

Colorado Begins Recreational Pot Sales

DENVER (AP) — Crowds were serenaded by live music as they waited for the nation's first legal recreational pot shops to open. They ate doughnuts and funnel cakes as a glass-blower made smoking pipes. Some tourists even rode around in a limo, eager to try weed but not so eager to be seen buying it.

And when the sales began, those who bought the drug emerged from the stores, receipt held high and carrying sealed shopping bags, to cheers.

"I'm going to frame the receipt when I go home, to remind myself of what might be possible: Legal everywhere," musician James Aaron Ramsey, 28, who did some time in jail for pot possession in Missouri and played folk tunes with his guitar for those in line.

Activists hope he's right, and that the experiment in Colorado will prove to be a better alternative to the costly American-led drug war, produce the kind of revenue that state officials hope and save the government costs in locking up drug offenders.

Just on the first day, prices had already risen to more than \$500 an ounce, but it's too soon to say whether that will hold.

Sudan: Peace Talks To Open In Ethiopia

JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — Negotiators from South Sudan's two warring sides arrived Wednesday in Ethiopia for peace talks, and a U.N. official urged both forces to bring the world's newest country "back from the brink."

Fighting continued in Bor, a gateway city to the capital of Juba, a government official said. Bor is just 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Juba.

Bor, the capital of Jonglei state, is the center of ethnically based violence stemming from the political rivalry between President Salva Kiir and ousted Vice President Riek Machar, the rebel leader accused of mounting a failed coup attempt.

Kiir declared a state of emergency Wednesday in Jonglei and Unity, two states where rebel forces have gained the upper hand in recent fighting.

Machar said Tuesday he would send his forces from Bor to Juba, but that threat was played down by Hilde Johnson, the U.N. representative in South Sudan.

Palestinian Ambassador Is Killed

PRAGUE (AP) — The Palestinian ambassador to the Czech Republic died Wednesday in an explosion that occurred when he opened an old safe that had been left untouched for more than 20 years, officials said.

Ambassador Jamal al-Jamal, 56, was at home with his family at the time of the explosion, according to Palestinian Embassy spokesman Nabil El-Fahel. Al-Jamal was seriously injured and rushed to a hospital where he died, according to police spokeswoman Andrea Zoulova.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki said no foul play was suspected, noting that the safe had been left untouched for more than 20 years.

It also appeared that the door of the safe had been booby-trapped, according to Zoulova. It was unclear how al-Jamal tried to open it or what type of safe it was.

The safe was recently moved from the old embassy building, but it had come from a building that used to house the Palestinian Liberation Organization's offices in the 1980s, Malki said.

US Battling To Catch Up In Arctic Race

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. is racing to keep pace with stepped-up activity in the once sleepy Arctic frontier, but it is far from being in the lead.

Nations across the world are hurrying to stake claims to the Arctic's resources, which might be home to 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its untapped natural gas. There are emerging fisheries and hidden minerals. Cruise liners loaded with tourists are sailing the Arctic's frigid waters in increasing numbers. Cargo traffic along the Northern Sea Route, one of two shortcuts across the top of the Earth in summer, is on the rise.

The U.S., which takes over the two-year rotating chairmanship of the eight-nation Arctic Council in 2015, has not ignored the Arctic, but critics say the U.S. is lagging behind the other seven: Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Canada and Denmark, through the semiautonomous territory of Greenland.

"On par with the other Arctic nations, we are behind — behind in our thinking, behind in our vision," Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said. "We lack basic infrastructure, basic funding commitments to be prepared for the level of activity expected in the Arctic."

At a meeting before Thanksgiving with Secretary of State John Kerry, Murkowski suggested he name a U.S. ambassador or envoy to the Arctic — someone who could coordinate work on the Arctic being done by more than 20 federal agencies and take the lead on increasing U.S. activities in the region.

Pope's Message: Accept Differences

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis, laying out his hopes Wednesday for the just-begun year, urged people to work for a world where everyone accepts each other's differences and where enemies recognize that they are brothers.

"We are all children of one heavenly father. We belong to the same human family and we share a common destiny," Francis said, speaking from his studio window overlooking St. Peter's Square, jammed with tens of thousands of faithful, tourists and Romans.

"This brings a responsibility for each to work so that the world becomes a community of brothers who respect each other, accept each other in one's diversity, and take care of one another," the pope said.

Setting aside his prepared text for a moment, he expressed impatience with violence in the world. "What is happening in the heart of man? What is happening in the heart of humanity?" Francis asked. "It's time to stop."

He told the crowd this reflection was inspired by a letter he received from a man — "maybe one of you" — who lamented that there are "so many tragedies and wars in the world."

Barbara Bush Remains Hospitalized

HOUSTON (AP) — Former first lady Barbara Bush remains hospitalized with a respiratory-related issue, but her condition hasn't changed, a spokesman for her husband's office said Wednesday.

Bush, 88, was admitted to Houston Methodist Hospital on Monday, though it wasn't announced until former President George H.W. Bush's office released a statement Tuesday night.

"She is in great spirits, has already received visits from her husband and family, and is receiving fantastic care," the statement read, promising to provide updates as warranted.

Jim McGrath, a spokesman for the former president, said there was "nothing new to report" on Wednesday.

In the meantime, President Barack Obama said he hopes Bush gets well soon.

"Michelle and I send our best wishes to Mrs. Bush for a speedy recovery," the president said in a written statement. "Barbara is blessed to have both a loving, supportive family by her side and a vibrant spirit that we hope will have her feeling better soon."

He added: "I know I speak for Americans everywhere when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with Barbara and her family on this New Year's Day."

Bush and her husband, the 41st president, live in Houston and still make public appearances. Last week, they honored a Houston businessman and philanthropist with a Points of Light Award, a volunteer service award started by the former president.

ACA Enters New Phase

New Year Means New Challenges For Health Care Law

BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — This could be the year that things finally turn around for President Barack Obama's health care law. Yet it could start with another round of glitches that vex consumers and leave Republicans crowing. "We told you so."

The law's major benefits take effect with the new year, along with an unpopular insurance mandate and the risk of more nerve-racking coverage disruptions.

Big improvements are in store for some, including Howard Kraft of Lincolnton, N.C. A painful spinal problem left him unable to work as a hotel bellman. But he's got coverage because federal law now forbids insurers from turning away people with health problems.

"I am not one of these people getting a policy because I'm being made to," Kraft said. "I need one to stay alive."

What's good for millions like Kraft is secured through what others see as an

imposition: requiring virtually every American to get covered, through an employer, a government program or direct purchase of a plan.

But the biggest health care headlines early this year could come from continued uncertainty over the insurance program's messy rollout.

The consumer-facing side of the HealthCare.gov website appears to be largely fixed — with 2.1 million enrolled through federal and state websites. But on the back end, insurers say they are still receiving thousands of erroneous sign-ups from the government.

That means early in the year insured patients could go for a medication refill — or turn up in the emergency room — only to be told there is no record of their coverage.

One of the main worries is over certain error-tainted enrollment records that insurers call "orphans" and "ghosts."

"Orphans" are sign-ups that the government has a record of, but they do not

appear in insurer systems. Insurers say those customers never left the government's "orphanage" to "go and live" with the carrier they selected.

"Ghosts" are new customers that the insurer does have a record of, but whose information mysteriously does not appear in the government's computers.

The Obama administration says the rate of such errors has been reduced dramatically, and insurers agree. The catch is that the volume of sign-ups has surged in the meantime, which means even with a lower error rate the number of problem cases keeps growing. And there is no automated way to clear up mistakes quickly.

"There are going to be problems for any number of people who thought they had signed up, and it won't work right off the bat," said Mark McClellan, who oversaw the rollout of Medicare's prescription drug benefit — a program that also had its share of issues. "It would be particularly disruptive for people in the midst of treatment."



RICK LOOMIS/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
An actor portraying Neil Armstrong walking on the moon is part of the Wells Fargo Opening Show entry in the 125th Rose Parade in Pasadena, Calif., Wednesday.

New Year's Holiday

World Celebrates Arrival Of 2014

BY JAKE PEARSON AND
DAVID B. CARUSO

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A world-wide wave of celebrations rang in 2014 with a dazzling 30-minute fireworks show in Dubai, a deluge of confetti in London that tasted as good as it looked and a lavish, boozy, music-filled party throughout the streets of Las Vegas.

In freezing New York City's Times Square, a sea of horn-tooting, hat-wearing revelers cheered and some smooched as the famed crystal ball dropped at midnight.

Bronx-born U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor led the 60-second countdown and pushed the button that unleashed the shimmering orb with 2,688 crystals, a role usually filled by the New York City mayor.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on his last day in office, sat out the celebration after 12 years on the job, while newly elected Mayor Bill de Blasio took the oath of office just after midnight at his Brooklyn home.

Kerrie McConaghy, 20, a university student visiting Times Square from Armagh, Ireland, was dancing and jumping up and down, donning a big blue top hat.

"It's unbelievable here," she said. "The lights, seeing the ball, hearing the music, all the people. It's amazing."

"TV doesn't do this justice," she said. "You have to be here to believe it."

1st Snowstorm Of 2014 Descends On New England

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Residents and emergency management officials in New England and parts of New York prepared on Wednesday for a winter storm predicted to help usher in 2014 with snow and frigid temperatures across much of the region.

Snow was expected to begin falling overnight in some areas, promising a messy commute for the first business day of the new year, but the full storm wasn't expected to hit until later Thursday. As much as a foot of snow or more was forecast for some areas overnight Thursday into Friday, and temperatures were expected to plummet, with some areas seeing highs just above zero, the National Weather Service said.

"There will be travel problems," said Hugh Johnson, a

Marcus lx, 34, visiting from Germany, gave his wife, Sabrina, a big kiss when the ball dropped and confetti rained down.

"This is the best New Year's Eve of my life," he said as the crowd erupted with cheers and cries of "Happy New Year!" "It was worth the 13 hour wait in the cold."

The annual New York celebration, which this year featured performances from artists such as Miley Cyrus, Macklemore & Ryan Lewis and Blondie, has become part endurance sport because post-9/11 security measures force spectators into pens at least 12 hours in advance, with no food, warmth or bathrooms.

"We've got adult diapers. We're wearing them right now," said 14-year-old Amber Woods, who came with friends from the New York City suburbs to experience the event for the first time. They entered their corral at 10 a.m. Tuesday. For nourishment, they brought lollipops and popcorn. For the cold, they did a lot of jumping in place.

"Every time I say, it's the last. But then I come back," said Yasmina Merrir, a 42-year-old Washington, D.C., resident attending her fourth Times Square ball drop. In 2009, the cold was so bad, she got hypothermia. Her legs swelled up like balloons.

Merrir was fasting and not drinking anything to deal with the lack of restrooms. As for the cold, she recommended

vigorous dancing for as long as you can stand on your feet.

"At a point," she said, "your brain is not working anymore."

Las Vegas held one its biggest ever New Year's Eve celebrations, with sold-out concerts and an eight-minute long fireworks show that was billed as the largest in the country. The Minus5 Ice Bar Mandalay Bay started handing out free champagne for hourly toasts at 11 a.m. Tourists were seen toting novelty drinks into casinos by noon.

On the other side of the Atlantic, London welcomed 2014 with a mixture of futuristic fireworks and torch-lit tradition. The city's mayor said this year's explosive display came packed with peach-flavored snow, edible banana confetti and orange-scented bubbles. The evening also included scratch-and-sniff programs, LED wristbands and fruit-flavored sweets.

In Russia, where two suicide bombings in two days killed 34 people, eerily empty

busses lumbered through the streets of Volgograd, where authorities canceled mass events for New Year's Eve and asked residents not to set off fireworks.

President Vladimir Putin, in his New Year's Eve address to the nation, vowed that the fight against terrorists will continue "until their destruction is complete," Russian news agencies reported.

In Dubai, a Persian Gulf city known for glitz, glamour and over-the-top achievements like the world's tallest skyscraper, officials sought to break another record by creating the largest fireworks show.

The Dubai skyline was a canvas for a dazzling 30-minute show. The display capped off with six minutes of fireworks that engulfed the city's man-made, palm-shaped island, with its fronds and trunk shimmering in thousands of lights. Organizers had promised that the fireworks would form a flying falcon, a sunrise and the United Arab Emirates flag.

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WE ARE CLOSING OUT OUR CHRISTMAS CLEARANCE WITH SAVINGS OF UP TO 95% OFF DURING A 4 DAY EVENT FROM THURSDAY-SUNDAY, JAN 2-5

90% OFF Winter Markdowns

80% OFF Clearance in Every Department

80% OFF Christmas Clearance: Apparel, Gifts, Décor, & More!

\$0.49 Final Clearance
Liquidation Gifts, Books, Accessories

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