In scramble to stop virus, testing raises tough questions

By M. STOBBE/A. GELLER
Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Health officials confronted tough questions and doubts Thursday about testing to intercept the fast-spreading virus, with scrutiny focused on a four-day delay in screening an infected California woman despite her doctors’ early calls to do so.

The questions are global, not just who, when and how to test for the illness, but how to make sure that working test kits get out to the labs that need them.

All those issues apparently came in to play in the treatment of the woman in northern California, a case officials say may be the first community-spread instance of the disease in the U.S.

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This undated photo provided by U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows CDC’s laboratory test kit for the new coronavirus.

Associated Press
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Continued from From

“This was a clear gap in our preparedness, and the virus went right through the gap,” said Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the University of Nebraska College of Public Health.

In the wake of the latest California case, U.S. health officials on Thursday expanded their criteria for who should get tested, and took steps to increase testing.

The debate over testing has taken on added urgency as the number of cases worldwide climbed past 82,000, including 2,800 reported deaths. The rapid spread pushed officials in Saudi Arabia to cut travel to Islam’s holiest sites, triggered tougher penalties in South Korea for people who break quarantines and ratcheted up pressure on investors as U.S. stock markets extended their week-long plunge. The Dow Jones Industrial Average sank nearly 1,200 points Thursday, its worst one-day drop since 2011. With the illness rippling across 47 nations in every continent but Antarctica, public health officials emphasized the need for rapid intervention.

“Aggressive early measures can prevent transmission before the virus gets a foothold,” World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said. He cited a study in China of more than 320,000 test samples that enabled health officials to zero in on the 0.14 percent that screened positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

But catching the disease early will require countries to invest in rapid diagnostics, said Dr. Gagandeep Kang, a microbiologist who heads the Translational Health Science And Technology Institute in India.

Test kits used by the World Health Organization cost less than $5 each, said Michael Ryan, the group’s emergencies programs director. But that figure does not include the expense of medical staff and validation screening, and making such investments effective goes well beyond the expense involved.

Doctors at the University of California Davis Medical Center were mindful of the need for early identification on Feb. 19 when the hospital admitted a female patient on a ventilator who showed symptoms of a viral infection.

They asked she be tested for the new coronavirus, according to an email hospital officials sent to their employees, but a test was not administered because she did not fit federal test criteria. The test was not done until four days later, on Feb. 23, and the results did not come back until Wednesday, a full week after she was admitted, the hospital said.

The federal agency in charge of testing, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, took issue with that account late Thursday. The agency said it was still investigating, but that a preliminary review showed it had not been informed of the case until Feb. 23, when it requested specimens for testing. It said criteria in place at the time could have allowed the woman to be tested earlier.

The case highlights the fact that most testing in U.S. up to now has been limited to those who, in addition to showing symptoms, have a history of travel to countries affected by the disease or contact with those who have done so, said Lauren Sauer, director of operations at Johns Hopkins University’s Office of Critical Event Preparedness and Response.

“In the U.S., people are sticking pretty closely to that definition,” Sauer said. But the increasing cases on other continents “are demonstrating we need to do a better job than just where the outbreak originated.”

On Thursday, the CDC updated its testing criteria on its website — a move that had been in the works for days, according to a federal official familiar with the change.

The CDC will continue to advise testing people who have traveled to certain outbreak areas and have fever and certain other symptoms. But now testing is also appropriate if such symptoms exist and flu and other respiratory illnesses have been ruled out and no source of exposure has been identified.

As part of that, CDC has expanded the list of countries that are red flags for testing to include not only China but Iran, Italy, South Korea and Japan.

Last month, the CDC said it had developed a test kit that could be sent to state and big city public health labs, so they could broaden testing to more people. Early this month, the agency got authorization to begin distribution of the kit to government public health labs in the 50 states and some cities and counties.

But most of the kits proved to be faulty, providing inconclusive results to test samples that should have tested positive. The problem was blamed on one of three reagents used in the testing. CDC said it was trying to manufacture new reagents, but gave no firm timetable for when that would occur.

Only about a half dozen state and local public health labs had fully functional kits as of early this week.

As weeks passed, the problem became more and more frustrating, said Scott Becker, the chief executive of the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

On Monday, Becker’s organization sent a letter to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, basically asking permission for state labs to develop their own tests.

On Wednesday, FDA officials responded that labs would be allowed to rely on the two other reagents, meaning that as many as 40 state and local labs could be up and running with their tests in the next few days, Becker said.

Associated Press
By JIM MUSTIAN
NEW YORK (AP) — New evidence against Mexico’s former top security official has been uncovered since he was charged with taking tens of millions of dollars in bribes to protect Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman’s notorious Sinaloa cartel, federal prosecutors said Thursday.

“The strength of the government’s case has only increased” since a grand jury indicted Genaro Garcia Luna last year on charges he conspired to traffic cocaine and made false statements, prosecutors wrote in court filings.

Prosecutors wrote they have additional witnesses that will testify Garcia Luna “agreed to assist the Sinaloa Cartel in exchange for millions of dollars in bribes.” The new details came as prosecutors asked a federal magistrate in Brooklyn to reject Garcia Luna’s request to be released on $1 million bond while awaiting trial.

De Castro argued it would be “nearly impossible” for Garcia Luna to flee the United States, saying he is under investigation in Mexico and would be arrested upon entering that country. Garcia Luna has surrendered his passport, he added.

“The government comes in and says he’s a flight risk because he’s Mexican and has access to corrupt Mexican officials,” de Castro said. “He is not a flight risk.”

Prosecutors countered that Garcia Luna has “every incentive” to flee prosecution, saying he faces a mandatory minimum of 10 years behind bars on each of three conspiracy counts. “This incentive is only further amplified by the strength of the government’s evidence in this case,” they wrote.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Robert M. Levy did not rule out the possibility of Garcia Luna being released on bond, but said he wants to know more about the sureties who would be on the hook financially should he abscond before trial.

Garcia Luna is accused of accepting tens of millions of dollars in bribes — often stuffed in briefcases full of cash — to shield the Sinaloa cartel from law enforcement. Prosecutors allege that Garcia Luna amassed a fortune allowing Guzman’s narcotics trafficking syndicate to operate with impunity in Mexico. Before convicting Guzman last year, jurors in his New York trial heard former cartel member Jesus Zambada testify that he personally made at least $6 million in hidden payments to Garcia Luna, on behalf of his older brother, cartel boss Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada.

Guzman was sentenced to life in prison last year after a jury convicted him in a massive drug conspiracy involving murder and mayhem.

The cartel shipped multi-ton drug loads to New York and other American cities, including the federal district covering Brooklyn and Queens, prosecutors say.
Labor union unveils $150M campaign to help defeat Trump

By STEVE PEOPLES
AP National Political Writer
WASHINGTON (AP) — One of the nation’s largest labor unions is unveiling plans to invest $150 million in a nationwide campaign to help defeat President Donald Trump, a sweeping effort focused on eight battleground states and voters of color who typically don’t vote.

The investment marks the largest voter engagement and turnout operation in the history of the Service Employees International Union, which claims nearly 2 million members. The scope of the campaign, which quietly launched last month and will run through November’s general election, reflects the urgency of what union president Mary Kay Henry calls “a make-or-break” moment for working people in America under Trump’s leadership.

“He’s systematically unwinding and attacking unions. Federal workers rights have been totally eviscerated under his watch,” Henry said in an interview. “We are on fire about the rules being rigged against us and needing to elect people that are going to stand with workers.”

The union’s campaign will span 40 states and target 6 million voters focused largely in Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin, according to details of the plan shared with The Associated Press. The union and its local members will pay particular attention to two key urban battlegrounds they believe will play a defining role in the 2020 general election: Detroit and Milwaukee. There may be some television advertising, but the investment will focus primarily on direct contact and online advertising targeting minority men and women who typically don’t vote.

Few groups of voters will be more important in the 2020 general election. Trump won the presidency four years ago largely because of his popularity with working-class whites and a drop-off in turnout from minority voters.

The union’s political director, Maria Peralta, noted that Trump’s campaign has been working effectively in recent months to win over some minority voters, particularly men, who have traditionally voted Democratic.

“He’s going after our communities in ways that are pervasive. We’re deeply aware of that,” Peralta said. “They’re talking about the strength of the economy.”

The Service Employees International Union, like the Democratic Party and its allies across the nation, faces significant headwinds in its fight to deny Trump a second term. Voters who may dislike his overall job performance are generally pleased with his leadership on the economy, and unemployment for black Americans has hit record lows in recent months.

At the same time, Trump’s campaign is far ahead of where it was four years ago, when it had little national organization.

On Wednesday, the Trump campaign announced plans to open 15 “Black Voices for Trump Community Centers” in battleground states and major cities, including Michigan and Wisconsin. The offices will feature a line of campaign swag adopting the “woke” label, and videos of prominent Trump surrogates like online stars Diamond and Silk explaining their support for the president and pamphlets outlining the president’s record.

SEIU is the most diverse union in the United States. The union’s membership includes those who work in health care, food service, janitorial services and state and local government workers, among others.

Half its members are people of color, and more than half make less than $15 an hour.

The 2020 investment is designed to benefit Democrats up and down the ballot this fall, though defeating Trump stands as a primary goal.

That said, SEIU’s political team has determined that a message simply attacking Trump isn’t effective with its target audience, which includes a significant number of conservatives. The union also determined that it’s particularly effective to highlight Trump’s work to weaken labor unions and conditions for working-class Americans.

After campaigning for a higher minimum wage, Trump has done little to raise the federal minimum wage, which has been stuck at $7.25 for more than a decade. His administration has also taken steps to make it harder for new groups of workers to form unions. And labor officials have decried his appointments to the National Labor Relations Board and the Supreme Court, which dealt a huge blow to labor in 2018 by ruling that government workers no longer could be required to pay union fees.
Neighbors: Brewery gunman built weapons from mail-order parts

By GRETCHEN EHLKE and TODD RICHMOND
Associated Press

MILWAUKEE (AP) — A Milwaukee electrician who police identified Thursday as the man who fatally shot five co-workers at one of the nation’s largest breweries enjoyed building guns, according to neighbors.

Authorities said 51-year-old Anthony Ferrill opened fire at the Molson Coors Brewing Co. complex on Wednesday, killing five male employees before turning his gun on himself.

His motive remains a mystery; police say the case is still under investigation. They also haven’t released details about how the shooting unfolded.

Milwaukee police Chief Alfonso Morales said the victims were all from the Milwaukee area. He identified them as Jesus Valle Jr., 33, of Milwaukee; Gennady Levshetz, 61, of Mequon; Trevor Wetselaar, 33, of Milwaukee; Dana Walk, 57, of Delafield; and Dale Hudson, 60, of Waukesha.

Ferrill’s neighbors said he was a married father of two adult children and one younger daughter. They said he had worked at the brewery for about 15 years as an electrician.

His brother, Benjamin Ferrill, of The Colony, Texas, told The Associated Press: “It’s a tragic loss to everybody. We’re still trying to digest it.”

Erna Roenspies, who lived next door to Ferrill, described him as a nice guy and helpful neighbor who enjoyed building guns with mail-order parts.

Several years ago Ferrill slipped or fell off a ladder at the brewery and hurt his shoulder, forcing him to miss work. He told Roenspies that “spies” from the brewery were lurking in the neighborhood, watching his activities to make sure he wasn’t faking the injury. Once he pointed out the spies’ car to her, she said, the spying “irritated” him, she said.

Still, Roenspies, 82, said Ferrill was a “gentleman” who checked up on her to make sure she was all right. “I considered him a son,” she said. “He wasn’t violent. He wasn’t a drunk. He was a gentleman. I just can’t believe it.”

Another neighbor, Elizabeth LaPine, described Ferrill as a quiet person who walked his Doberman pinscher every day, and would sometimes throw a ball around for his dog in the street. She said she lived across the street from Ferrill for 11 years.

“It’s heartbreaking,” she said.

LaPine said Ferrill had several cars and always kept them shiny. She said that the last time she saw Ferrill was Sunday, and he had polished up his burgundy Chrysler, which she called his “Sunday car,” and took it for a ride.

The shooting happened at an 82-acre (33-hectare) complex that includes a mix of corporate offices and brewing facilities and employs more than 1,000 people. It’s widely known in the Milwaukee area as “Miller Valley,” a reference to the Miller Brewing Co. that is now part of Molson Coors.

A massive red Miller sign that towers over the complex is a well-known symbol in a city where beer and brewing are intertwined with local history. The complex features a 160-year-old brewery, a packaging center that fills thousands of cans and bottles every minute and a distribution center the size of five football fields.

Brewery Workers Local 9 of the United Auto Workers, which represents about 400 workers at the complex, issued a statement Thursday calling the shooting a “senseless tragedy” and alerting members that grief counselors would be available at their union hall in West Allis, a Milwaukee suburb.

The Molson Coors facility is seen Thursday Feb. 27, 2020, in Milwaukee.

Associated Press
AP-NORC poll: Election security, integrity worry Americans

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and HANNAH FINGERHUT
Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans have widespread concerns about the security and integrity of elections, with few saying they have high confidence that votes in the 2020 presidential election will be counted accurately.

A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds skepticism about the democratic process in the United States. While a third of Americans say they have high confidence in an accurate count, roughly another third are only moderately confident, and a remaining third say they have little confidence.

"What's to prevent old Vlad Putin from interfering in the election? I don't know," says Reid Gibson, an independent voter in Mesa, Ariz., referring to the Russian president, who U.S. intelligence agencies say interfered in the 2016 election with a sophisticated operation to sow division and help elect Donald Trump, a Republican.

FBI Director Christopher Wray told Congress this month that Russia is still engaged in "information warfare" heading into the 2020 election, but that the enforcement has not been seen efforts to target infrastructure like voting machines.

Still, U.S. officials say one of Russia's goals is to sow doubt about the integrity of U.S. elections, and the poll suggests that even if Russia isn't targeting voting infrastructure, it may be achieving that goal because of the lack of voter confidence following from the 2016 election.

Gibson, who says he leans Democratic, is pessimistic about the state of U.S. politics and has little confidence that votes in the 2020 presidential election will be counted accurately. He says he's been concerned about voter problems in Florida delayed resolution of the presidential election and a Supreme Court decision to stop a ballot recount ultimately put George W. Bush, a Republican, in office.

Recent U.S. intelligence agencies and special counsel Robert Mueller found that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election. Mueller charged 13 Russians in a covert social media campaign that prosecutors said was aimed at dividing public opinion on hot-button social issues as well as raising Trump while denigrating Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic nominee.

"I think it's about as fair is it could be," says Richard Merritt, 53, a Republican from Maine who supports Trump. "If someone was trying to hack into a voting system, the United States would be on top of that before you and I even knew it."

Views on election integrity and security also divide along racial lines. Roughly two-thirds of black Americans say they have little confidence that votes in 2020 will be counted accurately, compared with fewer than 4 in 10 white Americans or Hispanics, who are concerned about hackers and foreign influence.

"There is increasingly incendiary rhetoric" on the voter fraud issue, he says.

Hasen says he believes many Americans' concerns about the process come after they tune into major news events, such as election problems in the recent Iowa caucuses or Mueller's investigation into Russian interference.

"I think there are threats to our system," Hasen says. "But I think the question of voter confidence is separable from the reality."
Latest Baltimore scandal ends with former mayor’s sentencing

By REGINA GARCIA CANO
Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — Yet another embarrassing chapter in Baltimore’s extremely troubled history ended Thursday when the city’s former mayor was sentenced to federal prison for fraudulently selling her self-published children’s books to nonprofit organizations to promote her political career.

Catherine Pugh accepted “full responsibility” for her actions and apologized through tears during the roughly 10 minutes she spoke in federal court in Baltimore before she was sentenced. The veteran Democratic politician said that “no one is more disappointed than me” and added that she did not want to bring “any more shame” to the city.

“I think the first thing I should do is apologize to the citizens of Baltimore who put their faith and trust in me as their mayor, and to all the people who put their faith and trust in me as state senator and as delegate,” Pugh said outside the courthouse after being sentenced.

The scandal shook Maryland’s 7th Congressional District. Five people spoke in support of Pugh during the hearing, including the former high school teacher. But Chasanow said she found it ironic that Pugh’s supporters stressed her commitment to public service because “it was precisely that reputation for good work that enabled her to commit those offenses.”

“I have yet frankly to hear any explanation that makes sense,” Chasanow said. “This was not a tiny mistake, lapse of judgment. This became a very large fraud. The nature and circumstances of this offense clearly I think are extremely, extremely serious.”

Baltimore City Council President Brandon M. Scott called the sentencing “a somber moment for Baltimore,” saying in a written statement that Pugh’s acts “seriously undermined the public’s trust in our local government.”

“This moment reminds us that, as elected officials, we have one job: to serve the people, period,” Scott said.

Pugh, who turns 70 next week, was elected mayor in 2016 and resigned under pressure in May as authorities investigated bulk sales of her “Healthy Holly” paperbacks, which netted her hundreds of thousands of dollars. Federal authorities accused her of double selling the books, keeping many for self-promotion purposes and failing to deliver them to institutions they were purchased for, including the Baltimore City Public Schools. Pugh used the proceeds to fund straw donations to her mayoral campaign and buy a new house.

Pugh was also sentenced Thursday to serve three years of supervised release after getting out of prison. She was ordered to pay more than $411,000 in restitution and to forfeit more than $669,000 to the government.

The disgraced former mayor pleaded guilty to federal conspiracy and tax evasion charges in November. She will be notified by April 13 when she must surrender. She was ordered to pay $132,100. But only about 73,200 copies were printed. Prosecutors said Pugh’s personal inventory of books never exceeded 8,216 copies, but she resold them repeatedly through the elaborate scheme.

The University of Maryland Medical System — one of the state’s largest employers — was Pugh’s biggest book customer. The system is slated to get $400,000 of the restitution Pugh was ordered to pay. Another book buyer, the Maryland Automobile Insurance Fund, is expected to get about $11,000.

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Pugh, helped by longtime aide Gary Brown Jr., carefully carried out the “Healthy Holly” scheme over more than seven years, starting when she was a Maryland state senator and into her tenure as Baltimore’s mayor. Brown and another Pugh associate, Roslyn Wedington, await sentencing after pleading guilty to conspiracy and tax fraud.

A detailed accounting of the sales presented by prosecutors in their sentencing memorandum showed that organizations paid Pugh $859,960 for orders of more than
SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic (AP) — A cruise ship heading to the Dominican Republic to disembark hundreds of passengers after a 14-day tour was turned away on Thursday because officials feared eight of those aboard showed potential symptoms of the COVID-19 virus, officials announced.

A joint statement by the Public Health Ministry and Port Authority said the captain of the Bremeria reported four Filipinos, two British citizens and two U.S. citizens were under medical observation for symptoms such as fever, coughing, or breathing difficulty.

Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines said in an emailed statement that it had reported "a small number of influenza-like cases on board. Our medical team has now advised that they are all feeling better. No guests or crew are, or have been, displaying symptoms that are considered to be consistent with those of Coronavirus." Officials said the ship was carrying 1,128 passengers and 384 crew members.

The cruise line said it was "awaiting advice on the next steps" and "talking with a number of airlines to secure onward travel for guests." "It is our opinion that this is an overreaction by the Dominican Republic," Fred. Olsen said in a written statement.

The cruise line’s website shows the ship had been due to pick up another load of passengers and set off on a new cruise Thursday night.

Public Health Minister Rafael Sánchez Cárdenas said the ship already had been barred by another port, which he did not specify.

Meanwhile, passengers on another vessel at the Mexican island of Cozumel faced yet another day in dock, after they weren’t allowed to get off the ship, after they had been previously turned away from two ports.

The MSC Meraviglia, turned away by two nations due to fears of the virus outbreak, docked at Cozumel on Thursday and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said passengers would be allowed to disembark. López Obrador said Mexico had to act with "humanity" after the ship was refused entry at ports in Grand Cayman and Jamaica.

But Alejandra Aguirre, the health secretary of the coastal state of Quintana Roo, said two people had been detected with acute respiratory infections not believed to be the new coronavirus and that other passengers wouldn’t be allowed off until tests on those two came back later Thursday.

The two were identified as a 27-year-old male crew member from the Philippines and a 30-year-old female passenger from France. MSC said in a statement that the two passengers were now symptom-free and the ship would remain in Cozumel.

Assuming clearance to disembark is given, passengers would be free to tour Cozumel through the end of Friday. The cruise line had expressed frustration with the rejections, which came after it reported the crew member was sick with common seasonal flu.

"The ship is being allowed to dock and the passengers, those who are aboard the cruise ship, can disembark," López Obrador said, adding that health inspections will be carried out.

"We cannot act with discrimination," he said. "Imagine if a ship arrived and it wasn’t even allowed to dock, and they were told, ‘Keep going on your way, see where you can dock.’ That is inhuman." He added "we cannot close our ports, nor can we close our airports."

"Imagine the desperation and everything it implies, almost 5,000 people on a ship and they cannot get off," he said. "Why such backward attitudes?"

The case of the Meraviglia illustrated the crisis of nerves over the COVID-19 virus. Mexico has no confirmed cases and MSC Cruises said the ship member had only common seasonal flu, had been placed in isolation and had "nearly recovered."
Plácido Domingo revises apology, as Spain drops more shows

By JOCELYN GECKER and ARITZ PARRA
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Opera star Plácido Domingo amended his apology to the multiple women who have accused him of sexual misconduct, adding several caveats Thursday to a statement two days earlier in which he said he took “full responsibility” for his actions.

In a statement on his Facebook page, posted as several European concert halls moved to cancel his appearances, the legendary tenor said he wanted to “correct the false impression generated by my apology to the multiple women who have accused him of sexual misconduct, adding several caveats Thursday to a statement two days earlier in which he said he took “full responsibility” for his actions.

In his Tuesday statement, Domingo had said: “I respect that these women finally felt comfortable enough to speak out, and I want them to know that I am truly sorry for the hurt that I caused them. I accept full responsibility for my actions, and I have grown from this experience.”

Domingo’s spokeswoman, Nancy Seltzer, offered no immediate comment when asked how to reconcile the dual statements.

The star’s initial statement came in response to the findings of an investigation by the U.S. union representing opera performers, which found the star had behaved inappropriately over the course of two decades when he held senior management positions at Washington National Opera and Los Angeles Opera.

His words set off a backlash in Spain, which became the first country in Europe to cancel the megastar since the sexual harassment allegations surfaced last year in two stories by The Associated Press.

In this Aug. 28, 2019 file photo, opera star Placido Domingo salutes spectators at the end of a concert in Szeged, Hungary.

On Thursday, Madrid’s main opera house, Teatro Real, said it had scheduled a meeting to decide what to do about Domingo’s five upcoming appearances in May, but that the singer then withdrew from the performances. The company added that it “reaffirms its policy of zero tolerance of harassment and abuse of any kind, and its permanent solidarity with the victims.”

The announcement came as other Spanish public institutions and theaters severed ties with the 79-year-old singer, a native son who has long been a source of pride for many in the country.

Many commentators, politicians and fellow artists in Spain had defended Domingo, as did concert halls across Europe, even as U.S. companies swiftly moved to cancel performances and sever ties with the singer in the wake of the harassment allegations.

The first to take action in Spain was the government itself. On Wednesday, the Spanish Culture Ministry said it was calling off two mid-May performances by Domingo at Madrid’s Teatro de la Zarzuela light opera house, the ministry said that “given the seriousness of the deeds,” it was acting “in solidarity with women affected” to take a stand against sexual harassment.

More cancellations followed Thursday. A musical association in the Spanish city of Ubeda said it was canceling Domingo’s May 3 performance in light of the week’s developments, and the Palau de les Arts, a publicly funded, state-of-the-art opera house in the eastern Spanish city of Valencia, said that “in line with the values of the institution,” it would strip the tenor’s name from its popular training program for opera singers. It also ruled out any future contracts with Domingo.

“arresting the truth be known” at his presidential election,” Fillon said. “Damages are irreparable.”

French media broke the scandal in January 2017, just three months before a presidential election in which Fillon was considered the front-runner.

France’s former Prime Minister Francois Fillon, center, and his wife Penelope, leave the Paris courthouse, in Paris, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020.

In his first statement to the court, Fillon said he had already been sentenced by the “media court.” “The goal was clear: To prevent me from running in normal conditions in the presidential election,” Fillon said. “Damages are irreparable.”

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Ex-French prime minister denies wrongdoing in fraud trial

By N. VAUX-MONTAGNY and S. CORBET
Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Former French Prime Minister Francois Fillon said Thursday that he wants to “make the truth be known” at his fraud trial in Paris. Fillon is facing charges after he used public funds to pay his wife and children for work they allegedly never performed.

Fillon, 65, has denied wrongdoing.

In this Aug. 28, 2019 file photo, opera star Placido Domingo salutes spectators at the end of a concert in Szeged, Hungary.

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PARIS (AP) — Former French Prime Minister Francois Fillon said Thursday that he wants to “make the truth be known” at his fraud trial in Paris. Fillon is facing charges after he used public funds to pay his wife and children for work they allegedly never performed.

Fillon, 65, has denied wrongdoing.

In his first statement to the court, Fillon said he had already been sentenced by the “media court.” “The goal was clear: To prevent me from running in normal conditions in the presidential election,” Fillon said. “Damages are irreparable.”

French media broke the scandal in January 2017, just three months before a presidential election in which Fillon was considered the front-runner.

Ex-French prime minister denies wrongdoing in fraud trial

By N. VAUX-MONTAGNY and S. CORBET
Associated Press

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Malaysia’s Mahathir says Parliament will pick new PM

By EILEEN NG
Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysian interim leader Mahathir Mohamad said Thursday that Parliament will pick a new prime minister next week following the collapse of the ruling alliance, and that snap elections will be called if the vote ends in an impasse. But his former alliance led by rival Anwar Ibrahim rejected the announcement, saying that only the king has the power to appoint the prime minister under the constitution.

Mahathir, who met the king earlier Thursday, said the monarch couldn’t find a candidate with a clear majority to lead the nation after consulting all 222 lawmakers over the last two days. As a result, the king decided to have the lower house of Parliament vote on a new leader on Monday, he said. “If the lower house fails to find a person with the majority, then we will have to go for a snap election,” he told a news conference.

A failed bid by Mahathir’s supporters to form a new government without his designated successor, Anwar, and Mahathir’s shock resignation on Monday broke apart the ruling alliance less than two years after it defeated a corruption-tainted governing alliance led by rival Anwar.

Mahathir is on trial on corruption charges and later jailed on sodomy charges that he said were trumped up. He led a reform movement that helped build a fledgling opposition “government” that was not only create a “Mahathir movement” but was also a key player in the 2018 elections, ushering in his first change of government since independence from Britain in 1957.

But their relationship remained uneasy as Mahathir refused to set a time frame to hand over power to Anwar under their election pact. Mahathir, the world’s oldest leader at 94, said Wednesday he wanted to form a nonpartisan government if chosen as prime minister for a third time. But his unity government plan was rejected by Anwar’s camp and other opposition parties, which said it would only create a “Mahathir government” that was not accountable to the people and was unsustainable.

The political drama that unfolded over the weekend saw 37 lawmakers, led by Bersatu, ditching the ruling alliance, depriving it of majority support. The king dissolved the Cabinet and reappointed Mahathir as interim leader Wednesday he wanted to form a nonpartisan government if chosen as prime minister for a third time. But his unity government plan was rejected by Anwar’s camp and other opposition parties, which said it would only create a “Mahathir government” that was not accountable to the people and was unsustainable.

Lawmakers from Anwar’s alliance nominated Anwar instead as prime minister when meeting the king after Mahathir rejected their offer to restore their former government. Anwar’s camp controls 41% of parliamentary seats, 20 seats short of a simple majority. Bersatu abandoned the governing alliance four days ago in a bid to form a new government with several opposition parties. But it flopped after Mahathir quit in protest of the plan to work with the United Malays National Organization, the party of disgraced ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak who is on trial on corruption charges, that he ousted in the 2018 polls.

Mahathir said he still cannot accept UMNO but will embrace UMNO members who leave the party. He said he still needs to discuss this with Bersatu leaders, who were willing to accept UMNO en bloc. Bersatu already joined hands with UMNO to take control of a southern state earlier Thursday. Mahathir said he will accept the outcome of Monday’s vote and that the new leader can choose anyone he likes as his Cabinet members, alluding back to the unity government plan he proposed.

The political drama that unfolded over the weekend saw 37 lawmakers, led by Bersatu, ditching the ruling alliance, depriving it of majority support. The king dissolved the Cabinet and reappointed Mahathir as interim leader.

Thai police find bodies of suspected smugglers in reservoir

BANGKOK (AP) — Police in northern Thailand said Wednesday the bodies of seven people believed to be drug smugglers were found in a reservoir in an area under military control.

Police in Chiang Rai province’s Mae Sai district said the seven are thought to have been involved in an armed clash with soldiers on Monday.

The area is notorious as a route for drugs smuggled from neighboring Myanmar, and it is not unusual for security forces to encounter smugglers there, most commonly transporting methamphetamine tablets. Thailand is both a market and a transit point for the drug.

Police speculated that the bodies may have been of people who drowned while attempting to swim across the reservoir to escape the soldiers.

Police investigating the case are awaiting the results of autopsies on the bodies. The U.N. anti-drug agency said last year that production of methamphetamine is skyrocketing in Southeast Asia, with prices dropping and usage expanding.

Even as seizures of the drug known as speed, ice and “ya ba” in its various forms reached a record high last year, street prices have dropped, indicating increased availability, said the report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The report said organized crime groups in the region have stepped up their involvement in making and trafficking methamphetamine and other drugs in the Golden Triangle, the region where the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet that has historically been a major source of opium and heroin.
Ex-housekeeper sues Israeli PM’s wife over abusive behavior

By ARON HELLER  
Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A former housekeeper at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s official residence is suing the leader’s wife Sara for pain and suffering allegedly caused during her employment there, the housekeeper’s attorney said Thursday.

Opheer Shimson says his client is demanding $190,000 in damages for the abuse from Sara Netanyahu. He said the woman, an immigrant from France in her mid-50s and a mother of five who wished to keep her identity secret, worked at the residence for five months until last November, when she was injured from a fall caused by what he described as Sara Netanyahu’s tyrannical demands.

He said the woman, a staunch supporter of the prime minister, is now in a day-to-day condition, detailing the verbal abuse she endured from his wife. “She adores the prime minister and saw her work at his home as a form of national service,” Shimson told The Associated Press. “But she’s been traumatized by her experience. Everyone knew what was going on there, and no one can say otherwise.”

Sara Netanyahu has been accused of abusive behavior toward her personal staff before. This, together with accusations of excessive spending and using public money on her own extravagant personal tastes, has earned her an image as the Israel Imelda Marcos, the Philippines’ former first lady who became infamous for her massive collection of designer shoes.

Last year, Sara Netanyahu was convicted of misusing state funds after she reached a plea bargain settling allegations that she overspent some $100,000 of state money on lavish meals. She’d previously been indicted for graft, fraud and breach of trust.

In 2016, a court ruled the prime minister’s wife mistreated a housekeeper and awarded the man $42,000 in damages. Several other employees have accused her of abuse, mistreatment and harassment.

Another pending lawsuit alleges she forbade a former staffer to eat or drink on the job and required her to change her clothes dozens of times a day. The plaintiff, who is also seeking damages, says Sara Netanyahu also required her to wash her hands dozens of times a day and dry them with a towel separate from the one used by the Netanyahu family.

The Netanyahus have angrily rejected all the charges, calling them part of a media-orchestrated campaign against the family to oust them from power.

Israel heads to the polls next week for its third election in less than a year. Two weeks later, Benjamin Netanyahu goes on trial for charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust stemming from accusations he accepted lavish gifts from billionaire friends and promised to promote advantageous legislation for them.

Israel’s chief election supervisor warned this week that Sara Netanyahu’s official residence was being used as a campaign office to violate law.

The Netanyahus have an ally in their campaign against the family, with the one used by the Netanyahu family.

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Ex-housekeeper sues Israeli PM’s wife over abusive behavior

Lebanon begins ‘historic’ offshore oil drilling amid crisis

By ZEINA KARAM  
Associated Press

Beirut (AP) — Lebanon’s president Thursday inaugurated the Mediterranean country’s first offshore exploratory drilling for oil and gas, calling it a “historic day” for the cash-strapped country. Michel Aoun spoke aboard the drill ship Tungsten Explorer, which will be conducting the drilling operations of the first exploration well, located approximately 30 kilometers (18 miles) offshore from the capital Beirut.

“Today is a happy day for us and for all Lebanese, and we hope the dream we’ve all imagined is realized today. It is a historic day,” he said. The ceremony at sea contrasted sharply with Lebanon’s crippling financial and economic crisis, including a deepening liquidity crunch and soaring public debt. The limits have prompted protests against the financial institutions — including violent attacks on ATMs machines and some bank branches. Lebanon has one of the highest debt to GDP ratios in the world, standing at about $87 billion or more than 150% of the country’s GDP. Teetering on economic and financial collapse, the Lebanese government is now considering whether to pay or default on its $1.2 billion Eurobond debt, which matures next month.

Lebanon begins ‘historic’ offshore oil drilling amid crisis

Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, greets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s wife Sara, left, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stands at centre, prior to their talks in the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, Thursday, Jan. 30, 2020. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, Pool)

Associated Press

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Very reasonable price, exciting menu and NO SERVICE CHARGE

Dinner from 5:30 - 10:00

Monday - Saturday
Mexico president ties shootout dead to drug consumption

By PETER ORSI
Associated Press
MEXICO CITY (AP) — President Andrés Manuel López Obrador suggested Wednesday without offering evidence that most of those who die in Mexico’s cartel- and gang-fueled firefightes are high on drugs or intoxicated, prompting criticism and questions about whether the claim was accurate.

Speaking to journalists in his morning news conference, López Obrador said rising drug consumption rates must be reversed if the country is to guarantee peace and security after years of rising, record-setting homicide statistics.

“Just so you have the number, 60% of those who lose their life each day, 60% of those killed in clashes, it is shown that they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, but primarily drugs,” the president continued.

“Because of that, these ruthless crimes that cause such sadness.”

The comments revived a debate seen during the 2006-2012 presidency of Felipe Calderón, who first launched Mexico’s militarized anti-drug offensive.

Calderón used to say that the majority of those killed during the drug war were tied to cartels, also without offering evidence, but eventually backed off such rhetoric after criticism from activists and relatives of some victims.

A federal government official clarified later Wednesday that the figure came from López Obrador’s closed-door morning meetings with his security Cabinet and is based on analyses of those killed in clashes between criminal groups and/or with security forces.

That suggests he was referring to presumed criminals and not murder victims more broadly speaking.

The official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said documentation exists but is not publicly available.

But critics questioned whether there was any scientific basis for such an assertion. While it’s true that sometimes cartel killers get high before doing their bloody business, they questioned whether it was fair to imply drug consumption is an underlying cause of gangland violence.

And perhaps due to the ambiguity of López Obrador’s words, many understood them to mean all homicides, leading to accusations of victim-blaming.

Security analyst Alejandro Hope wrote that usually drug consumption is used to characterize perpetrators of murders, not the dead, and that “there is zero evidence” for López Obrador’s assertion.

María Elena Morera, president of the NGO Causa en Común, called the president’s comment “troubling” and said there is no data to back it up.

“So the president is confused, ill-informed or simply does it to reinforce his posture of revictimizing and not legalizing drugs,” Moreira said. López Obrador was asked at the news conference about possible legalization, for example the cultivation of opium poppies or the recreational use of marijuana, and suggested his administration is looking more at legalization for medicinal purposes.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2018 that prohibition of personal use, possession and private cultivation of cannabis was unconstitutional, though lawmakers have not codified decriminalization into law.

Data Civica, a stats-driven NGO working in human rights and citizen empowerment, also said it was concerned by López Obrador’s assertion.

Grief grips Peruvian community one month after deadly fire

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO
Associated Press
LIMA, Peru (AP) — One month after a gas tanker leak triggered fires and explosions that killed 30 people in the Peruvian capital, traumatized survivors and relatives of victims are still waiting to know who was responsible. They include Paola Lizeta, whose 13-year-old son, Jean Francisco Álvarez, ran back toward his house to try to rescue his dog and died a week later after suffering severe burns. The dog, Lester, survived.

“Sometimes he wants me to pick him up,” Lizeta said of the dog. “I embrace him with all my strength.”

Some 14 people were also injured in the blaze that swept through the Sector 6 neighborhood of the Villa El Salvador district in Lima on Jan. 23. While prosecutors say they are working hard to close their investigation, grief and disillusionment have overwhelmed the neighborhood. “Nobody has been jailed. There’s no justice,” said 25-year-old Vanesa Meza, who lost her aunt and four nieces in the disaster.

Four of Meza’s nephews - the youngest is a baby - remain hospitalized with burns over half their bodies. Visible as a white cloud, liquefied gas leaked from a tanker after its pump hit a sharply angled speed bump at an intersection, according to a police report. Residents rushed away from the cloud, but someone started a car and a spark ignited the gas, Lizeta said.

Prosecutor Humberto Durán is investigating the tanker driver, the gas distribution company, Lima Mayor Jorge Muñoz, Villa El Salvador Mayor Kevin Ilígo and other officials.

In addition, the tanker driver, 72-year-old Luis Guzmán, wasn’t authorized to transport liquefied gas and had been fined five times for transporting dangerous cargo without observing safety protocols. On Jan. 23, Guzmán should have had a colleague with him, but was driving solo. His vehicle didn’t have proper fenders or a system that would automatically prevent the gas from escaping into the air. Emergency services were slow to arrive at the scene to help victims and put out the flames. Firefighters admitted later that a fire engine was out of order after a road accident.

Wilder Félix, a water distributor, was passing through the area and pitched in with supplies from his truck to fight the fire consuming people, homes and vehicles.
Every Wednesday: Dinner under the stars

ORANJESTAD - The only other living species you will encounter during your Dinner under the Stars at the Private Island of Renaissance are the island staff and a bunch of beautiful flamingos. Outside of that you will enjoy pure tropical delight and tranquility, just one private island away from Aruba. A 10-minute boat trip will take you to a place outside of the buzz. A breathe in, breathe out location where you are pampered with white sands, comfy sun beds, pink flamingos, tropical flora, smiling waiters and delicious culinary treats.

Imagine to surprise your love, your family or friend with taking her or him on a boat trip instead of driving your car to a restaurant on the main island. Falling from one amazement into the other when arriving at the Renaissance Private Island’s boat deck with romantic lightning and attending staff. Walking her or him to the beautiful beach will light up the spirits and the night has just begun…….

Go & Find Out

“Every Wednesday we offer the Private Island Dinner with two menu’s that rotate. Starting off with an amuse-bouche, followed by an appetizer, two choices for the main course and a lovely dessert. Space is limited as we have only 50 seats”, says Tineke Lenters, Manager of the Renaissance Private Island. “While the island is normally only reserved for Renaissance Resort guests, visitors and locals can also take this experience when booking a dinner or –for a day spend- a massage.” If doing so, you can actually enjoy the island’s assets to the fullest. The beach, the beach tennis court, the (air-conditioned) fitness, private cabanas, beverages and foods. It’s all there. And even more, just go and find out. It will for sure be an experience.

Saying bye bye to Winnie and Skip for now

PALM BEACH — Our columnist Steve Francees takes amazing pictures to enchant you bi-weekly on Mondays with the colors and impressions of his art: photography. Now Steve made some close friends with Winnie and Skip and asked Aruba Today to send them his special message before they return to the United States where their home is.

“This amazing couple have been coming to Aruba for the last 33 years and is loved by many here in Aruba. Every time they come back to the island they are getting younger and probably you don’t know but they are celebrating 33 years of marriage this year and sure we will have a big party. We will miss you two for the hugs and kisses but looking forward to see you two back in July.

Steve”
PALM BEACH — Patrons are invited Saturday, February 29, 6:30pm to leap back in time with a dinner featuring classic fare from the delectable repertory of the Hilton Caribbean Aruba Resort & Casino culinary brigade.

The upcoming six-course, wine-paired meal summons leapsters to the second in the series of Sunset Grille wine dinners showcasing the steakhouse's elevated cuisine in collaboration with a top-tier local wine supplier. The special wine pairing will be guided by Divina’s star sommelier, Kiume Tjon-A-Tsien, the winner of the recent 2020 Sommelier of the Year competition. The menu for the evening was created by French & American-trained Executive Chef Matt Bolland, and French born Katia Soujol, Executive Sous Chef, inspired by the first leap year of the decade. The evening will take off with a Sparkling Wine Reception at Mira Solo Lobby Bar at 6:30pm, then guests will be escorted to their tables, with indoor seating available at 7pm.

On the menu: Fresh Grouper Ceviche, paired with Matua Sauvignon Blanc, New Zealand; Escargot & Shrimp swimming in Garlic Butter, Herbs, with Focaccia, complemented by Beringer Regional Estates Chardonnay, Napa Valley, California; Gnocchi Mushroom butter, paired with Elouan Pinot Noir, Oregon; Lamb Chop on a bed of Couscous, Green Pepper sauce, with Elouan Pinot Noir, Oregon; Braised Beef Slider Chipotle Mayo, Gouda Cheese, Sweet Potato Fries, and Caribbean Slaw paired with Beringer Bros, Red Blend, Aged in Bourbon Barrels, California. The traditional Apple Tart Tartin Crème Anglaise, with Ice Cream served for dessert will be matched with Madiki Breeze Cocktail invented by the resort’s very own master bartender Gaby, made with Tito’s Vodka, Disaronno Amaretto, and splashes of Pineapple and Orange Juice.

The six-course Culinary Experience with Complimentary Wine Pairing is available at a great price. Reservations & Questions: 526 6612 or email HiltonConcierge@depalmtours.com

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By Aruba Birdlife Conservation:
Beauty in Aruba: the love for our birds

ORANJESTAD — On May 11th, 2010, the Aruba Birdlife Conservation was founded with the aim of protecting the biodiversity in general and birds in and around Aruba in particular. Among other things, the foundation will focus on increasing the survival chances of species of wild birds by promoting their preservation and conservation.

The foundation publishes the most beautiful pictures of local birds on their social media that show us the beauty of Aruba’s birds and nature in general. Aruba Today gives you a peek of some of the pictures and descriptions from the foundations Facebook page.

Impact
The moment of impact induces a chain reaction of ripple effects throughout the wetlands. Once again, the egret’s strategy reaps results. An instant of Aruba’s wetlands bird wildlife in survival mode. A Great Egret carrying out a successful hunt at Aruba’s Bubali Wetlands.

Falcon’s time
Parents are very busy gathering food for the chicks. It’s that time of the year; it’s Kinkini time. A female American Kestrel during a hunt.

Carnival’s Grand Parade
Nature inspires the creativity of all carnival participants! Aruba enjoyed her Grand Parade! A dancing Troupial in full costume; it’s time to party!
Blue Line Walk/Run 2020:
Walk or run with the police

PALM BEACH — For the first time students of the police school, class N4-2019 organize a sportive event named Aruba Blue Line Walk/Run 2020 taking place this Saturday, February 29th with starting point the parking of The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba. Join this healthy and cozy event and mingle with our locals.

The registration for this event begins from 5pm on until 5.30pm. There will be a warm up Zumba session before the walk and run start at 6pm. The route goes from the parking of The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba to Arashi beach and back. It is a beautiful course where you will have the ocean in sight while walking or running. There will be water posts on the way which are provided by Community Footprints (The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba) and in the end some fresh fruits will be available. Of course there will also be door prices to win. The organization would love participants to wear blue shirts and to take a water bottle with them to fill at the water posts.

Tickets are 20 Florin and available at the police school at Watty Vos Boulevard in San Nicolas or you may call telephone +297 564-7523 or 566-6013. Tickets are also be delivered in case there is no opportunity to pick them up at the police school.

Tickets are also available at The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba. The registration for this event begins from 5pm on until 5.30pm. There will be a warm up Zumba session before the walk and run start at 6pm. The route goes from the parking of The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba to Arashi beach and back. It is a beautiful course where you will have the ocean in sight while walking or running. There will be water posts on the way which are provided by Community Footprints (The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba) and in the end some fresh fruits will be available. Of course there will also be door prices to win. The organization would love participants to wear blue shirts and to take a water bottle with them to fill at the water posts.

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Longtime employees reach milestone events
Playa Linda celebrates career achievements and well-deserved retirements

ORANJESTAD -- The quality standards for which the Playa Linda Beach Resort is known are a result of the example set by long-time employees, including Florencia “Gloria” Koolman, Catharina “Rina” Angela, Lucio Piter and Cecilia Charles, who have served as role models while making ongoing contributions in ensuring resort members and guests always enjoy excellent vacations stays.

Career accomplishments were recently recognized for these employees marking decades-long work anniversaries as well as transitions into well-deserved retirements.

After dedicating thirty years plus to the Playa Linda, Housekeepers Gloria and Rina are each heading toward enjoyment of their retirement years. Gloria received her send-off after marking her three-decade-long career last year. She was a well-respected face at the resort, and had moved to a leadership position as a supervisor, and it was with a great deal of emotion that accompanied goodbyes from colleagues and staff.

Rina marked thirty years on February 19, 2020, and also looks back over a career filled with hard work but also of lifelong friendships and career accomplishments. She earned her supervisory position after going above and beyond, especially during the early years of the resort and in successfully dealing with everyday challenges. She became a resource to her fellow housekeepers and also a favorite among guests.

Recent retiree Lucio Piter, who also marked a respectable amount of years, with a 16-year career with the Playa Linda as a night auditor reliever in the Front Office, was also honored for his invaluable contributions. An example of his winning ways and appreciation for his talents resulted in being named an Employee of the Year in 2010.

Still going strong is Cecilia Charles, who hit her 30-year anniversary in February of this year, but who has no plans, as of yet, to retire. Cecilia was hired as housekeeper when Playa Linda was still in its first phase of construction. As part of a much smaller housekeeping team at the time, the work consisted of long hours, and she often stayed late to ensure lobby and rooms were sparkling clean. Although the work was never easy, she says she found great satisfaction at the Playa Linda, both at the start and into the current day, having formed lasting ties with her colleagues as well as with many of the return visitors and members of the resort. These ongoing relationships, as well as the family environment at the resort, keep her looking forward to coming to work each day.

Separate events were held to honor all of these exceptional employees, with Playa Linda Beach Resort executive staff expressing special thanks for their dedication as well as each one’s individual talents that have contributed to Playa Linda’s unique blend of outstanding hospitality.

Tonight at Bohemian restaurant: Enchanting ambience made by the harp

PALM BEACH — The harp is an instrument admired for its grandeur and beauty. It has a unique sound and is always eye-catching. This instrument will be played live by Yhosayra Rojas live at Bohemian Restaurant TONIGHT.

Rojas is a native from “Camaguan” the birthplace of Venezuela folk music and she commenced playing the harp in the footsteps of her father Rafael Rojas, a well-known artist and part of Juan Vicente Torrealba’s époque. It served her as an inspiration to interpret the versions from the “Llano”, a unique area near the Amazon basin with nature, flora and fauna. Bohemian Restaurant is a different swing. European flair and outside dining, a place from the same owner as the for years already successful Casa Tua restaurants. This is about avant-garde from France, nonconformist in style and ethnic in cuisine. The beautiful garden of Bohemian will be filled with lights, good food and the live harpist in an intimate, hip and offbeat ambiance.

Free Parking available at the parking lot in front of Barceló Resort. Make your reservations through their website: https://bohemianaruba.com. Call them at 00 297 280 8448. Facebook: Bohemian.
Virus threat to Olympics casts shadow over marathon trials

By CHARLES ODUM
AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — The nation’s top distance runners carry a new concern into the U.S. Olympic Team Marathon Trials.

“The possibility that you make this team and then you don’t have an Olympics to go to,” Jacob Riley said.

The top three men’s and women’s finishers on Saturday will earn spots on the U.S. team. Ultimately, their dreams of actually competing in the Olympics this summer may rest upon the new virus from China, which has spread to other parts of the world, including Japan.

The coronavirus was a hot topic as some of the runners gathered in Atlanta on Thursday.

“It’s there but I think from my perspective what I have to do is just ignore it and go out and race,” said Jared Ward, who finished third in the 2016 trials in Los Angeles and placed sixth in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Longtime International Olympic Committee member Dick Pound told The Associated Press on Tuesday there is a window of two to three months to decide if conditions are too dangerous to hold the Olympics in Tokyo.

Continued on Page 23

HEAT CHECK

Minnesota rallies late, shock Miami 129-126

Miami Heat forward Bam Adebayo (13) is stripped of the ball by Minnesota Timberwolves forward Juancho Hernangomez during the second half of an NBA basketball game, Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2020, in Miami.

Associated Press
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Lawmakers push for Curt Flood’s enshrinement in Hall of Fame

WASHINGTON (AP) — Curt Flood’s widow has a simple explanation for why her late husband, who is revered by players for sacrificing his career to advocate for free agency, has not been enshrined in baseball’s Hall of Fame.

“I think the holdup is that he got on a lot of people’s nerves,” Judy Pace Flood said.

Flood has some powerful advocates on his side. Members of Congress sent a letter to the Hall of Fame on Thursday asking that Flood be elected in December by the next golden era committee. The recognition would coincide with the 50-year anniversary of Flood’s defiant letter to baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn in which he wrote, “I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes.”

“What Curt Flood did and championed is resonating throughout professional sports for the past 50 years,” Rep. David Trone, a Maryland Democrat who is leading the push for Flood’s enshrinement, said at a news conference.

Flood was 31 when he sent that letter on Dec. 24, 1969. He had spent most of the past decade as the starting center fielder for the St. Louis Cardinals. A three-time All-Star, Flood won a World Series title in 1975 by arbitrator Peter Seitz in a case involving pitchers Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally. The following July, owners and the union agreed to a labor contract that included free agency.

“I will tell people to this day, Curt did not lose that case,” Pace Flood said.

Flood’s efforts essentially ended his career. He only played in 13 more games in 1970 after his letter to Kuhn. With the 1966 hitting championship and two World Series titles, what a great ballplayer,” said Sen. Roy Blunt, a Missouri Republican. “When the great Stan Musial was finishing up his career in right field, Curt Flood would play all of center and about half of right so that Stan the Man could still be on the team.”

After the 1969 season, Flood asked the Cardinals for a pay raise. Instead, they traded him to the Philadelphia Phillies. Under baseball’s reserve clause, players were fully under the control of their teams. Flood refused the trade and, with the backing of players’ union executive director Marvin Miller, filed a federal lawsuit in 1970 challenging the reserve clause. The Supreme Court ruled against him in a 5-3 decision in 1972, but the justices agreed Flood’s arguments had merit. They said they could not intervene because it was up to Congress to alter the antitrust exemption created in 1922 when the Supreme Court ruled baseball was not interstate commerce.

The union kept fighting, and the reserve clause was struck down in December 1975 by arbitrator Peter Seitz in a case involving pitchers Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally. The following July, owners and the union agreed to a labor contract that included free agency.

“It’s so important that players know the sacrifices that players made in order to keep the integrity of the game where it is,” Cole said.

Players’ unions from the NFL, NHL, NBA and MLS had representatives at Thursday’s news conference, and 102 members of Congress signed the letter to the Hall of Fame. Miller was elected to the Hall last year by the modern era committee, an encouraging development for Flood’s advocates. Flood’s letter to Kuhn is on display in Cooperstown, too.

“He had a clearly building Hall of Fame career cut short,” said Donald Fehr, the former MLBPA executive director who now leads the NHL players’ union. “It was cut short because he said, ‘Thus far and no farther.’ This is wrong. It has to change.”


Swimmer Filippo Magnini’s 4-year doping ban annulled by CAS

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) — Two-time swimming world champion Filippo Magnini was cleared of doping and had his four-year ban annulled by the Court of Arbitration for Sport on Thursday.

“I WON: The TAS acquitted me from any kind of accusation,” Magnini wrote in a celebratory message on Instagram. “It has always been like this, I have always won races in the last few meters. They taught me never to give up. I have always been an athlete and a correct person. I tremble with joy.”

Italy’s anti-doping agency banned the retired swimmer in 2018, finding him guilty of using and attempting to use banned substances. Magnini had been linked to nutritionist Guido Porcellini, who was banned for 30 years for distributing illegal drugs.

However, a CAS panel determined there was “insufficient evidence” in the case. Magnini, who won the 100-meter freestyle at the 2005 and 2007 world championships and a relay bronze at the 2004 Olympics, never tested positive and maintains he never doped.

He was an outspoken critic of doping throughout his career, having taken part in an “I am doping free” initiative.
Lewis, English ride exemptions to early Honda Classic lead

By TIM REYNOLDS
AP Sports Writer
PALM BEACH GARDENS, Fla. (AP) — Sponsor exemptions are basically free-play gifts handed out by the people in charge of golf tournaments, a handful of invitations available most weeks to those who wouldn’t have otherwise qualified for an event.

Tom Lewis and Harris English were among the recipients for The Honda Classic. They made the most of those chances Thursday.

Lewis and English each shot 4-under 66 at PGA National, sharing the lead after the opening round. Lee Westwood — also in the field thanks to a sponsor exemption — was a shot back with Zach Johnson, J.T. Poston, Brian Stuard and Cameron Tringale.

"I didn't hit it my best, but I knew it was going to be one of those rounds you're going to have to grind it out," said English, a two-time winner on the PGA Tour in 2013, but winless since. "It's windy out there, you're going to have a lot of cross-winds, and it played really tough. My short game was on point, and I made some really good putts."

Sometimes, no putt was required: English holed out from about 25 yards on the par-4 11th, catching a great lie after a drop because his second shot came to rest on a sprinkler head.

"That was as good as I can do," English said. It was a rare easy-looking shot at PGA National. The average score was just a smidge below 2 over, on a day where wind gusts often topped 20 mph.

"It's just live and survive, basically," said Matthew NeSmith, who had a hole-in-one on the par-3 fifth. Westwood hit 11 of 14 fairways and was thoroughly pleased with how the day went.

"Everybody should play like that," Westwood said. "Everybody who's out here is in a privileged position with nothing to lose. We should all be having fun. But at the age of nearly 47 it seems even easier. I don't play anywhere I don't want to play, I just play great tournaments and the ones I want to play in, and I set my own schedule, and it's just great fun."

Lewis made his splashy entrance into golf headlines in 2011, when the then-amateur Englishman was a surprise co-leader after the opening round of the British Open. He played that opening round with Tom Watson, the five-time British Open winner who happens to be Lewis’ namesake and his father’s favorite player.

He wound up as the European Tour’s rookie of the year that season. Not much has gone right since.

"I struggled for a while, and then really things got so low that you couldn't get any lower," Lewis said. "So it was like, 'Well, only good things can happen now.'"

Good things happened in bunches Thursday, when Lewis had a bogey-free round.

"It can just happen," Lewis said, a few minutes before he sat in relative anonymity inside the resort's hotel lobby and had lunch while fans walked by mostly oblivious to the fact that they were passing a co-leader.

"Just one shot, one putt at the right time or good break and then all of a sudden it can snowball. I need to take a lot of belief from today."

Plenty of others weren't as chipper as Lewis and English were when their days at PGA National was over.

Third-ranked Brooks Koepka, in his hometown tournament, made a triple bogey and a double bogey in a four-hole span on the front side on his way to a 74.

"Didn't feel like I played that bad," Koepka said. Defending champion Keith Mitchell finished birdie-birdie and still shot 75. Rickie Fowler, who won the Honda in 2017 and tied for second with Koepka last year, made one birdie all day and shot 76.

"It's a fine line," Fowler said. "Just got it going in the wrong direction."

That happens at PGA National. Only 22 of the 144 players broke par.
Joel Embiid sprains left shoulder, 76ers fall to Cavaliers

By The Associated Press

CLEVELAND (AP) — Colin Sexton scored 28 points and the Cleveland Cavaliers routed Philadelphia 108-94 on Wednesday night after 76ers center Joel Embiid left in the first quarter because of a sprained left shoulder. The 76ers, already playing without All-Star guard Ben Simmons, never led against the team with the worst record in the Eastern Conference and fell to 9-21 on the road.

Embiid collided with Cavaliers center Ante Zizic while being fouled late in the first quarter. The 7-footer held his shoulder in obvious pain but stayed in the game and missed both free throws. The Sixers pulled Embid at the next timeout and he walked to the locker room while rubbing his shoulder. He briefly returned to the bench in the second quarter, but went back for more evaluation and treatment. At halftime, Embiid rejoined his teammates on the bench with a wrap on his injured shoulder.

Tristan Thompson had 14 points and 13 rebounds, and Larry Nance Jr. had 13 points for Cleveland. Shake Milton, who replaced Simmons in the starting lineup, scored 20 points.

MAVERICKS 109, SPURS 103

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Luka Doncic had 26 points, 14 assists and 10 rebounds for his 13th triple-double of the season, helping Dallas beat San Antonio. Kristaps Porzingis added 28 points and 12 rebounds for Dallas. DeMar DeRozan had 27 points, nine assists and eight rebounds for San Antonio.

CELTICS 114, JAZZ 103

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Jayson Tatum had 33 points and 11 rebounds to lead Boston over slidding Utah. Jaylen Brown added 20 points and Marcus Smart had 17 for Boston. All five starters scored in double figures to help the Celtics finish 3-1 on a road trip out West.

Donovan Mitchell scored 37 points to lead Utah. Mike Conley chipped in with 15 and Royce O’Neale added 14 for the Jazz, who lost their fourth straight game — all at home.

ROCKETS 140, GRIZZLIES 112

HOUSTON (AP) — Russell Westbrook scored 33 points, James Harden had 30 and Houston sailed past Memphis for its fifth straight win, 140-112 over the Memphis Grizzlies on Wednesday night.

Harden say out the fourth quarter. Westbrook sat down for good with about six minutes left. Dillon Brooks had 22 points for Memphis. They went 0-4 on their longest trip of the season.

TIMBERWOLVES 129, HEAT 126

MIAMI (AP) — Jordan McLaughlin’s layup with just under nine seconds left put Minnesota ahead for good. D’Angelo Russell led all scorers with 27 points and the Timberwolves added to Miami’s late-season stagger.

Malik Beasley scored 21 points, Juancho Hernangomez added a season-high 17 and McLaughlin added 13 for Minnesota. The Timberwolves were down by 12 with 3:59 left, then closed on a 20-5 run to get just their second victory in 20 games.

HORNETS 107, KNICKS 101


The slumping Devonte Graham returned from a team-mandated night off to add 21 points.

WASHINGTON 208-106 BOSTON

— In a three-point attempt and Robinson added two free throws as Washington won after squandering an 18-point lead.

Bradley Beal led the Wizards with 30 points after consecutive games of 53 and 55 points.

Wizards 110, Nets 106

WASHINGTON (AP) — Jerome Robinson hit a 3-pointer with 8.4 seconds left to lift Washington past Brooklyn.

After Robinson gave Washington a 108-106 lead, Brooklyn’s Spencer Dinwiddie missed a 3-point attempt and Robinson added two free throws as Washington won after squandering an 18-point lead.

MAGIC 130, HAWKS 120

ATLANTA (AP) — Evan Fournier scored 28 points, Aaron Gordon added 25 and Orlando pulled away in the fourth quarter to beat Atlanta.

Solidifying their hold on the final playoff spot in the East, the Magic put away the Hawks with a 1-4 spurt after Trae Young’s drive cut Orlando’s lead to five with 6:20 remaining.

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Caris LeVert had 34 points for Brooklyn.

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NYCFC draws small crowd to Red Bull Arena for CONCACAF match

New York City Football Club midfielder Valentin Castellanos (11) fends off San Carlos defender Pablo Arboine during the first half in the second leg of a CONCACAF Champions League soccer match Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2020, in Harrison, N.J.

New York City FC midfielder Valentin Castellanos (11) tends off San Carlos defender Pablo Arboine during the first half in the second leg of a CONCACAF Champions League soccer match Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2020, in Harrison, N.J.

Associated Press

HARRISON, N.J. (AP) — Major League Soccer’s New York City FC team drew a tiny crowd for its first competitive match of the season, a CONCACAF Champions League victory over Costa Rica’s San Carlos that was played at Red Bull Arena. The announced crowd for Wednesday night’s game was 4,396 in the 25,000-capacity stadium. The team said that figure was tickets distributed and the actual attendance was about 2,700.

NYCFC’s home has been Yankee Stadium in the Bronx since it launched in 2015, and the team has been trying to put together a deal for its own venue. This game was played at the home of its rival New York Red Bulls.

One game in each of the past two seasons was moved to the Mets’ Citi Field in Queens because of baseball conflicts and four are scheduled to be played there this year. One game in 2016 was moved to Fordham’s Coffey Field and one in 2017 to Rent-cheller Field in East Hartford, Connecticut.

NYCFC is majority owned by City Football Group, also the parent of England’s Manchester City, CFG is controlled by of Abu Dhabi United Group and owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The Yan-kees are a 20% partner in NYCFC.

NYC won 1-0 to advance 6-3 on total goals and will play Mexico’s Tigres in the quarterfinals, at home from March 10-12 and on the road the following week.
By The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Nick Cousins scored in his Vegas debut and the Golden Knights beat the Edmonton Oilers 3-0 on Wednesday night in a matchup of the top teams in the Pacific Division. Marc-Andre Fleury made 29 saves to earn his 61st career shutout, tied for 17th all-time with Turk Broda. The 16-year-veteran netminder is now 5-0-0 in his last five starts.

Cousins, acquired from Montreal at the NHL’s trade deadline Monday, became the 10th player in Golden Knights history to score a goal in his team debut. He knocked home a rebound on a power play for his sixth overall goal to give the Golden Knights a 2-0 lead midway through the third period.

Max Pacioretty and Shea Theodore also scored for Vegas, which won its seventh straight game. With the victory, the Golden Knights increased their lead to four points ahead of the Oilers and Vancouver, each with 74 points. Just six points separate the top four squads in the Pacific as the Easter road trip begins on Sunday against the Calgary Flames.

Calgary holds the top wildcard spot, two points better than Nashville.

Vegas improved to 11-3-2 under Peter DeBoer, who replaced fired Gerard Gallant Jan. 13. Edmonton is 18-13-3 on the road.

AVALANCHE 3, SABRES 2

DENVER (AP) — J.T. Compher broke a tie on a wrist shot with 8:06 remaining, Martin Kaut scored his first NHL goal and banged-up Colorado won its fourth straight.

Gabriel Landeskog also scored to help the Avalanche vault into second place in the Central Division.

Blues rule out Bouwmeester for remainder of season, playoffs

By WARREN MAYES

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — St. Louis Blues defenseman Jay Bouwmeester has been ruled out from returning to play in the regular season or in the playoffs. General manager Doug Armstrong made the announcement Wednesday.

In a news conference at the Enterprise Center, Bouwmeester spoke to reporters for the first time since he collapsed on the bench in the first period during a game at the Anaheim Ducks on Feb. 11.

“l was a scary thing, but its been going pretty good lately,” he said. “We’ll continue to evaluate things as it goes, I’m at the point where I feel pretty good.”

Armstrong discussed Bouwmeester’s status for the remainder of the season.

“To clarify, Jay and I have both spoken over the last week or so,” Armstrong said. “We both understand that he won’t participate in the regular season or playoffs.

February. We don’t have to make long-term decisions at this point. He’s going to take time, get back in with his family and be around the team and he’ll address those things as the summer progresses.”

The Blues were hosting their annual fathers trip when they played in Anaheim.

Bouwmeester said there was no warning anything was about to happen. “Everything up to that point was normal,” Bouwmeester said. “I hadn’t been sick, or had much going on. It was completely out of the blue.”

Bouwmeester said he’s been moved by the response he has received from people.

“The outreach and support people have shown has been pretty overwheming,” Bouwmeester said. “The people that were around at the time, as well as my dad being there on the trip, there were a lot of things that were absolute best-case scenario. He was able to relay information and that was extremely helpful to everyone.

“It’s all been so humbling. It’s a small world. People really do care.”

Cousins, Fleury lead Golden Knights to 3-0 win over Oilers

By The Associated Press

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MLB appoints 1st black umpire crew chief

NEW YORK (AP) — Kerwin Danley became the first African American umpire crew chief in Major League Baseball when a series of promotions, additions and retirements were announced Thursday.

The moves included Alfonso Marquez being elevated to the second Hispanic crew chief in MLB history. Crew chiefs Jeff Kellogg, Dana DeMuth, Gary Cederstrom and Mike Everitt have retired. Kellogg and Everitt will move into jobs as MLB umpire supervisors. Dan Iassogna and Jim Reynolds were promoted to crew chiefs.

Ramon De Jesus, who worked his first big league game in 2016 as a minor league fill-in, moved up and became the first Dominican-born umpire on the MLB staff. Also getting full-time jobs in the majors were Ryan Blakney, Chris Segal and Jansen Visconti.

Nic Lentz also joined the MLB umpire roster, replacing the late Eric Cooper. The 58-year-old Danley became the first in 1966.

Boston ace Chris Sale will start this season in the same place he ended 2019: on injured list.

Boston Red Sox starting pitcher Chris Sale throws during spring training baseball camp Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2020, in Sarasota, Fla. 

Sale to start season where he ended 2019: on injured list

Boston ace Chris Sale will start this season in the same place he ended 2019: on the injured list.

The left-hander will be placed on the IL after reporting to spring training with pneumonia. "With the sickness, it cost him two weeks’ time and that two weeks is what we’d like to give him to make sure that he’s right," Red Sox manager Ron Roenicke said Thursday. "He’s worked hard on getting his arm right and we didn’t think four starts in spring training was fair to him."

Sale did not pitch after Aug. 13 last season due to elbow inflammation. The left-hander agreed with the decision, even though he’s not happy about it. "It was a gut punch," he said. "When we were in that meeting, I said, ‘The only thing this hurts is my ego, and that doesn’t matter.’"

CUBS

Chicago Cubs reliever Brad Wieck had surgery this week for an abnormal heart flutter and is out indefinitely. The team said an irregular heartbeat was discovered during the 28-year-old left-hander’s spring training physical.

Subsequent tests showed an intermittent atrial flutter. Wieck underwent a cardiac ablation at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago on Monday and returned to Arizona two days later. The Cubs said Wieck will rest and rehab for the next week, then be re-evaluated. Wieck had a 5.71 ERA over 44 appearances for San Diego and Chicago last season.

ORIOLES 13, PIRATES 0

BRAVES 3, CARDINALS 1

Bucks 3, Blue Jays 3

Twins 3, Blue Jays 3

YANKEES 7, RAYS (SS) 1

Yankees 7, Rays (SS) 1

Clint Frazier and Tyler Wade hit back-to-back home runs in a three-run first inning. Daniel Robertson was 2 for 3 with a double and run scored for Tampa Bay.
**U.S. women's pursuit takes gold at track cycling championships**

BERLIN (AP) — Once again, the Americans will head to the Olympics as the gold-medal favorite in the women's team pursuit.

Continued from Page 17

Pound said if the coronavirus outbreak poses a threat too great to hold the Olympics in Tokyo, the games likely would be cancelled instead of postponed or moved.

Tokyo organizing committee CEO Toshirō Muto on Wednesday responded to Pound's comments by calling a news conference to say plans are being made to proceed with a safe Olympics. "Our basic thoughts are that we will go ahead with the Olympic and Paralympic Games," Muto said. The Olympic marathon is scheduled to be staged in Sapporo, a couple hours from Tokyo. The event was moved to protect the runners from the heat in Tokyo.

Pound said the trials "creates a stage on its own and an Olympic feel on its own." "My feeling of competing in and crossing the finish line in the Olympic trials in 2016 was as exciting as crossing the finish line in Rio later that year," Ward said. "So I think there's still something to race for, regardless of what happens later on down the line. I'm excited to embrace that opportunity."

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"I'm not like an infectious disease expert and I try to be educated," said Scott Fauble, whose finishing seventh in the 2019 Boston Marathon. He was the top American in the field.

"I try to listen to podcasts and read articles about it, but me worrying about what the coronavirus does in six months doesn't help me on Saturday," Fauble said. Riley, who led U.S. runners by finishing ninth in the 2019 Chicago Marathon, noted another major event already was postponed. On Jan. 29, the indoor world athletics championships in Nanjing, China, were postponed until 2021 due to the coronavirus. That postponement, combined with Pound's warning, gives cause for concern.

"It's there in the back of my mind but I'm trying not to think about it too much," Riley said.

In this March 15, 2015, file photo, Jared Ward, from Provo, Utah, crosses the finish line of the Los Angeles Marathon in Santa Monica, Calif.

**Associated Press**
WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government’s highway safety agency has ordered an autonomous shuttle company to stop carrying passengers in 16 U.S. cities after a mysterious braking problem occurred in Columbus, Ohio.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says the suspension will remain in place while it examines safety issues with the low-speed shuttles operated by France-based EasyMile.

TECHNOLOGY

To operate without a steering wheel and brake pedals, the imported shuttles need the agency to grant an exemption from federal motor vehicle safety standards.

The 12-15 passenger shuttles were halted in Columbus as well as Dover, Delaware; West Valley City, Park City, Farmington and Salt Lake City, Utah; Dallas, Houston and Corpus Christi, Texas; Dublin, California; Golden, Colorado; Raleigh, North Carolina; Gainesville, Florida; Fairfax, Arlington and Blacksburg, Virginia; and Basking Ridge, New Jersey.

The agency made the move after an EasyMile shuttle in Columbus braked suddenly, causing a passenger to fall from a seat and suffer a minor injury.

“NHTSA will continue to work with all affected parties, including EasyMile and local authorities, to evaluate potential future vehicle operations, consistent with applicable legal requirements and public safety,” the agency said in a statement.

Low-speed shuttles generally run 25 mph or less and are restricted to small geographic areas. The EasyMile shuttles have a human attendant on board to handle unexpected problems. EasyMile said in a statement that its shuttle in Columbus was traveling 7.1 miles per hour (11.4 kilometers per hour) when it made an emergency stop as it is programmed to do, but it is unclear what triggered the emergency stop.

The company said it is running test loops to analyze the suddenness of the stop. The statement said NHTSA is still allowing EasyMile vehicles on the road in 10 states for testing but they will not be accessible to the public.

Sharad Agarwal, EasyMile senior vice president in Denver, said the company is investigating why the shuttle computer decided to stop. The shuttles are programmed to stop if they detect any kind of problem, he said.

“We’d be more concerned if it didn’t stop,” Agarwal said.

Earlier this month NHTSA granted Silicon Valley robotics company Nuro temporary approval to run autonomous delivery vehicles on public roads for the first time without human occupants. Those vehicles also had to get an exemption from federal safety standards.

Delivery giant DoorDash takes step toward public offering

By ALEXANDRA OLSON

NEW YORK (AP) — Food delivery giant DoorDash has taken a first formal step toward a stock market debut. The San Francisco-based company said Thursday that it had filed paperwork with the Securities Exchange Commission outlining its proposed public stock offering. There was no proposed date for an initial offering, which could be a long way off. Last year, rival Postmates delayed plans for an IPO, citing unfavorable market conditions.

DoorDash Inc. has overtaken Grubhub as the top digital food delivery company in the U.S., according to data analytics firm Second Measure, capturing 38% of monthly food delivery sales in January, compared to 31% for Grubhub.

Analysts have said both DoorDash and Postmates are burning cash and need money-raising options as the third-party delivery business becomes more fragmented and competitive.

DoorDash was valued at about $13 billion after a Nov. 13 funding round that raised $700 million, according to PitchBook Data.

Wall Street has been wary of fast-growing, money-losing companies. Ride-hailing company Uber — another major delivery player through Uber Eats — has traded well below its IPO price since going public last year, as has rival Lyft.

Besides Uber, Grubhub is the only publicly traded digital food delivery company. Grubhub saw its stock plunge last fall after slashing full-year revenue expectations, citing costs associated with gaining customer loyalty in a crowded field.

Food delivery apps are fighting over a growing but still small market. Delivery represents only about 3% of all restaurant orders, according to market research firm PitchBook Data.

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How to make a student loan complaint that gets results

By ANNA HELHOSKI of NerdWallet

Trying to make a complaint against your student loan lender or servicer may feel like screaming into the void. In 2019, federal student aid customers made 44,155 complaints using the Federal Student Aid Feedback System, according to the most recent report of the Federal Student Aid Ombudsman. The most common complaints deal with repaying loans.

The Department of Education, in an email, said while all complaints will be reviewed and responded to, “we cannot guarantee a customer a specific result or change in their current situation.”

Don’t let that stop you from voicing your concerns to the powers that be. Before you send off a fiery email, set reasonable expectations about the outcome — it may not be what you want. But it’s possible to get a result if you know the right steps to take.

START WITH YOUR LENDER OR SERVICER

You’ll see results fastest by contacting your private lender or federal loan servicer first, says Betsy Mayo-Riter, president and founder of the Institute of Student Loan Advisors. Reach out to the lender or servicer’s highest office of customer service, whether that’s a consumer advocate, ombudsman or claims department. Its general call center might not give you the response you’re looking for or have the authority to make account changes.

Send an email first to the company’s general customer service address, which will get your message to the right person, says Mayotte. Written correspondence ensures you have a paper trail. A phone call might seem easier, but it’s more difficult to track interactions with your lender or servicer.

When you make a complaint, document everything and keep your narrative consistent, experts say. It also helps to be clear about what you’re asking for, says Bonnie Latreille, director of research and advocacy at the nonprofit Student Borrower Protection Center. “It’s really easy for any company to send off a form letter,” she adds. “But if a borrower says, ‘I have called and sought relief, and you advertise relief on your website and I want to know what’s available to me,’ then the servicer needs to supply what plans you’re eligible for and a copy of the applications.”

ESCALATE YOUR COMPLAINT

If your issue isn’t resolved with your lender or servicer, bring it to the government. All federal loan borrowers should submit complaints through the Federal Student Aid Feedback System. Private loan borrowers should submit complaints to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

When you submit to the feedback system, you can expect a response via email or letter within 15 days and typically get a resolution within 60 days, according to an email from the Education Department. If not, you can contact the Federal Student Aid Ombudsman Group.

SEEK OUTSIDE HELP

Your state attorney general’s office, state consumer protection office and congressional representative are additional resources to lodge complaints with. There’s also no wrong time in the complaint process to seek advice. Nonprofit consumer advocacy groups such as the Institute of Student Loan Advisors offer free help to student borrowers to navigate the process.

You can pay for legal services, but these services may be expensive, says Adam Minsky, a Massachusetts attorney who specializes in student loans issues. He recommends contacting an attorney only when you’ve exhausted all your appeals.

LEARN HOW TO CHANGE YOUR LENDER OR SERVICER

If all else fails, it is possible to change your lender or servicer. You can refinance private and federal loans with a private lender. And federal borrowers can pick a new servicer after consolidating with the government.

Fake meat and a latte?

Starbucks adds Beyond Meat in Canada

By JOSEPH PISANI

NEW YORK (AP) — Starbucks customers in Canada will soon be able to down fake meat with their Frappuccinos.

The coffee chain said Wednesday that it will soon start selling a sandwich featuring a meat-free patty from Beyond Meat, the El Segundo, California, company whose products are being put on the menu at other fast food chains as well. Restaurants have been rushing to add patties that mimic meat to their menus to try and boost sales.

Burger King sells a Whopper stuffed with a patty from rival Impossible Foods. And coffee chain Dunkin’ already has a breakfast sandwich with a Beyond Meat patty.

Starbucks said its new sandwich, which also has egg and cheddar cheese, will be available at almost all its 1,500 Canadian stores in March. The patty is made from peas and brown rice and features a blend of fennel, rosemary and other spices.

The Seattle roaster has talked about introducing plant-based patties in the U.S., but has yet to do so.
Conceptis Sudoku

Sudoku is a number-placement puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that each row, each column and each 3x3 box contains the same number only once. The difficulty level of the Conceptis Sudoku increases from Monday to Sunday.

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2 . 6
1 . 9
5 . 1

8 7 9 6 8 4
3 4 9 7 5 2
9 . 6 8 3 . 4
7 . 2 8 . 5
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Blondie

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MINUTEMAN PLUMBING
AT YOUR SERVICE

I CALLED YOU TWO HOURS AGO. WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?

WELL, GIVE ME A MINUTE AND I’LL TRY TO EXPLAIN.
```

Mother Goose & Grimm

```
IT ALL STARTED ONE DAY WHEN I THOUGHT I WAS EATING SEAWEED.

ROAD RUNNER AND THE PEYOTE
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Baby Blues

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GUYS, I’VE MADE A DECISION.

STARTING TODAY, I WANT TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN EVERYTHING YOU DO.

I’LL BE PICKING UP A KNEE SCAR AFTER BREAKFAST. I’M MAKING A WISE CHOICE.
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Zits

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SHOULD I GO GROCERY SHOPPING TODAY OR TOMORROW?

SOMETIMES I ASK THE DUMBDEST QUESTIONS.
```

6 Chix

```
I LIKE BEING GLUTEN-INTOLERANT BECAUSE EVERY TIME I ORDER FOOD I CAN PRETEND I HAVE A GIRLFRIEND.
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Mutts

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SAVE THE KOALAS

SAVE THE PLANET

SAVE THAT THOUGHT
```

Blondie

```
MINUTEMAN PLUMBING
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DALLAS (AP) — The “Leaning Tower of Dallas,” a social media sensation born when a part of a building survived implosion, endured hundreds of blows from a wrecking ball Monday.

Dozens of people gathered northeast of the Texas city’s downtown to watch as a crane was used to batter the former Affiliated Computer Services building. But the developer now says the demolition may take days.

The 11-story building found its second life online after surviving a first demolition attempt. It inspired jokes and comparisons to Italy’s Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The “Leaning Tower” was located in the city’s downtown to watch its implosion when a part of a building survived implosion, enduring hundreds of blows from a wrecking ball.

The developer, which had planned to tear down the building, now says it may take days to complete the demolition.

The building was located in the city’s downtown, and its second-life story quickly spread online, inspiring jokes and comparisons to the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The developer’s change of heart comes after the building survived implosion when a part of a building was battered by a crane.

The developer, who had planned to demolish the building, now says it may take days to complete the demolition.

The building, located in the city’s downtown, was known for its second-life story that quickly spread online, inspiring jokes and comparisons to the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The developer’s change of heart comes after the building was battered by a crane during its first demolition attempt.
About 40% of U.S. adults are obese, government survey finds

By MIKE STOBBE
AP Medical Writer
NEW YORK (AP) — About 4 in 10 American adults are obese, and nearly 1 in 10 is severely so, government researchers said Thursday. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention findings come from a 2017-18 health survey that measures height and weight. More than 5,000 U.S. adults took part.

The survey found that the obesity rate was 42% — higher than the 40% found in a similar 2015-16 study. The severe obesity rate was more than 9% in the new survey, up from the 8% figure in the previous one.

The increases aren't considered statistically significant: The survey numbers are small enough that there's a mathematical chance the rates didn't truly rise.

But it's clear that adult obesity rates are trending up, said the CDC's Cynthia Ogden, one of the report's authors. A half-century ago, about 1 in 100 American adults were severely obese.

Now it's 10 times more common. The obesity rate has risen about 40% in the last two decades.

The findings suggest that more Americans will get diabetes, heart disease and cancer, said Dr. William Dietz, a George Washington University obesity expert.

It also will be increasingly difficult for doctors to care for so many severely obese. The blast. Dietz said. He has estimated that on average, every primary care doctor treating adults has about 100 severely obese patients.

“How's a provider going to do that? Severe obesity really requires very intensive therapy,” he said.

The CDC did not report new obesity numbers for kids and teens. That may come out later this year, Ogden said. In 2015-16, 18.5% of kids and teens were obese and just under 6% were severely obese.

And just under 6% were severely obese, Dietz faulted the government for not pushing for more measures to promote physical activity and better eating. Building more sidewalks and passing a national tax on sugary beverages could make a big difference, he said.

Obesity — which means not merely overweight, but seriously overweight — is considered one of the nation’s leading public health problems.

It is measured by the body mass index, or BMI, a figure calculated from a person's weight and height. A BMI of 25 or greater is considered overweight, a BMI of 30 and above is obese, and a BMI of 40 or above is severely obese.

A person who is 5-foot-4, the average height for U.S. women, is considered obese at a weight of 174 pounds and severely obese above 232 pounds. A person who is 5-foot-9, about the average height for men, is deemed obese at 203 pounds and severely obese at 270.

Biggest explosion seen in universe came from black hole

By MARCIA DUNN
AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Astronomers have discovered the biggest explosion seen in the universe, originating from a super-massive black hole. Scientists reported Thursday that the blast came from a black hole in a cluster of galaxies 390 million light-years away.

The explosion was so large it carved out a crater in the hot gas that could hold 15 Milky Ways, said lead author Simona Giacintucci of the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington.

It’s five times bigger than the previous record-holder. Astronomers used NASA’s Chandra X-Ray Observatory to make the discovery, along with a European space observatory and ground telescopes. They believe the explosion came from the heart of the Ophiuchus galaxy cluster of thousands of galaxies: a large galaxy at the center contains a colossal black hole.

Black holes don’t just draw matter in. They also blast out jets of material and energy.

The first hint of this giant explosion actually came in 2016. Chandra images of the Ophiuchus galaxy cluster revealed an unusual curved edge, but scientists ruled out an eruption given the amount of energy that would have been needed to carve out such a large cavity in the gas.

The two space observatories, along with radio data from telescopes in Australia and India, confirmed that the curvature was, indeed, part of a cavity.

“The radio data fit inside the X-rays like a hand in a glove,” co-author Maxim Markevitch of NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland, said in a statement. “This is the clincher that tells us an eruption of unprecedented size occurred here.”

The blast is believed to be over by now: There are no signs of jets currently shooting from the black hole.

More observations are needed in other wavelengths to better understand what occurred, according to the team.

The findings appeared in the Astrophysical Journal.
By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER
Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — TV actress Lori Loughlin and her fashion designer husband, Mossimo Giannulli, will go on trial in October on charges that they bribed their daughters’ way into the University of Southern California, a federal judge said Thursday.

The judge set the trial date a day after defense attorneys claimed that new evidence would exonerate the couple of charges in the college admissions bribery scheme that has embroiled prestigious universities across the country. The famous couple will be tried starting Oct.5 in Boston federal court alongside six other prominent parents accused of rigging the college admissions process. Seven others still fighting the charges will go to trial in January 2021, U.S. District Judge Nathaniel Gorton said. Loughlin, who played Aunt Becky on the sitcom “Full House,” and Giannulli are accused of paying $500,000 to get their daughters into USC as recruits to the rowing team, though neither of them was a rower. Authorities say Loughlin and Giannulli believed their payments were legitimate donations, not bribes. But the judge said the cases need to be resolved expeditiously and instructed defense attorneys to file any motions to dismiss the case by March 13. Loughlin and Giannulli’s attorneys said in a filing late Wednesday that prosecutors provided them with notes from Singer’s iPhone.

Associated Press

Kobe Bryant handprints, other memorabilia up for auction

NEW YORK (AP) — Some key Kobe Bryant memorabilia, including two of his Los Angeles Lakers uniforms and cement handprints from his induction into the Grauman’s Chinese Theater hall of fame gallery, are going up for sale in April.

Julien’s Auctions said Thursday that the items would be up for sale on April 30 as part of its annual sports auction that includes a silver medal from the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and a 2002 FIFA World Cup gold winner’s medal.

Bryant’s items were already being planned for auction when he, his daughter Gianna and seven others were killed in a helicopter crash on Jan. 26.

“Were honored to include this collection of his items and pay tribute to this giant who was an inspiration not only to basketball fans but to the entire world,” said Darren Julien, Julien’s Auctions president and CEO.

The Lakers uniforms up for sale are one worn during the 2000 NBA Finals, with his original number 8. The uniform included a black armband which marked the memory of Wilt Chamberlain, who died that season.

The other uniform was from his 2007 season, when his number was 24.

Author Edwidge Danticat wins $20,000 Story Prize

NEW YORK (AP) — Edwidge Danticat had an eventful Wednesday, praised for work both past and current.

Hours after the American Academy of Arts and Letters announced that she was among this year’s new members of the venerable honor society, Danticat became the first two-time winner of the Story Prize, a $20,000 award for short fiction.

She was presented the Story Prize on Wednesday night for her collection “Everything Inside,” set in part in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In 2005, she won the inaugural Story Prize for “The Dew Breaker.”

“It is something to see a writer whose previous work is already canonical, write a story collection with the fierce desperation and love usually seen in first books,” Story Prize judges wrote in their citation. “But Danticat is not one of our regular writers, she is a harking angel. She comes to tell us that the world is new, again and again, and that stories will not lose their urgency, their necessity.”

The other finalists Wednesday night were Kail Fajarado-Anstine for “Sabrina & Corina” and Zadie Smith for “Grand Union.”

Danticat is also known for the memoir “Brother, I’m Dying” and for the novel “Breath, Eyes, Memory,” which Oprah Winfrey selected for her book club in 1998.
Kids shine as Broadway’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ goes big

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press
NEW YORK (AP) — The cast of “To Kill a Mockingbird” ditched its somber Broadway home Wednesday for the cavernous Madison Square Garden, performing the play for 18,000 school kids in an electric one-time-only performance that one actor called “primal.”

It marks the first time a Broadway play has been performed at the venue nicknamed “The World’s Most Famous Arena,” which is home to the New York Knicks and Rangers.

The last line of the play is “All rise” and the students did exactly that, giving it a standing ovation and a hearty thank you.

“I loved the book in middle school when I read it and seeing it live and seeing the characters come to life, it’s so much more real,” said Alissa DiCrista, 17. “It makes you feel so much more.”

The play’s usual Broadway home is the 1,435-seat Shubert Theatre, where it’s routinely sold out. But thousands of middle and high school students from all five boroughs got to see it for free, courtesy of the Scott Rudin-led production and James L. Dolan, executive chairman and CEO of the Madison Square Garden Company.

The tickets were distributed by the city’s education department. Free popcorn and bottles of water were also offered on the way out.

The audience this time surrounded the stage and, in the moments before the play, started using the flashlight feature on their phones to mine patterns and signals, turning the Garden into a tapestry of lights, like a forest ignited by an electrical current.

The play’s usual Broadway setting was completely silent as it crackled with current issues: institutional racism, a flawed criminal justice system, police misconduct, sexual assault and standing against evil.

Ripples of anger coursed through the crowd when racial epithets were used. “I feel like it targeted a lot of prominent issues in today’s society and it really did speak to me,” said Amudha Creary, 17. “Definitely there were parts where you had to react because it hurt so bad to even imagine it happening today.”

The entire current Broadway cast performed the show, led by Ed Harris as Finch. They practiced for the Garden show in a warehouse in Long Island City, preparing to work on their new space, a stage measuring 90 feet in length by 40 feet in width.

Despite the size, the actors kept the experience intimate, rolling pieces of equipment onstage and helping put away props. Some, when not onstage, sat in chairs or a bench waiting for their cues. At one point, Nick Robinson, who played Jem, gave Lisa Gay Hamilton, who played Calpurnia, a gentle hug after a powerful scene. “It was magical. It felt like what theater used to be like thousands of years ago,” said actor Taylor Trensch, who played Dill Harris. “It’s something I’ll remember forever.”

Mayor Bill de Blasio and city first lady Chirlane McCray introduced the show, urging the students to think about the themes of the play and urging them to embrace the arts. “You are part of history today,” McCray said. Director Spike Lee, a die-hard Knicks fan, said: “Don’t let anyone tell you you can’t be artists. Follow your dreams.”

While Sorkin’s script wasn’t altered, the staging had to adapt to the hulking space. Eight cameras captured eight shots of each scene, sending it onto four massive screens so everyone could see small details. The stage arrived in about 100 pieces and took four hours in install, including the jury box, which remains empty throughout, a signal that the audience also is complicit in the trial.

On Wednesday, director Bartlett Sher paced along one side of the stage during the performance, helping actors with their sound equipment and cheering them on. Trensch thought back to his own youth and didn’t initially know if the three-hour play would capture the attention of the children. He needn’t have worried. “It was almost primal,” he said. “There was like an electrical charge in the air that you don’t get at the Shubert Theatre.”
Clive Cussler, million-selling adventure writer, dies at 88

By HILLEL ITALIE
AP National Writer
NEW YORK (AP) — Clive Cussler, the million-selling adventure writer and real-life thrill-seeker who wove personal details and spectacular fantasies into his page-turning novels about underwater explorer Dirk Pitt, has died, his publisher said Wednesday.

Cussler died Monday at his home in Scottsdale, Arizona, said Alexis Weitby, spokeswoman for publisher Penguin Random House. He was 88. The cause was not disclosed.

Cussler dispatched Pitt and pal Al Giordino on exotic missions highlighted by shipwrecks, treasure, espionage and beautiful women. In popular works including "Cyclops," "Night Probel" and his commercial breakthrough, "Raise the Titanic!"

Cussler was an Illinois native who was raised in Southern California and lived in Arizona for most of his final years, but he sent Pitt around the globe in plots that ranged from the bold to the incredible. "The Treasure" features as an aspiring Aztec despot who murders an American envoy, the hijacking of a plane carrying the United Nations secretary-general and soldiers from an ancient Rome looting the Library of Alexandria.

In "Iceberg," the presidents of French Guiana and the Dominican Republic are the ones in danger, during a visit to Disneyland. In "Sahara," a race across the desert somehow leads to new information about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

"Again and again, Dirk Pitt, working for the fictional National Underwater and Marine Agency, must find a sunken vessel and retrieve some artifact," Mark Schone, summarizing Cussler’s novels, wrote in The New York Times in 2004. "Evil forces, be they Communists or Biofiedian madmen, try to stop him. Along the way Pitt saves himself, the world and the damsel of the moment."

Cussler has a new novel, "Journey of the Pharaohs," set to be released March 10, with several more awaiting posthumous publication.

In real life, Cussler founded his own National Underwater and Marine Agency and participated in dozens of searches for old ships, including one that turned up a steamship belonging to Cornelius Vanderbilt. He also had a long history of questionable claims — some admitted, some denied.

"He can definitely spin the tall tales and is a master of fiction. But that doesn’t mean I buy into his alleged discovery claims," Dr. E. Lee Spence wrote on his blog in 2011. Spence, a prominent underwater archaeologist feuded with Cussler over which of them recovered a Confederate submarine. Born an only child in 1931 in Aurora, Illinois, and raised in Alhambra, California, Cussler's name and writing persona have the air of a pseudonym, but he was born with his moniker, named for the British actor Clive Brook. He studied for Aurora, Illinois, and raised in Alhambra, California, Cussler's name and writing persona have the air of a pseudonym, but he was born with his moniker, named for the British actor Clive Brook. He studied for

In 1965, he married Barbara Knight, with whom he had three children. Through much of the 1960s, he worked in advertising, as a copywriter and creative director. Among the better known slogans he helped coin — "It’s stronger than dirt," for an Ajax laundry detergent campaign.

In his free time, he was writing fiction and moonlighting at a skin-diving equipment shop, where his wife suggested he work to help gather material for his novels.

"When creating advertising, I had always looked at the competition and wondered what I could conceive that was totally different," Cussler said in an interview included in "Dirk Pitt Revealed," a nonfiction book released in 1998. "(James) Bond was becoming incredibly popular throughout the movies, and I knew I couldn’t match Ian Fleming’s style and prose. So I was determined not to write about a detective, secret agent or undercover investigator or deal in murder mysteries. My hero’s adventures would be based on and under water."

Cussler finished manuscripts for "Mediterranean Caper" and "Iceberg," but had no literary agent; so he created one. He purchased a thousand sheets of blank letter paper, got a friend in advertising to design a logo for "The Charles Winthrop Agency" and sent his first inquiry to Peter Lippack of the William Morris Agency. Lippack agreed to take on Cussler and remained with him long after the author confessed his charade.

"I told him the story of Charlie Chaplin’s initial great repudiation," Cussler explained to the Arizona Republic. "I sat there waiting for the result, and he sat there blank for a minute, and then he laughed himself under the table. And then he said, ‘Oh my God. I always thought Charlie Chaplin was some guy I met while I was drunk at a cocktail party.’”

"Mediterranean Caper" came out in 1973, followed by "Iceberg" two years later and "Raise the Titanic!” in 1976. He would turn out more than 20 Dirk Pitt novels and expand into children’s books and such adventure series as "The Oregon Files" and "The NUMA Files.

Cussler had claimed his worldwide sales topped 100 million copies, but in a legal battle with Crusader Entertainment, which alleged he misrepresented his popularity, it was determined the number was closer to 40 million. In 2007, a Los Angeles jury awarded Crusader $5 million but also ordered that Cussler receive $8.5 million because the film company only adapted one of "Sahara" of the two books it had agreed to produce.

The film version of "Sahara" came out in 2005 and starred Matthew McConaughey and Penelope Cruz. An adaptation of "Raise the Titanic!"— its title the same except for dropping the exclamation point, came out in 1980 and featured Jason Robards and Frederic Forrest.

"The Tonight Show" executive producer Mark Lester and "The Tonight Show" executive producer Mark Lester have taken a black tape recorder, and placed it on a table. And he said, ‘Oh my God. I always thought Charlie Chaplin was some guy I met while I was drunk at a cocktail party.’”

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Boy band BTS performs at NYC’s Grand Central Terminal

NEW YORK (AP) — The South Korean boy band BTS performed at Grand Central Terminal in New York City for a special episode of Jimmy Fallon’s "The Tonight Show.

The band performed their new single “On” with an ensemble of dancers and a marching band for the episode, which aired on Monday. Metro-North Railroad officials told The New York Times the five-minute performance took two months to organize.

The crew of about 180 people arrived at Grand Central at about 10 p.m. on Feb. 8. The dancers and marching band rehearsed in Vanderbilt Hall and the North West Balcony rooms while the crew set up their cameras and people left the busy transit hub, said Meredith Conti, Metro-North’s manager of special events.

BTS didn’t set foot on the terminal floor until it closed at 2 a.m., so they could avoid being spotted, said Meredith Conti, Metro-North's manager of special events. They had about two hours to shoot the video before the terminal’s cleaning staff arrived to wash the floors.

Gavin Purcell, the show’s interim showrunner, wrote on Twitter that the episode was “our love letter to this city.”

Associated Press
RIGHT AT HOME: Ceilings with something to say

By KIM COOK
Associated Press

The ceiling — sometimes referred to as a room’s fifth wall — often gets short shrift in decorating schemes. Walls and furnishings take center stage while the acreage overhead receives a coat of neutral white paint, with perhaps a snazzy ceiling fixture. That wasn’t the case historically. Plaster ornamentation and murals were used centuries ago, and the Victorians really went to town on the ceiling, with elaborate moldings and stamped tin sheeting. Ceiling medallions graced more formal spaces like dining rooms and parlors, while timber beams and tongue-and-groove boards were popular in kitchens, bedrooms and common spaces. Through the early 20th century, curvy coving, paneled grids and ornate moldings were popular. But with the advent of modernism after the 1930s, ceilings became the serene planes most of us are familiar with. Now we’re looking up again. Designers are really getting creative with architectural elements, as well as paint, wallpaper and lighting.

“Statement ceilings are a great way to bring detail and visual interest to a room,” says Gideon Mendelson, founder and creative director of his New York-based eponymous design group. “We see them as an opportunity to create something unexpected that adds to the space.”

For one client in the New York suburbs, he’d been tasked with creating a classic white kitchen, but he wanted to add some personality. “The client loved checks and plaids, so a decorative painter painted a green checkered design on a canvas and then installed it on the ceiling. The color matches the green on the kitchen island, so it ties the room together and makes the space feel that much more special.”

The positive reaction to that ceiling spurred Mendelson’s team to include them in other projects. “We quickly realized how impactful and powerful they can be. It immediately makes the space feel like one-of-a-kind. In almost every project we do now, there’s some ceiling treatment.”

He turned traditional Tudor style on its ear in another project by creating a modern design made of oak for the ceiling. And in a Hamptons retreat, faux-wood wallcovering from the French firm Nobilis added a beachy feel to the ceiling, punctuated with fresh Lilly Pulitzer-esque green paint. Not ready to fully dress your ceiling? Coleman installed a series of architectural wood beams across the ceiling in both the dining area and a bathroom, giving the spaces a Japanese country-house vibe.

In a Roxbury, Connecticut, country home, designer Philip Gorrivan ran wallpaper up the walls and across the ceilings in several rooms, including a Cole & Son’s Fornasetti leaf print in the dining room and a storm-cloud print called Nuvolette, also by Fornasetti, in a boy’s room. Wrapping rooms in strong patterns like this creates drama, and in nurseries and children’s rooms can spark imagination.

Smooth-finished ceilings make it easy to apply whatever you can dream up: paint, peel and stick or traditional wallpapers, or even complicated architectural elements, as with origami, decals, buttons, faux jewels, botanicals, twigs, garlands, ribbon, stencils or scarves. Command strips will hold most lightweight objects firmly to a smooth ceiling, but if you’re stuck with one of those textured ceilings, you’ll either have to refinish it or opt for wood paneling or tin sheets.

Not ready to fully dress your ceiling? You can still add some excitement there with a light fixture. “A ceiling statement doesn’t have to involve complicated architectural details,” points out Leigh Spicher, design studio director for the Atlanta-based homebuilding group Ashton Woods. “It can also be created by adding a chandelier that contrasts in either style or scale to the room.”

Sometimes an unexpected bonus comes from creating a statement ceiling. Chris Coleman remembers a project in Manhattan a few years ago, in a 39th floor apartment: “The husband said what do we do with the ceiling? And I said lacquer it, and they were so ecstatic when they saw the yellow taxis reflecting in the ceiling.”