions — her daughter just tested positive, so she understands the stress — but is here to make our stay as enjoyable as possible. She, too, sends me a thorough list of nearby restaurants and the name of another grocery delivery guy. At this point, I feel like I'm either being pranked or perhaps have unknowingly paid for VIP service somewhere along my blindly-filling-out-forms journey.

We finally arrive at our "designated isolation location."

It's not an apartment but rather a spacious and modern two-storey townhouse in a gated community. There's a full kitchen, washing machine and dryer, Wi-Fi, Netflix. My king bed has a firm mattress, crisp white sheets and nearly a dozen pillows. Have I mentioned the back patio with barbecue? I lose Isaac for a few minutes but eventually find him in the kitchen, hunched over a welcome basket of Frito-Lays and Snickers. "I'm living my best life," he says, deadpan, and disappears to his bedroom to watch basketball on TV.

The next five days are a breeze.

Concerned friends check in, certain I'm in COVID jail (a video tour of our digs alleviates any fear). Dr. Bakker calls to check in. Two public-health nurses stop by on our second-last day with an official letter of recovery for Isaac. A separate public health worker drops off meds (unrelated to COVID) and we chat for a while out front. He tells me COVID numbers are going up and they're running out of places to house people; visitors are now welcome to stay put at their hotel/time-share/Airbnb so long as they isolate (insurance covers the cost). I tell him how lucky I feel to have been placed in this beautiful home and he explains that all government-appointed accommodations meet this high level of comfort and luxury. In fact, he can't understand why someone would be "punished," or treated poorly, for contracting COVID. "We're all human," he says, then asks if I need more groceries or wine.

How to get home.

My only source of stress — and it's a big one — is figuring out how to get home. Our week of quarantine is about to end but we cannot board a plane to Canada until at least 14 days have passed since Isaac tested positive. The CDC, meanwhile, has changed U.S. quarantine to five days. Following many phone calls and much research, I find a loophole: fly from Aruba to Buffalo via Newark and drive across the border from there. If you're a Canadian citizen, you cannot be turned away at the border (you may, however, be subject to a \$5,000 fine). At the end of the day, there's nothing illegal about taking this route.

My other option is to spend another week in Aruba until the 14 days have passed, but I'm worried I'll contract COVID while waiting it out (numbers are rising quickly). Also, I haven't budgeted for an

extra two weeks away and I need to get back to work. I consult with a couple of doctors to ensure we won't be putting other people on our flight at risk; they assure me that Isaac is no longer contagious. Our 16-hour travel odyssey begins. We leave for the airport at noon, land in Newark at 10 p.m. and finally in Buffalo close to midnight. I fill out the ArriveCAN app and wait in line for an express PCR test at the Buffalo airport because I'm told my negative PCR test from Aruba won't cut it at customs. We get to the Canadian border and show our documents, are told to pull over to discuss a quarantine plan. A customs agent knocks on the car window and tells me to expect a call on my cell. I'm confused but don't dare ask questions; this man is not interested in talking.

Twenty minutes later, a call comes in from Ottawa Public Health. An agent tells me the border is short-staffed and that he's "the first line of defence." He asks me dozens of questions about where we'll quarantine, if we'll have access to food and medicine. He then tells me the clock has reset: I'm to quarantine at home for 14 days, Isaac for 10, upon entry. I ask why, given that I've tested negative and that we've already spent seven days in quarantine (for those keeping track, that'll be 21 days total for non-COVID me). He laughs at the absurdity of it all.

Incidentally, newspapers are reporting that same day that Canada is following CDC guidelines and has lowered its quarantine period to five days. The Ottawa Public Health man admits there's lots of confusion within public health about the new rules. Finally, he says that an agent will return to my car with two PCR tests each for Isaac and me, to be self-administered on days 1 and 8. I ask why they'd waste two covetable tests on Isaac, given that we know he'll

test positive (antibodies can stay in your system for up to six months). Again, he's not sure. I can tell by his tone he's as dumbfounded as I am; he's just doing his job.

Eight long days after returning home, I receive an email from Switch Health with our COVID results. Isaac has tested positive. Toronto Public Health sends an automated text: "We're asking you to complete an assessment form to help slow the spread of COVID." I reluctantly comply, offering details of our quarantine plan. Hours later, they call to alert me of Isaac's positive COVID test; we must discuss a quarantine plan! "Isaac first tested positive 16 days ago," I explain. The agent sounds genuinely surprised. "My manager will call you over the weekend," she says. This woman is no doubt one of thousands of tired and overworked public-health workers, repeating guidelines from yesterday that are no longer relevant, seeming to shrug their shoulders at the logic of it all (or lack thereof). I don't blame them but rather the labyrinth of confusing rules and quasi-regulations set out by the province. It has destroyed whatever sense of community we once had.

Here's what I've learned:

In Canada, citizens are made to feel like criminals for travelling. If they contract COVID while home or abroad, it's nearly impossible to know who to call for clear answers as the rules seem to change every day. In Aruba, visitors are connected to public-health workers, doctors and nurses who are knowledgeable and eager to help. This little island takes a compassionate and common-sense approach to keeping its visitors — and residents — feeling safe. They've proven that in the fight against COVID, humanity wins. When numbers are down and it's once again safe to travel, my family cannot wait to return. □

Tuscany Residence Aruba: Aruba's Luxury Residential Resort with unique Water Villas

NOORD — Within walking distance of the finest white beaches and the clear blue ocean, Tuscany Residence Aruba is founded in one of the best and most popular neighborhoods of Aruba, close to the shopping and nightlife of Palm Beach. Tuscany Residence Aruba brings luxury living to a new level and they are very unique in their offerings with the Daimari Water Villas.

Around 180 exclusive properties will be built in all different sizes and prices, suitable for everyone's wishes and among them are 18 luxury Water Villas, all with a private terrace and direct access to the pool. The Daimari Water Villas include 2 and 3 bedrooms with wardrobes, 2 and 3.5 bathrooms, are fully furnished with a fully equipped German kitchen, fully air-conditioned and with wide aluminum sliding door to the covered pool terraces. Balcony and covered terraces are offered on the 2 floors unit and a private parking in front of the unit or your own garage is all yours. 50% of these amazing houses is already sold! There are still 6 residences available, including 2 with a one car garage.

Tuscany Residences now offer a special pre-construction discount, whereby your advantage increases to 9.7%. Pre-construction prices valid up to November 1st starting at US\$ 450,775 Turn-Key!

Dutch design

This luxury residential resort with various types of homes has many amenities such as swimming pools, restaurant, bar, offices, meeting rooms, gym, wellness and more. The combination of the beautiful Dutch modern international architecture and the Aruban palm trees creates a luxurious Aruban feeling and relaxed atmosphere in this resort. Tuscany Residence Aruba is the perfect choice for couples and families. Bas de Groot, Managing Director of Tuscany Residence Aruba adds, "We differ from traditional building, our design distinguishes itself." At 8 minutes' walk from Palm Beach, designed in a European style with high-quality materials, on property land and with buying possibilities from condos to townhouses to villas, Tuscany



Residence is a dream comes true.

We take care of it all

De Groot adds, "Our project is in continuous construction which builds confidence. He continues saying that maintenance, property management, rental program and safety are taken care of. "You can log in from abroad and manage your property for rental or view your administration." The great thing about Tuscany is that it offers everything equal to a resort but you do not need to wait for an elevator to bring you up, worry about parking space or noisy neighbors. "We have got space and different size offerings making this more a community feel rather than a packed condo building." He also emphasizes that the location is one of the best on Aruba as it is quiet and close to Palm Beach.

Reasons to buy

Reasons to consider Aruba property ownership, at Tuscany Residence Aruba

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Are you looking for a safe, quiet, residential area where you will meet a mix of local and foreign owners? Do you feel for a warm community with amenities like wellness, gym, restaurants, pools and this all within a structure where the residence takes care of your property management while you are not here? Can the highest European quality and solid working structure take away your preoccupations while you are home? Than meet us, we are here to convince you with quality!

For an impression of Daimari Water Villas have a look at the website: <https://www.tuscanyresidencearuba.com/en/news>. For more information please contact Bas de Groot by phone +297-7332424 or email bas@tuscanyresidencearuba.com. □

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Euro nations seek path between high inflation, weak growth

BRUSSELS (AP) — Euro finance chiefs on Monday engaged in a high-wire political balancing act prompted by conflicting economic forces: a weaker growth outlook and stronger inflation.

Finance ministers from the 19 nations that share the common euro currency pledged continued budgetary stimulus for the European economy amid headwinds caused by the highly transmissible omicron variant. At the same time, they sought to reassure voters by pledging vigilance over sharp price rises.

"Am I concerned about inflation? Obviously so," Dutch Finance Minister Sigrid Kaag told reporters in Brussels before entering a meeting with her euro zone counterparts. "The purchasing power of the individual citizens will be affected."

The euro zone faces a slowdown in economic growth this year after a solid recovery in 2021 from a severe coronavirus-induced recession two years ago. But surging inflation, which reached a record 5% in December and is tied to an energy-market squeeze, has complicated the picture — for both policymakers and voters.

Ioanna Orfanou, a small-scale producer of olives and pomegranates along the central-eastern coast of Greece, said the prices



that she pays for fertilizers and insecticides jumped to alarmingly high levels in the second half of last year.

"This trend is very worrying," Orfanou told the AP. "It gets harder for small farmers to stay in business because we have limited room to pass on the cost increases to average consumers."

Such sentiments have helped spark questions about the European Central Bank's policy of keeping the euro zone money supply loose to fuel economic activity.

The Frankfurt-based ECB has offered support in two key ways: maintaining its interest rates at zero or less and helping to keep other market borrowing costs low by purchasing hundreds of

billions of euros of assets in financial markets.

Daniel Gros, a board member of the CEPS think tank in Brussels, said the ECB should now act in a nuanced way by ending the pandemic-induced asset buying while holding its interest rates at the current ultra-low levels.

"The economic emergency caused by the coronavirus is over and there is a danger, albeit probably a small one, of euro-area inflation staying too high for longer," Gros said Monday by phone.

The euro region's gross domestic product is projected by the European Commission to expand 4.3% in 2022 after estimated 5% growth last year and a 6.4% contraction in 2020.

Still, the predicted growth is higher than projections of a maximum 4% GDP expansion this year in the U.S., where the central bank has warned about the economic threats of inflation and signaled an imminent tightening of monetary policy.

By contrast, ECB officials including President Christine Lagarde have indicated they are in no rush to raise interest rates, arguing that euro-area inflation will fall back to the bank's 2% target in due course.

The EU Commission has predicted a further slowing of euro-area economic growth in 2023 to 2.4%.

While the growth outlook is weaker, national governments in Europe are press-

ing ahead with plans to spend hundreds of billions of euros in unprecedented EU funds raised to help overcome the pandemic-induced slump.

In parallel, some countries including France are pushing for looser EU limits on national debt to allow greater room for growth-boosting public investments. This will require concessions from Germany, a traditional defender of budget austerity.

"More prosperity is needed for Europe," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on his way into the euro gathering. "More growth is needed."

In this context, employment trends in Europe could play a key role for policymakers in coming months because a tighter labor market can lead to wage increases and, by extension, stronger inflation.

So far, the Commission has cited persistent slack in European labor markets and predicted the euro-area jobless rate will fall to 7.5% in 2022 from 7.9% in each of the previous two years.

But Greek farmer Orfanou offered a potential warning on this front, saying she has also faced demands from seasonal workers for higher pay.

"They cited the rising inflation and took advantage of a sudden shortage in the supply of such workers in Greece," Orfanou said. □

Pandemic hasn't slowed China's love for US lobster

By **PATRICK WHITTLE** Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — China is showing no signs of slowing its demand for American lobster this year despite disruption to the supply chain and international trade caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Chinese demand for the crustaceans grew dramatically during the 2010s in part because of the expansion of the country's middle class. The lobsters are especially sought after in winter because they are a popular delicacy on Chinese New Year, which is Feb. 1 this year.

American exporters sent more than 13.2 million pounds (6 million kilograms) of lobster to China during the first 11 months of 2021. That was about 6% more than the same time period the previous year.

The pandemic has made the already difficult task of sending live seafood across the globe more challenging, but Maine lobster exporters are gearing up for a decent Chinese New Year, said Bill Bruns. The operations manager at The Lobster Co. in Arundel said shipments are complicated by the fact the company can't send lobsters to Bei-

jing because of COVID-19 restrictions — but they are able to send to other airports, such as Shenzhen.

"Chinese New Year is always a crapshoot the last couple years," Bruns said. "But I'm prepared for it. I have the staff. Because otherwise it's going to be a long spring."

China buys lobsters from the U.S. — where the industry is based mostly in Maine — and Canada, where the industry is situated in the Atlantic provinces. Exports from Canada were up even more than the U.S. the first 11 months of 2021 compared to 2020, said



John Sackton, an industry analyst and founder of SeafoodNews.com.

Signs point to a strong season for the industry, Sackton said. Consumption of

seafood could also get a boost from the Beijing Winter Olympics, which are set to start a few days after Chinese New Year, he said. □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Jacket flap
- 6 Brooch part
- 11 Stood up
- 12 Berry of "X-Men"
- 13 Waste an opportunity
- 15 Light touch
- 16 Black goo
- 17 Lamb's mother
- 18 Leg bone
- 20 Thin cookie
- 23 Soothing ointments
- 27 Litmus reddener
- 28 Fervor
- 29 Picture puzzle
- 31 Run-down
- 32 Skin features
- 34 Letter after zeta
- 37 Way off
- 38 Zodiac sign
- 41 Fail
- 44 Urge forward
- 45 Lowest point
- 46 Peevish
- 47 Baffled

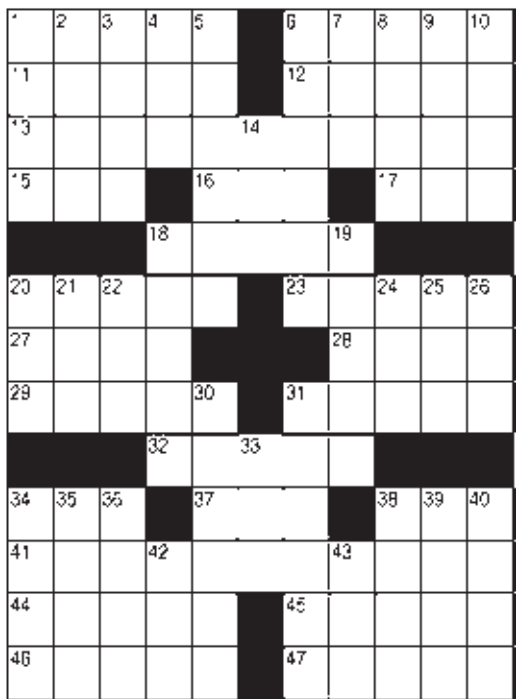
DOWN

- 1 Reader's light



Yesterday's answer

- 21 Dogfight
- 22 Tell
- 24 "Crooklyn"
- 25 Seething
- 26 Wily
- 30 In a
- 31 Venus's
- 33 Fan
- 34 Give off
- 35 Watch
- 36 Nile
- 38 Young
- 39 Buffalo's
- 40 Gumbo
- 42 Ready to
- 43 Small



AXYDLBAAXR
IS LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-18

CRYPTOQUOTE

T M M G A , X T P D R M D V T

C N R C T N R F F E Y A R M Y . A Y E

Y A I M R X A M D T P P A I T M F T .

— F P A X D R M X E B A U E M

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: ZEST IS THE SECRET OF ALL BEAUTY. THERE IS NO BEAUTY THAT IS ATTRACTIVE WITHOUT ZEST. — CHRISTIAN DIOR

'Scream' scares off 'Spider-Man' with \$30.6M debut



NEW YORK (AP) — After a month at no. 1, "Spider-Man: No Way Home" has finally been overtaken at the box office. Paramount Pictures' "Scream" reboot debuted with \$30.6 million in ticket sales over the weekend, according to studio estimates Sunday. "Scream," a self-described "requel" that is both the fifth film in the franchise and a reboot introducing a new, younger cast, led all releases over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. Paramount forecasts that it will total \$35 million including Monday's grosses. "Scream," which cost about \$24 million to make, added another \$18 million in 50 international markets. That made for a solid revival for the self-aware slasher franchise. Rights to the "Scream" films, once a reliable cash cow for Harvey and Bob Weinstein's Miramax Films, were acquired by Spyglass Media Group, which produced the new film with Paramount. This "Scream," helmed by Matt Bettinello-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, was the first not directed by Wes Craven,

who died in 2015. It features original "Scream" cast members Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox and David Arquette alongside new additions Melissa Barrera, Jenna Ortega and Jack Quaid.

Most notably, "Scream" is the first box-office success in a year that Hollywood hopes will see a return to weekly stability at movie theaters. January is typically a quiet period at the box office, but the surge of the omicron variant in COVID-19 has further upended release plans of some winter movies.

"All of our traditional measures were indicating a solid opening, but as I kept telling people: We're still in this thing and it's very difficult to determine what will actually happen," said Chris Aronson, distribution chief for Paramount. "Now we're open, people have seen the movie and we're off and running. Hopefully this becomes another building block toward building the business back and getting it back to some semblance of normalcy."

Meanwhile, "Spider-Man:

No Way Home" slipped to second place but continued to rise in the record books.

"No Way Home" grossed \$20.8 million in its fifth weekend of release. Sony Pictures predicts that with another \$5.2 million on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, "No Way Home" will reach a domestic cumulative total of \$703.9 million Monday, edging "Black Panther" and moving into fourth place all-time. That puts it behind only "Avatar" (\$760 million), "Avengers: Endgame" (\$858 million) and "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" (\$936 million). Globally, "No Way Home" has grossed \$1.6 billion.

Universal Pictures' "Sing 2" landed in third place in its fourth weekend with \$8.3 million over the three-day weekend. The animated sequel has grossed \$122.1 million domestically and \$96.3 million internationally. While the debut of "Scream" could be celebrated by Paramount, which postponed most of its top 2021 releases to 2022 (movies including "Top Gun: Maverick" and "Mission Impossible 7"), its performance also typified current box-office realities. Superhero movies and genre films that appeal to younger audiences have bounced back to near pre-pandemic levels, while films skewing older haven't. "Scream," which received largely favorable reviews (81% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes) and a B+ CinemaScore from audiences, fared better than the last installment, 2011's "Scream 4." That film launched with \$19.3 million. The audience for the new "Scream" was 42% under the age of 25, Sony said. But any success needs to pull from various demographics, and "Scream" also appealed to fans of the early franchise entries. Some 23% of ticket buyers were over 35. The only other new widely released movie over the weekend was "Belle," Mamoru Hosoda's critically acclaimed anime riff on "Beauty and the Beast." □

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Editor
Caribbean Speed Printers N.V.
Aruba Bank N.V. Acc. #332668
Caribbean Mercantile Bank N.V.
Acc. #23951903
RBC Royal Bank Acc. #1330772

Assistant Director

Xiomara Arends

Editors

Liza Koolman (Management assistant)

Richard Brooks

Sales

Linda Reijnders

Sulaika Croes

Classifieds

classified@cspnv.com

Distribution and Collection

accounting@bondia.com

Social / Website

Juan Luis Pinto

Pilar Flores

Columnists

Anthony Croes

Weststraat 22

T: 582-7800

E: news@arubatoday.com

W: www.arubatoday.com

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N. Korea fires short-range missiles in 4th launch this month

By **KIM TONG-HYUNG**

SEOUL, South Korea (AP)

— North Korea fired two suspected ballistic missiles into the sea Monday in its fourth weapons launch this month, South Korea's military said, with the apparent goal of demonstrating its military might during paused diplomacy with the United States and pandemic border closures.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea likely fired two short-range ballistic missiles from an area in Sunan, the site of Pyongyang's international airport. The missiles were launched four minutes apart and flew about 380 kilometers (236 miles) with a maximum altitude of 42 kilometers (26 miles) before landing in waters off the country's north-eastern coast, it said.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the missiles did not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to its allies, but highlighted the destabilizing impact of North Korea's "illicit" weapons program. Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi said the missiles landed outside Japan's exclusive economic zone, and Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno condemned the actions as



threats to peace.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who is visiting the United Arab Emirates, instructed officials to make "utmost efforts to ensure stability" on the Korean Peninsula, his office said. It also said members of the presidential National Security Council stressed the need to revive nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. The U.S. special representative for North Korea, Sung Kim, called his counterparts in Japan and South Korea to discuss the launches and urged the North to instead engage in dialogue. The three officials pledged to continue their close coordination, the U.S. Department of State said.

North Korea conducted flight tests of a purported hypersonic missile on Jan. 5

and Jan. 11 and also test-fired ballistic missiles from a train on Friday in an apparent reprisal for new sanctions imposed by the Biden administration last week for its continuing test launches. North Korea has been ramping up tests in recent months of new, potentially nuclear-capable missiles designed to be maneuverable and fly at low altitudes, which potentially improve their chances of evading missile defenses in the region.

Some experts say North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is going back to a tried-and-true tactic of pressuring his neighbors and the U.S. with missile launches and threats before offering negotiations meant to extract concessions.

A U.S.-led diplomatic push

aimed at convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program collapsed in 2019 after the Trump administration rejected the North's demand for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

Kim has since pledged to further expand a nuclear arsenal he clearly sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.

His government has so far rejected the Biden administration's call to resume dialogue without preconditions, saying that Washington must first abandon its "hostile policy," a term North Korea mainly uses to describe sanctions and combined U.S.-South Korea military exercises.

Kim Dong-yub, a professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies, said North Korea may have conducted another launch to pressure Washington and could continue to dial up its testing activity after vowing stronger action over what it perceives as U.S. hostility. Last week, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on five North Koreans over their roles in obtaining equipment and technology for the North's missile

programs, in its response to North Korea's earlier tests this month.

The State Department ordered sanctions against another North Korean, a Russian man and a Russian company for their broader support of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction activities. The Biden administration also said it would pursue additional U.N. sanctions over the North's continued tests.

The announcement of the sanctions just came hours after North Korean state media said Kim Jong Un oversaw a successful test of a hypersonic missile on Tuesday, the country's second test of the purported system in a week, and claimed that the weapon would greatly increase the country's "war deterrent."

North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles from a train last Friday in apparent retaliation against new U.S. sanctions tied to the hypersonic tests. Friday's test came hours after North Korea's Foreign Ministry issued a statement berating the Biden administration over the new sanctions and warned of "stronger and certain reaction" if Washington maintains its confrontational stance. □

Tesla inks deal to get key battery component outside China



By **TOM BOWKER and TOM KRISHER Associated Press**

LONDON (AP) — Tesla is turning to Mozambique for a key component in its electric car batteries in what analysts believe is a first-of-its-kind deal designed to reduce its dependence on China for graphite.

Elon Musk's company signed an agreement last month with Australia's Syrah Resources, which operates one of the world's largest graphite mines in the southern African country. It's a unique partnership between an electric vehicle manufacturer and

a producer of the mineral that is critical for lithium-ion batteries. The value of the deal hasn't been released. Tesla will buy the material from the company's processing plant in Vidalia, Louisiana, which sources graphite from its mine in Balama, Mozambique. The Austin, Texas-based electric automaker plans to buy up 80% of what the plant produces — 8,000 tons of graphite per year — starting in 2025, according to the agreement. Syrah must prove the material meets Tesla's standards.

The deal is part of Tesla's plan to ramp up its capacity to make its own batteries so it can reduce its dependence on China, which dominates global graphite markets, said Simon Moores

of United Kingdom-based battery materials data and intelligence provider, Benchmark Mineral Intelligence.

"It starts at the top with geopolitics," Moores said. "The U.S. wants to build enough capacity domestically to be able to build (lithium-ion batteries) within the USA. And this deal will permit Tesla to source graphite independent from China." Moores said producing the batteries in the U.S. will reduce some of the questions Tesla is facing about its ties to China, where there are environmental concerns at some mines. The automaker also has set up a showroom in the region of Xinjiang, where Chinese officials are accused of forced labor and other hu-

man rights abuses against mostly Muslim ethnic minorities.

A message was left seeking comment from Tesla, which has disbanded its media relations department.

The battery industry has been confronted with a short supply of graphite in recent months, Moores said. Graphite stores lithium inside a battery until it's needed to generate electricity by splitting into charged ions and electrons.

It comes as every major automaker is racing to get into electric vehicles amid concerns about climate change. Tesla is making almost a million electric cars per year, and sourcing enough batteries is its biggest constraint, he said. □

South Carolina still No. 1 in women's Top 25; Oklahoma jumps

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

South Carolina remained the No. 1 team in The Associated Press women's college basketball poll released Monday.

The Gamecocks received 28 of the 30 first-place votes from a national media panel after beating Texas A&M and Arkansas last week. South Carolina is off until hosting Vanderbilt next Monday.

There was no movement near the top of the poll as Stanford, Louisville, North Carolina State, Tennessee and Indiana followed the Gamecocks again. Louisville received the other two first-place votes.

Iowa State moved up two spots to No. 7 with Michigan, UConn and Arizona rounding out the top 10. The Wolverines won at Maryland for the first time. The Terrapins fell from No. 8 to 12th after being routed



69-49.

Oklahoma made the biggest jump, climbing nine spots to 14th. The Sooners beat then-No. 14 Baylor and TCU last week and now have their best ranking since they were 12th in 2016.

Florida Gulf Coast and Iowa returned to the poll at Nos. 24 and 25 while Kansas State and South Florida dropped out.

Here are a few other tidbits from the women's AP Top 25:

WELCOME BACK

Florida Gulf Coast fell out of the poll in early December after suffering its only loss of the season, to Princeton. The Eagles were ranked for two weeks in late November. A huge reason for the team's success this year and last season has been

the play of junior guard Kiernan Bell. She is averaging 24.6 points and 7.9 rebounds for the team that beat ASUN Conference rival Liberty on Saturday. Bell had 25 points in that win.

NO. 1 STATS

Since moving to No. 1 for the first time in school history in 2014, South Carolina has spent 36 weeks as the top team, including the last 11. Only UConn has more appearances at No. 1 in that timeframe, with 71 weeks. Notre Dame is third with 11.

GAME OF THE WEEK

Louisville at N.C. State, Thursday. The two top teams in the ACC meet for the only time this season with the No. 1 spot in the conference at stake. Louisville coach Jeff Walz got his 400th career win on Sunday in a victory over Boston College. N.C. State is coming off a 24-point victory over Duke. □

Osaka, Nadal advance in Australia after Djokovic flies home

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP)

— The first test of Naomi Osaka's new approach to tennis might have been when she completely whiffed an overhead to give her opponent a break point on Day 1 of the no-Novak Djokovic Australian Open.

Osaka didn't throw her racket. She didn't roll her eyes. She smiled.

"There are situations where I previously would get upset. But at this point in my life, like, I'm here because I want to be here and because I find that it's fun for me," Osaka said. "Might as well enjoy it while I still can." In Osaka's mind, the drama involving nine-time champion Djokovic's deportation on the eve of the Australian Open was something for the players in the men's draw to worry about. Her title defense began smoothly enough: She won the first five games on the way to a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Camila Osorio.

With so much attention on the 11-day saga of Djokovic's attempt to participate

in the year's first Grand Slam tournament, the returns of Osaka and Rafael Nadal have been overshadowed. Osaka wasn't bothered by that. Nadal didn't seem to be put off by it, either, renewing his bid for a record 21st Grand Slam singles title with a 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 win over Marcos Giron.

Nadal is tied with Djokovic and Roger Federer with 20 major singles titles each, the most in the history of men's tennis. With Djokovic unable to defend his crown in Melbourne because he didn't meet Australia's strict COVID-19 vaccination criteria, the door is slightly more ajar to Nadal.

Osaka's main concern, meanwhile, is winning a third Australian title in four years.

"To be completely honest, it didn't really affect me," Osaka said of the Djokovic drama. "My goal, like even before this whole situation, is to just focus on myself more, what I need to do to become better."

"Me, I'm a tennis player. I'll focus on my matches. You

as, I guess, an audience, focus on whatever is in the news, no?"

A potential fourth-round meeting with top-ranked Ash Barty could be waiting. Barty, aiming to be the first Australian woman to win the title in Melbourne since 1978, beat Lesia Tsurenko 6-0, 6-1.

Osaka, after winning the title last year, pulled out of the French Open before the second round, then sat out Wimbledon. She played at the Tokyo Olympics, where she lit the cauldron, but ended her 2021 season early after a third-round loss and a teary news conference at the U.S. Open.

Two of her goals for 2022 are to stay completely composed on the court and off, and to enjoy the game.

And, yes, finally, the focus was on tennis in Australia. It got started in a big way, with a combined 64 singles matches on opening day. French Open champion Barbora Krejickova, fifth-seeded Maria Sakkari, No. 15 Elina Svitolina and two-time Australian Open

champion Victoria Azarenka all advanced.

Two young American contenders went out in the first round, with 2020 Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin losing 7-6 (2), 7-5 to Madison Keys and No. 18 Coco Gauff saving five match points before losing 6-4, 6-2 to Wang Qiang.

Olympic champion Belinda Bencic advanced to a second-round match against Amanda Anisimova.

Men's Olympic champion Alexander Zverev wrapped up the Day 1 program on Rod Laver Arena with a 7-6 (3), 6-1, 7-6 (1) win over Daniel Altmaier and will next play John Millman, who ended 40-year-old Feliciano Lopez's 79th consecutive Grand Slam event in the first round.

No. 14 Denis Shapovalov followed up his win with Canada in the ATP Cup with a 7-6 (3), 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (3) win over Laslo Djere.

Also advancing were No. 7 Matteo Berrettini, No. 10 Hubert Hurkacz, No. 16 Cristian Garin, No. 17 Gael Monfils and No. 23 Reilly Opelka, while No. 12 Cam-

eron Norrie lost in straight sets to Sebastian Korda.

Nadal won the Australian Open in 2009 and is the only past champion in the men's bracket after Djokovic's late withdrawal Sunday. On Monday, the top-ranked Serbian landed in Dubai, then caught a flight to Belgrade.

Monday was Nadal's first appearance at a major since he lost to Djokovic in the semifinals of the French Open. He missed Wimbledon because of fatigue, skipped the U.S. Open with a painful left foot and, after recovering from COVID-19, started 2022 with a title in a tuneup tournament in Melbourne.

"Honestly, it's been very tough moments and there are still doubts," Nadal said. "But here I am and I can't be happier to be back in this amazing stadium. It's fantastic."

The 35-year-old Spaniard said Djokovic's absence would have an impact on the tournament.

"In a personal level, yes, I would like to see him playing here," Nadal said. □

Steelers face long-overdue reboot as Roethlisberger exits

By **WILL GRAVES** AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Ben Roethlisberger came back for one more run, wanting a chance for his final performance to not be a lopsided first-round playoff loss. Even with his closest friends gone. Even with a first-year offensive coordinator. Even knowing he'd have an almost completely rebuilt offensive line. Even with rookies likely to take over in the backfield and at tight end. The longtime Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback and future Hall of Famer's reward? An unlikely postseason berth and ... a lopsided first-round playoff loss. Pittsburgh's unwieldy season came to the crashing halt that was practically inevitable in a 42-21 whipping at the hands of Kansas City on Sunday night. The Steelers (9-8-1) arrived at Arrowhead Stadium as the longest shot in the 14-team field and played like it. The issues that plagued them all year — from offensive coordinator Matt Canada's ineffectual play calling to a defense that was consistently drilled on the



road — manifested themselves over the final three quarters. Patrick Mahomes did whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. It looked an awful lot like a handful of games from earlier in the season, including a 36-10 whipping in the same stadium the day after Christmas.

Roethlisberger's career likely ended with an 11-yard

pass to Zach Gentry as the clock ran out. The 39-year-old married father of three met briefly with Mahomes at midfield, saluted the fans in black and gold who stuck around to the bitter end, then walked into the tunnel — and into the next phase of his life.

"Being a husband and father, you never take a day off," he said. "You've got to

keep going, and so, as we move from one chapter to the next, it's going to be different, but it's going to be fun. It's going to be a challenge and I'm looking forward to it."

The team he's leaving behind, maybe not so much. The franchise that had every opportunity to make a clean break after last year's flameout in the first round

against the Browns but opted to bring back Roethlisberger can no longer kick the can down the road.

There are pieces in place to build around. All-Pro outside linebacker T.J. Watt is in his prime and a contender to win his first Defensive Player of the Year award. Rookie running back Najee Harris and rookie tight end Pat Freiermuth look very much like long-term fixtures. Safety Minkah Fitzpatrick is due a contract extension and All-Pro defensive lineman Cam Heyward is a worthy successor to Roethlisberger as the keeper of "The Steeler Way."

It's a way that will need some recalibration over the next six months. Pittsburgh hasn't won a playoff game in five years, the longest drought of any team in the AFC North. "I take it very personal when we don't have playoff success," Heyward said. "I will be back at the drawing board trying to figure out a way if I am on this team." Heyward almost certainly will be. Yet he may be one of a few high-profile holdovers for a team in transition. □

German luge star Geisenberger says she's going to Olympics

By **TIM REYNOLDS** AP Sports Writer

Natalie Geisenberger has made it official: She's heading to the Beijing Games and seeking a third consecutive Olympic women's luge gold medal.

The German slider, generally considered the best in the history of her sport, had considered skipping the Olympics for a multitude of reasons — including human rights issues, and her belief that luge athletes were not treated well by Chinese officials when training there earlier this season.

But in a social media post on Monday, the four-time world champion and eight-time World Cup overall champion laid out her reasons for deciding to compete in what presumably will be her final Olympics.

"We athletes have absolutely nothing to do with the decision to award the Olympic Games to Beijing — the (International Olympic Committee) decides and we athletes are presented with a fait accompli," Geisenberger wrote. "We only have the choice: do I fly there and give everything or do I just let my sporting dream burst so close to the end."

She chose to go and will be considered among the top medal hopefuls — along with fellow Germans Julia Taubitz and Anna Berreiter, Austria's Madeleine Egle and American sliders Summer Britcher and Emily Sweeney.

Geisenberger and almost all of the world's top luge athletes were at the Yanqing Sliding Center north of Beijing this fall for extended training on the Olympic track, followed by the first World Cup race of the season. But not long after leaving China, Geisenberger told German regional broadcaster BR that she was considering skipping the Olympics.

"The conditions that we experienced there speak in favor of not necessarily going back there again," Geisenberger told BR in December.

She spent several days in quarantine after arriving in China for a three-week training and racing period in November. She got there on a charter flight that carried basically the entire International Luge Federation circuit to China for those events, then wound up being among the sliders identified as a potential close contact to someone who was aboard that flight and tested positive for COVID-19.

Despite testing negative daily, Geisenberger said rules put in place by Chinese officials mandated that she would not be allowed out of her room for several days other than for training sessions. She also said food dropped off outside her door wasn't to the standard that elite athletes need or want.

"If I had said now that I would not fly, nothing would have changed in China, neither the hu-

man rights situation nor anything else," Geisenberger wrote Monday. "Unfortunately, it takes more than just a few athletes to boycott. Then I would have destroyed my own dream in the first place. There would have been a different name somewhere on the list of results."

"It shouldn't be that athletes now have to pay for what the IOC and politicians decided 10 years ago," she added. "Hence my decision to fly to Beijing."

Geisenberger became a mother for the first time after the 2018 Olympics, missed a year of competition, then returned to the World Cup circuit with eyes on 2022. She said her family has sacrificed considerably on this Olympic journey and she didn't want to let them down by not competing.

She turns 34 on Feb. 5, the first full day of competition at the Beijing Games.

"The Olympic Games are not just any event," she said. "It is the greatest of all for almost every athlete and cannot be compared to anything in terms of sport. I can't say 'then I'll just go next year' — there are only Olympic Games every four years."

Geisenberger is fourth in the women's World Cup standings this season with one race left, coming this weekend in St. Moritz, Switzerland. She has medaled four times — three silver, one bronze — in 11 races this season. □