

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Area Schedule of Events

Friday, February 8, 2019

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg High School
Faculty Inservice - No School

Doubleheader Basketball with Warner in Groton. (7th Grade boys @ 4pm; 8th Grade boys @ 5pm Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Varsity girls at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity boys game.)

Saturday, February 9, 2019

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg High School
Robotics at Douglas High School

10:00am: Wrestling: Boys Varsity Tournament @ Howard High School

2:00pm: Basketball: Girls Varsity Double Header vs. Moberidge-Pollock Schools @ Moberidge-Pollock High School (JV Girls & JV Boys games at 2pm (Both at same time) Varsity Girls at 3:30pm Varsity Boys at 5:30pm)

Sunday, February 10, 2019

2:00pm- 6:00pm: Open Gym at GHS Arena (Grades JK-8 2pm - 4pm; Grades 6-12 4pm - 6pm)

Monday, February 11, 2019

5:00pm: School Board Meeting

5:15pm: Basketball: Boys C Game vs. Aberdeen Roncalli @ Aberdeen Roncalli High School followed by JV and varsity

Tuesday, February 12, 2019

6:30pm: Basketball: Girls Varsity Game vs. Webster Area High School @ Groton Area High School

Thursday, February 14, 2019

LifeTouch Pictures Groton Area Elementary School, Groton Area High School

4:00pm: Basketball: Boys 7th/8th Game vs. Redfield-Doland @ Redfield Jr-Sr High School(7th Grade @ 4pm; 8th Grade @ 5pm)

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

- 1- Bowling Scores
- 2- Travis Kurth Letter to the Editor
- 3- Locke signs on with Valley City
- 3- Groton Care & Rehab Help Wanted Ads
- 4- School Board Meeting
- 5- Today in Weather History
- 6-7 Weather Pages
- 8- Daily Devotional
- 9- 2019 Groton Events
- 10- News from the Associated Press

Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Cheetahs 74 ½ Chipmunks 74, Foxes 68, Jackelopes 59 ½ Shih Tzus 48, Coyotes 36

Men's High Games: Brad Larson 194, Brad Waage 189, Scott Kampa 189

Women's High Games: Lori Wiley 185, Nicole Kassube 181, Darci Spanier 162

Men's High Games: Brad Larson 533, Doug Jorgensen 525, Brad Waage 524

Women's High Games: Nicole Kassube 482, Darci Spanier 482, Lori Wiley 472

Skating Rink Hours

Open Monday - Thursday: 4 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Friday: 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Saturday: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Sunday: 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.

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EDITORIAL

To the Editor:

I am writing this letter to offer my warmest heartfelt thank you to Groton Post 39, the Groton community, the players, and all the fans who have followed Groton Legion baseball for my 19 years as head coach. It is with sadness and joy that I am stepping down as the Groton legion coach. Differences in baseball philosophy with myself and the Baseball Foundation, along with my lack of time spent with my family, have led me to decide it was time to let others take the lead. I am so very proud of what these players have accomplished, and I believe that their record speaks for itself over the last 19 years. 16 regional legion championships. Playing in 9 state legion championship games while winning 3 state championships. Winning one VFW state 13-14 state championship. All of these are memories I will truly cherish. I have truly been blessed to have great players and even better men to coach. I'm so happy and privileged to have been able to come along for the ride. It has been an honor. It is not without sadness that I am stepping away. It has not been an easy decision and one I have not taken lightly. When you do things for that long it is very difficult to move on and say it is time, without having some reservations. When I say there have been many sleepless nights pondering this. I am not exaggerating. It has been a hard decision.

It is however with great joy that I can now spend more time with my family and maybe find the time to do things that have been put off because of my busy schedule. Your kids are only kids for awhile and then with a blink of an eye they are gone. I'm finding that priorities in life change and you can either change to accommodate them or you can continue doing what you do and watch them pass you by and wish in hindsight, that you would have done things differently. It's ironic, because it's similar to coaching. There have been a few games over the years, where after the game was over, you say, boy I wish I would have done this because we may have had a better chance to win. Hindsight is 20/20 or so they say. So, I guess I'm trying to prevent the "I wish I would have done this," in regard to, my family. Who says you don't learn life lessons from baseball? Again, I want to thank all of you who have supported us through the years. I wish nothing but the best for all the players who are, or will be coming up, who will one day wear the jersey with Groton across their chest. Go Post #39 and Go Groton Baseball!

Sincerely,
Travis Kurth

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WYATT LOCKE

DEFENSIVE LINE

6'1"
225 LBS

GROTON SOUTH DAKOTA

GROTON HS COACH WANNER

VIKING FOOTBALL



Locke signs on with Valley City

The Valley City State University football program has signed 41 student-athletes who will join the Vikings for the 2019 season.

Head coach Dennis McCulloch and his staff announced the additions on Wednesday. All 41 have signed letters of intent to continue their education and football careers at VCSU this fall.

The 2019 class so far spans 10 different states and includes 11 players from North Dakota, nine from Washington, seven from Minnesota, four from Alaska, two each from South Dakota, California, Texas and Arizona, and one each from Florida and Wyoming.

Groton Area's Wyatt Locke has signed on to play at Valley City State University this fall.

**Cook/
Dietary Aide**

Flexible schedule
and new wage
scale.

Contact Pam Rohrbach



 **GROTON**
CARE & REHABILITATION CENTER

1106 North Second Street
605.397.2365

HELP WANTED

**Director
of Nursing**



Current RN licensure in SD
BSN/MSN degree preferred
Sign on bonus available
Full benefits included.

Contact Brynn Pickrel

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6 School Board Meeting February 11, 2019 – 5:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of January 14, 2019 school board meeting as drafted.
2. Approval of North Central Special Education Co-Op (NCSEC) agenda items...as fiscal agent.
3. Approval of January 2019 District bills for payment.
4. Approval of January 2019 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
5. Approval of January 2019 School Transportation Report.
6. Approval of January 2019 School Lunch Report
7. Acknowledge receipt of Notification for Public School Exemption #19-13.
8. Approve Open Enrollment #19-21.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
 - a. Destination Imagination...J. Donley, J. Milbrandt
 - b. CTE...D. Donley, A. Franken, L. Tietz, B. Compton
3. School Board Committee Reports:
 - a. Building, Grounds, & Transportation: Clint Fjelstad, Merle Harder
 - b. Personnel, Policy, & Curriculum: Deb Gengerke, Kara Pharis
 - c. Negotiations: Grant Rix, Steve Smith, Marty Weismantel
4. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Present Certificates of Appreciation in honor of South Dakota School Board Recognition Week.
2. Set fee for summer 2019 driver's education.
3. Approve resignation/retirement of Bonnie Schimmel, RtI/Title Teacher, effective at conclusion of 2018-2019 contract.
4. Approve resignation of Joe Schwan, Athletic Director, effective at the conclusion of the 2018-2019 contract.
5. Executive session pursuant to SDCL 1-25-2(2) student issue and SDCL 1-25-2(1) personnel.
6. Issue administrative contracts for 2019-2020 school year with terms to be negotiated at a later date.

ADJOURN

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Today in Weather History

February 7, 1994: Snow falling over the area produced heavy accumulations from central into northeast South Dakota with 11 inches at Kennebec and eight inches at Watertown from the 7th through the 9th. Extreme cold accompanied and followed the snow with low temperatures of 52 below zero at Promise and 45 below zero at Aberdeen on the 9th. Snow accumulation caused a roof to cave in on a drugstore at Bristol. A man died of exposure attempting to walk home near Sioux Falls after his car became stuck in a ditch.

February 7, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 16 inches fell across central and northeast South Dakota resulting in school and activities cancellations, closing of some businesses, and challenging if not impossible travel. Several people became stranded and had to be rescued. There were also flight cancellations and delays along with some vehicle accidents resulting in minor injuries. Some snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Mound City, Mobridge, Eureka, 7 inches at Milbank and 6 SE McIntosh, 8 inches at Aberdeen, Ipswich, Selby, Iona, and Britton, 9 inches at Clark, 1 S Columbia, Isabel, Webster, and 10 inches at Roscoe, Watertown, and 1 W of Summit. Locations with snowfall of a foot included, Mission Ridge, Murdo, 4 NW Onida, Castlewood, 23 N Highmore, and Timber Lake. Thirteen inches of snow fell at Canning, and Fort Pierre, 14 inches fell at Gettysburg, Eagle Butte, and Pierre with 15 inches at Miller and 16 inches of snow at Clear Lake, Mellette, and Faulkton.

February 7, 2010: A compact but strong area of low pressure moved from Canada and across the Northern Plains from the 7th through the 9th. A prolonged period of moderate to heavy snow developed over far northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota bringing 6 to 8 inches of snow to the area. Some snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Milbank, Wheaton, and Ortonville; 7 inches at Clear Lake, Sisseton, and Artichoke Lake; 8 inches at Summit, Victor, Wilmot, and Browns Valley.

1812: The Hard Shock of the New Madrid Earthquake series strikes the area around the small town of New Madrid Missouri. A three-mile-long island, Island #32 was completely sunk! The Mississippi River once again ran backward. This major shock marked the beginning of the end of New Madrid's long ordeal, even though aftershocks would continue to be felt for years and the fault is still active.

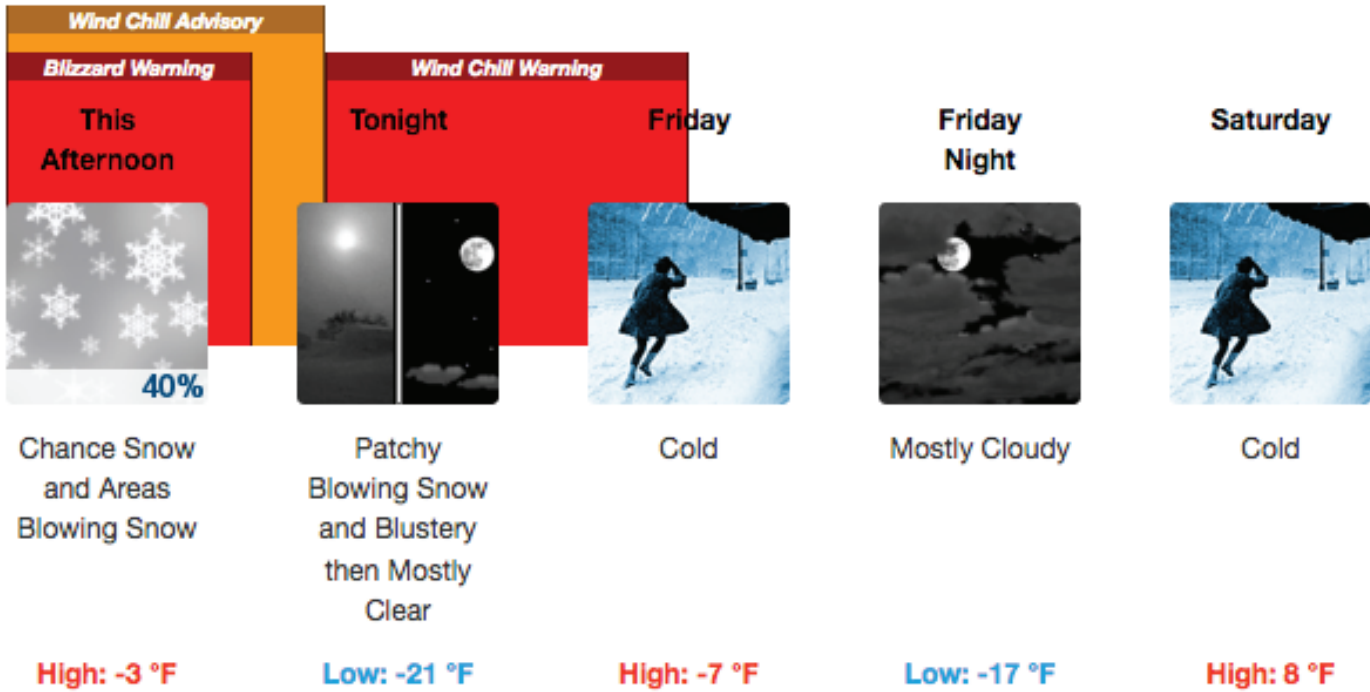
1835: A Great Freeze took place from February 2-9 across southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida. During this freeze, the St. Johns River was frozen, "several rods from the shore," and people were able to walk a distance from the shore. Many citruses and other fruit trees were killed to the ground, never to grow again, when temperatures reached as low as 1°F in Charleston and 8°F in Jacksonville. A Florida gentleman told a newspaper that the state, "appeared as desolate as if a fire had swept over it," after the severe freeze of that winter season. According to Florida Citrus Mutual, this freeze was so severe that it is considered an impact freeze. This indicates that the freeze, annihilate entire groves across the state, killing both mature and young citrus trees while causing a profound economic impact on the citrus industry and prompting growers to replant farther south. This freeze ended attempts to grow citrus in southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida.

1882: The temperature falls to 90 degrees below zero in Verkhoyansk, Russia on this day. This was considered the coldest temperature ever recorded in Asia. However, this reading was done by a spirit thermometer, which is less accurate than a mercury thermometer. The accepted record was 90 degrees below zero in Oymyakon on February 6, 1933.

1933: The USS Ramapo, a 478 ft. Navy oiler found was traveling from Manila to San Diego when it encountered the tallest rogue wave ever recorded. The wave measured 112 feet in height was caused by 70 mph winds over a broad fetch of the ocean.

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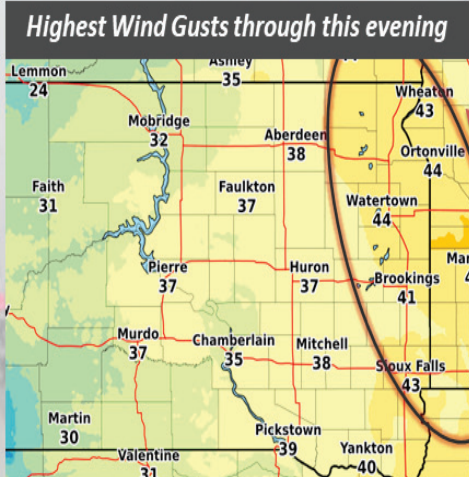
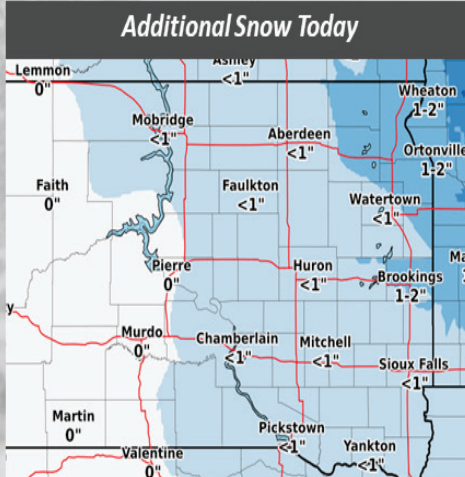


Snow, Gusty Winds, and Dangerously Cold Wind Chills!

- ✓ Prepare for **rapid reductions in visibility**, especially over eastern SD and in open spaces as snow combines with strong winds
- ✓ Little additional Snow expected today

- ✓ Limit time outdoors!
- ✓ Wind gusts of 35 to 45 mph expected today
- ✓ Wind Chills of -25 to -35° today

Blizzard Warning through this evening



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

www.weather.gov/abr
Updated: 2/7/2019 5:12 AM Central

Published on: 02/07/2019 at 5:26AM

Bitterly cold to dangerously low wind chills continue (-25 to -35 degrees today, falling to -35 to -45 degrees Friday morning). Plan ahead for longer than normal travel times due to deteriorating road conditions and reduced visibilities in blowing and drifting snow. Travel may become difficult over eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota from mid morning into tonight, as snow that has already fallen combines with strong gusty winds (gusting 35 to near 45 mph).

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 0 °F at 12:47 PM

Low Outside Temp: -7 °F at 12:00 AM

High Gust: 15 mph at 1:29 PM

Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1987

Record Low: -42 in 1895

Average High: 26°F

Average Low: 4°F

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.09

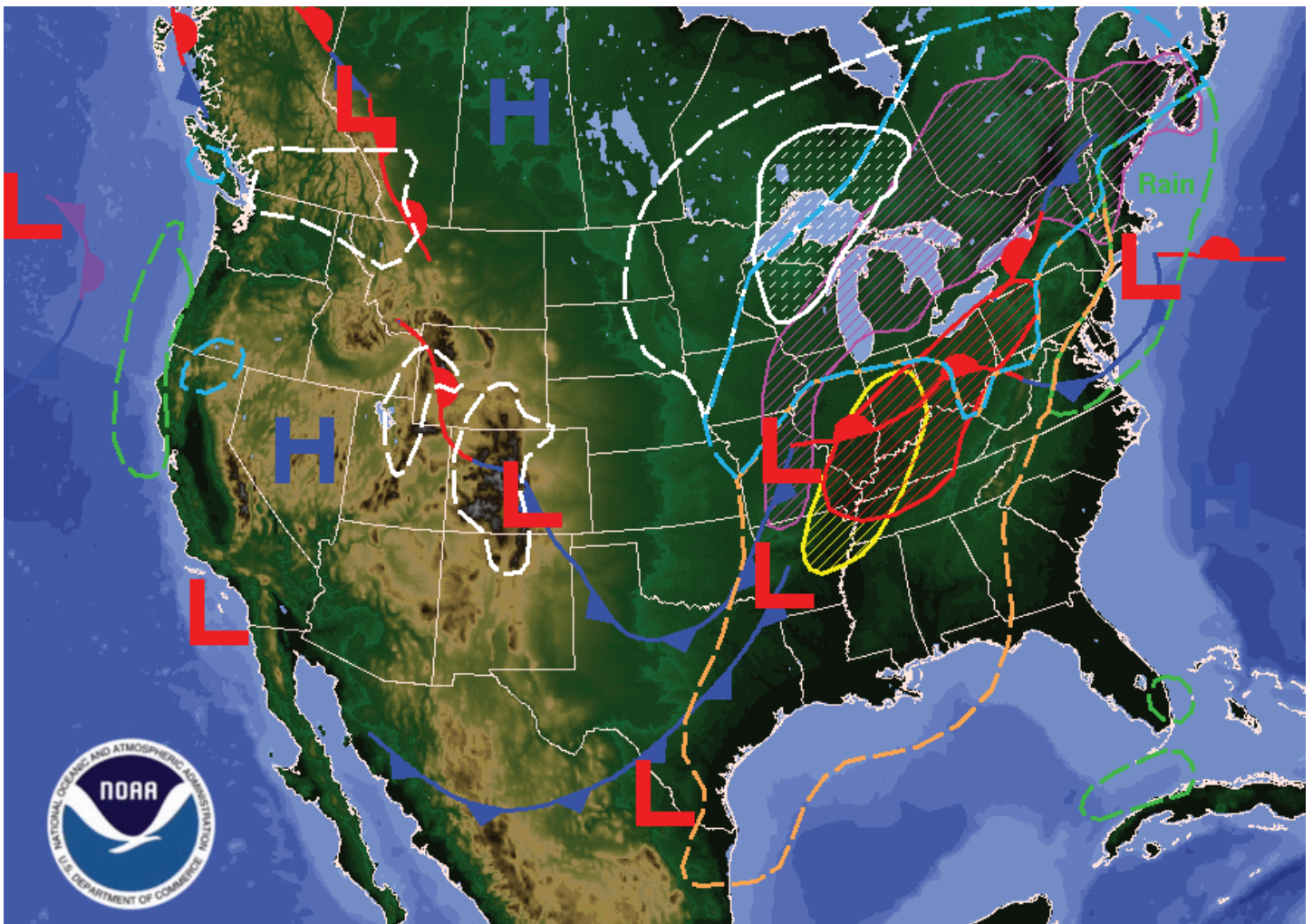
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.56

Precip Year to Date: 0.09

Sunset Tonight: 5:49 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:46 a.m.



Day 1 National Forecast Chart

Valid Thu, Feb 07, 2019, issued 4:49 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McReynolds/Hurley with WPC/SPC/NHC forecasts

Rain
Rain and T'Storms
Rain and Snow
Snow
Flash Flooding Possible (hatched)
Severe T'Storms Possible (hatched)
Freezing Rain Possible (hatched)
Heavy Snow Possible (hatched)

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A KINGS RESUME

Recently I was asked to write a resume. Since I had not written one in nearly 30 years, it presented a real challenge. As I thought about the many things I had done, some well and some not so well, I was grateful for the fact that the choice of what I would include was up to me.

Solomon did not write his resume. God did. Nor was he the last one to make a statement about who he was and what he had accomplished. God did that as well. (And, by the way, God will do the same for you and me.)

Even a casual review of Solomons resume is impressive.

-Early Childhood Education:

Exposed to sages, philosophers, wise men
Observed troops preparing for battle
Studied large building construction
Accompanied his father in foreign affairs
Sang Psalms written by his father
Involved in worship, prayer, and praise

-Major Life Achievements:

The third king of Israel
Built Gods Temple in Jerusalem
Diplomat, trader, patron of the arts
Recognized as wisest man who ever lived
Author, sage, and philosopher

-Final Notations:

Leadership accomplishments destroyed
Married pagan women, compromised his God
Enslaved Gods children

What could have been, never was. Sadly, sin defeated Solomon, and he lost everything.

Prayer: One day, Father, we will all stand before You to be judged for the lives we lived.. May You bless us and say, Well done, Faithful Servant! In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Nehemiah 13:26 Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women.

2019 Groton SD Community Events

- 01/27/2019 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 03/17/2019 Groton American Legion Spring Fundraiser
- 04/13/2019 Easter Egg Hunt (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/27/2019 Fireman's Stag
- 05/04/2019 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/27/2019 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Program
- 06/13/2019 Transit Fundraiser (Middle Thursday in June)
- 06/14/2019 SDSU Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 06/15/2019 Triathlon (Saturday before Father's Day)
- 06/21/2019 Best Ball Golf Tourney
- 07/04/2019 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
- 07/14/2019 Summer Fest
- 08/22/2019 First Day of School
- 09/07/2019 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/08/2019 Sunflower Classic at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 10/12/2019 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/11/2019 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/31/2019 Trunk or Treat/Halloween on Main
- 11/09/2019 Groton American Legion Post #39 Turkey Shoot (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 12/07/2019 Olive Grove Golf Course 2019 Holiday Party
- 12/07/2019 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services

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News from the Associated Press

The Latest: Interstates closed in North Dakota

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — The Latest on the winter storm creating blizzard conditions in parts of the Upper Midwest (all times local):

11:10 a.m.

The North Dakota Department of Transportation has closed sections of interstates and highways because of blizzard conditions that are making parts impassable. Interstate 29 northbound and southbound from Fargo to Grand Forks are closed.

Interstate 94 eastbound lanes from Jamestown to Fargo and I-94 westbound lanes from Fargo to Valley City are shut down as well. Highway 13 from I-29 to Wahpeton is closed in both directions.

Motorists who disobey a road closure may be fined up to \$250.

The Highway Patrol has advised against travel in all of eastern North Dakota due to heavy snow and blowing snow which is creating near zero visibility and hazardous driving conditions.

7:03 a.m.

A wintry mix of snow, sleet and gusty winds is closing schools, causing power outages and making travel treacherous in parts of the Upper Midwest.

In North Dakota, Grand Fork and Cass county courthouses and offices closed Thursday as well as North Dakota State University and dozens of other schools. The North Dakota Highway Patrol advised against travel in eastern parts of the state because of blowing snow and near zero visibility.

The National Weather Service issued a blizzard warning for the eastern edges of the Dakotas and western Minnesota. That region was bracing for up to a foot of snow and wind chills as low as minus 40 (negative 40 Celsius).

In Wisconsin, freezing rain and snow snarled the morning commute, closed schools and left 5,300 We Energies customers without power.

Blizzard warning posted in Dakotas, Minnesota

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SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

11-23-27-30-35

(eleven, twenty-three, twenty-seven, thirty, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$73,000

Lotto America

01-15-35-41-47, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 2

(one, fifteen, thirty-five, forty-one, forty-seven; Star Ball: nine; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$14.75 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$157 million

Powerball

05-13-28-38-63, Powerball: 21, Power Play: 5

(five, thirteen, twenty-eight, thirty-eight, sixty-three; Powerball: twenty-one; Power Play: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$204 million

Boyfriend of admitted covert Russian agent accused of fraud

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The boyfriend of a Russian woman who admitted she was a secret agent for the Kremlin has been charged with fraud in South Dakota, the U.S. Attorney's Office announced Wednesday.

Businessman and conservative political operative Paul Erickson, 56, pleaded not guilty Wednesday to 11 counts of wire fraud and money laundering, a day after he was indicted, according to the South Dakota U.S. Attorney's Office. He faces up to 20 years in prison for each count. The charges appear unrelated to the case of Maria Butina, 30, who pleaded guilty in December for trying to infiltrate conservative political groups.

Prosecutors said Erickson defrauded "many victims" from 1996 through August 2018. The indictment accuses Erickson of concocting a variety of schemes to carry out well over \$1 million in fraudulent transactions, including recruiting investors for a string of elder care homes; developing a wheelchair that allowed a person to use the bathroom from the chair; and home-building in North Dakota's booming oil fields.

Erickson made false representations to get people to invest in the schemes, according to prosecutors. An attorney for Erickson didn't immediately return a phone message seeking comment from The Associated Press.

Before his indictment, Erickson was caught up in Butina's high-profile case, which was separate from special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Butina acknowledged she "sought to establish unofficial lines of communication with Americans having power and influence over U.S. politics," according to her plea agreement. She admitted that her boyfriend, Erickson, helped her as she tried to use his ties with the National Rifle Association to set up the back channels. It's not clear if Erickson will face charges in that case. As part of her deal, Butina pleaded guilty to a single charge of conspiracy to act as an unregistered foreign agent and she agreed to cooperate with investigators.

In South Dakota, Erickson in 2015 helped arrange speeches for Butina to talk about freedom and entrepreneurship at a Sioux Falls school, at the University of South Dakota and at a teenage Republican camp held in the Black Hills.

Erickson, a native of Vermillion, South Dakota, has led a colorful career. He was active in politics as a freshman at the University of South Dakota, and became vice president of the Student Association in 1980. A profile of Erickson by the Sioux Falls Argus Leader in 2003, when he was working on a campaign to defeat then-Democratic Sen. Tom Daschle, said Erickson was forced out of that Student Association post after obtaining confidential student records and giving them to a political campaign.

He transferred to Yale, serving as national treasurer of the College Republicans while there. He graduated in 1984 and got a law degree in 1988 from the University of Virginia.

He also worked on Pat Buchanan's 1992 presidential campaign and later made an action movie with Jack

Abramoff, the former Washington lobbyist ensnared in a corruption scandal in 2006.

House panel passes campus 'intellectual diversity' measure

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota bill seeking to promote "intellectual diversity" on college campuses advanced Wednesday despite pushback from the Board of Regents, university presidents and student representatives.

The House Education Committee voted 9-6 to send the measure to the chamber's floor. Republican Rep. Sue Peterson urged support for her bill, saying it would "preserve our First Amendment rights on college campuses."

"It's time to begin recreating the foundation upon which our freedoms are based," Peterson said. "That foundation is a firm knowledge of the history of these great United States of America and the government given to us by our founders and by almighty God."

But Paul Beran, chief executive officer and executive director of the Board of Regents, said it would create unfunded testing and reporting mandates for the state's six public universities. He said the measure obscures the regents' current "clear" free speech policy.

University of South Dakota Student Government Association Vice President Madison Green said students "overwhelmingly believe" there's no free speech issue on campus and that the legislation is misguided.

"Ultimately, we view this bill as unnecessary and repetitive," Green said.

South Dakota College Republicans President Trevor Gunlicks said the measure is vital to current and future generations of students. South Dakota has a problem with intellectual diversity on college campuses, said Gunlicks, a South Dakota State University student.

"I have had first and secondhand accounts and witnessed and heard many stories of members of my organization over the past year-and-a-half being condemned for their beliefs," he said.

The wide-ranging bill would designate outdoor university areas as public forums, prohibit officials from discriminating against student organizations based on their expression and direct the Board of Regents to set policy requiring state universities to maintain a commitment to free expression.

The proposal would require each university to report to the governor, regents and legislators about actions taken to boost intellectual diversity. The public reports would also require information including instances in which free expression is disrupted, attempts to block a speaker and investigations into students based on their speech.

It would also mandate requirements for students, including U.S. history and government courses and scoring at least 85 percent on the U.S. citizenship test.

Allyson Monson, president of the South Dakota State University Students' Association, said the group opposes the civics test mandate because it would add an obstacle to getting a degree and over concerns that it would create a barrier for international students to fulfill their degree requirements.

The committee on Wednesday also advanced a bill that would prohibit public school instruction about gender dysphoria through seventh grade. The measure originally sought to ban teaching about gender identity or expression, but was changed by the panel.

Republican Rep. Tom Pischke, the sponsor, said his intent to ensure South Dakota public schools are not "teaching and confusing our young children to be more susceptible to this dysphoria."

Large School Group lobbyist Dianna Miller said the bill's sponsors are looking for a solution to a problem that doesn't exist.

Dakota Access criminal cases wrapping up in North Dakota

By BLAKE NICHOLSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Hundreds of state-level criminal cases stemming from the prolonged protest in North Dakota against the Dakota Access oil pipeline are mostly wrapped up, and an organization of

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volunteer attorneys that formed to aid protesters is shifting its focus to other potential battles, including the Keystone XL pipeline and President Donald Trump's southern border wall.

"Whenever the next struggle heats up and takes off, then we will swell our ranks to meet the demand," said Frances Madeson, spokeswoman for the Water Protector Legal Collective. "Water protector" is what many pipeline opponents called themselves because they fear a spill could contaminate water supplies.

Thousands of Native Americans and others who feared environmental harm from the \$3.8 billion pipeline built by Texas-based Energy Transfer Partners came to southern North Dakota in 2016 and 2017 to protest, resulting in hundreds of arrests over a six-month span and nearly 850 criminal cases in state court. The pipeline that ETP maintains is safe has been moving North Dakota oil to Illinois since June 2017.

The nonprofit legal team, which formed in a tent at a protest camp, grew to 31 attorneys from around the country who donated tens of thousands of hours over the past 2 ½ years to help defendants in those cases, most of which have been dismissed or resolved through plea agreements.

The last of about 70 scheduled trials ended Tuesday, with Katrina Silk of Mitchell, South Dakota, convicted of misdemeanor obstruction of a government function but acquitted of four other misdemeanors, including rioting. She was given two months of unsupervised probation and ordered to pay \$325 in court fees.

The Water Protector Legal Collective, which raised and spent about \$2 million on Dakota Access-related work, considers the job finished.

"We set a tone with the state's attorney's office that they were going to have a serious fight on their hands, and we have never let up that pressure," said board President Daniel T'seleie.

The collective, funded entirely through grants and donations, maintains an office in Bismarck with five full-time staff members. It is governed by a volunteer board of directors that currently has seven members.

The organization is talking with tribes who are preparing to protest in South Dakota against the \$8 billion Keystone XL pipeline, which TransCanada Corp. is planning to build to move Canadian crude to the U.S. Gulf Coast. The legal group also is planning to meet with a tribe in Texas that opposes a U.S.-Mexico border wall proposed by Trump.

"The mass arrests at Standing Rock may not have been the largest in the U.S. history of repression, but they are among the most significant, both in the lives of the individual water protectors like myself, but also for the future of indigenous-centered environmental struggles," T'seleie said.

In addition to the state-level Dakota Access cases that have been resolved, there are several pipeline- and protest-related lawsuits ongoing in federal court. They include a challenge to the pipeline itself by four Sioux tribes in the Dakotas, a racketeering lawsuit ETP filed against environmental groups and activists, and a lawsuit against law officers and other authorities over alleged civil rights violations that the defendants deny. That lawsuit, which the legal collective is involved in, has lingered since November 2016.

"We are determined to press on for justice, no matter how long it takes," said legal collective board member Rachel Lederman, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs.

Follow Blake Nicholson on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/NicholsonBlake>

Gov. Kristi Noem vetoes PUC's solar energy legislation

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem has vetoed a Public Utilities Commission bill to define solar energy facilities in state law.

The Republican governor on Wednesday rejected the measure, questioning in her veto message the need for more commission regulation of solar generating stations. Noem says also that a legal review shows "poor drafting" of the bill would give the panel authority to mandate the locations of solar energy projects.

Public Utilities commissioner Chris Nelson, a Republican, earlier told a Senate panel that the bill would be good for solar development because it would remove some regulations on the facilities.

The bill passed overwhelmingly through both legislative chambers, exceeding the two-thirds margin needed in both the House and Senate to override a gubernatorial veto.

Senate panel votes down bill to expand lobbying restrictions

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Senate panel has voted down a measure to expand the number of state employees barred from private lobbying for two years after leaving government.

The State Affairs Committee voted 7-2 Wednesday to reject the bill. Sen. Stace Nelson, who supported it, says it was one in a series of bills to address what people have dubbed a “culture of corruption” in Pierre.

Sen. Brock Greenfield, an opponent, says it would’ve been a “sea change.”

The prohibition in current law applies to elected officials, department and agency heads, division directors and the highest-paid employee reporting to them.

Nelson would have expanded it to include employees of the governor, paid members of the governor’s transition team and Unified Judicial System employees.

The panel also rejected Nelson’s bill to require legislative caucuses to be public.

Senate panel endorses asking voters to allow sports betting

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota Senate panel has approved a measure that would ask voters to legalize sports betting in historic Deadwood.

The Senate State Affairs Committee voted 5-4 on Wednesday to send the proposal to the full chamber. Republican Sen. Bob Ewing, the sponsor, says lawmakers should allow South Dakota residents to decide the issue.

The push comes after the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way last year for all states to offer legal sports betting.

Deadwood Gaming Association Executive Director Mike Rodman says sports betting would be a marketing opportunity to boost the city’s less-busy seasons. Revenue Department Deputy Secretary David Wiest opposed the measure, saying regulation costs would exceed revenues generated.

The constitutional amendment would allow the Legislature to authorize wagering in Deadwood and at tribal casinos.

Senate panel approves Trump’s attorney general nominee

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ERIC TUCKER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate Judiciary Committee approved William Barr’s nomination for attorney general along party lines Thursday, with Republicans praising his credentials and Democrats questioning how transparent he’ll be once special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation concludes.

The vote now heads to the full Senate, where Barr is expected to be confirmed in a vote as soon as next week.

Barr, who previously served as attorney general from 1991 to 1993, would succeed Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was pushed out by Trump last year over the president’s anger that he had recused from the Russia investigation. Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker is currently filling the position.

“I appreciate what Mr. Whitaker has done, but I think it’s time for new leadership at the department,” Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and committee chairman, said at the outset of Thursday’s meeting.

Democrats and many Republicans have said they believe Mueller’s final report should be fully released. Barr has said he will be as transparent as possible under Justice Department regulations, but many Democrats are skeptical.

Barr said he takes seriously the department regulations that say Mueller’s report should be confidential. Those regulations require only that the report explains the decisions to pursue or to decline prosecutions, which could be as simple as a bullet point list or as voluminous as a report running hundreds of pages.

“I don’t know what — at the end of the day, what will be releasable. I don’t know what Bob Mueller is writing,” Barr said at his hearing last month.

Democrats have also criticized a memo Barr wrote to the Justice Department before his nomination in which he criticized Mueller’s investigation for the way it was presumably looking into whether Trump had

obstructed justice. In the memo, Barr wrote that Trump could not have obstructed justice by firing former FBI Director James Comey since it was act the president was constitutionally entitled to take.

"This is not the time to install an attorney general who has repeatedly espoused a view of unfettered executive power," Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, said Thursday.

The top Democrat on the Judiciary panel, California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, said last week that she is worried that Barr won't be a check on the president who appointed him.

"This memo is of serious concern to me and appears to be seminal in his appointment to this position," Feinstein said.

Trump had repeatedly criticized Sessions for recusing himself from Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election that includes examining the ties between Russia and the Trump campaign. Trump calls the probe a "witch hunt."

Barr said in his hearing last month that he is a friend of Mueller's and that "it is vitally important" that the special counsel be allowed to complete his investigation.

"I don't believe Mr. Mueller would be involved in a witch hunt," Barr said.

Researchers seek fuller picture of first Africans in America

By **JESSE J. HOLLAND, Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first Africans to arrive in North America were so little noted by history that many are known today by only their first names: Antony and Isabella, Angelo, Frances and Peter.

Almost 400 years ago, they were kidnapped and forcibly sailed across the ocean aboard three slave ships — the San Juan Bautista, the White Lion and the Treasurer — and then sold into bondage in Virginia.

Now their descendants, along with historians and genealogists, are seeking recognition for a group of 20-some Africans they describe as critical to the survival of Jamestown, England's first successful settlement in North America.

"We need to reclaim our history. We need to tell our story," said Calvin Pearson, head of Project 1619, which is named after the year those first Africans landed near what became Hampton, Virginia.

A few historical markers and records mention these early slaves, but there's been scant research on their lives. Pearson and others are working to learn more.

Before the slaves arrived, Jamestown was starving. "Basically all of those people were right off of the streets in England," said Kathryn Knight, who in May will release a book titled "Unveiled - The Twenty & Odd: Documenting the First Africans in England's America 1619-1625 and Beyond."

Those colonists "didn't know how to grow anything. They didn't know how to manage livestock. They didn't know anything about survival in Virginia," Knight said. The Africans "saved them by being able to produce crops, by being able to manage the livestock. They kept them alive."

The slaves' arrival marked the beginning of the region's fractured relationship with blacks. More than two centuries later, Virginia became home to the Confederate capital, and in the last week its governor has been pressured to resign for appearing in a racist photo in a 1984 yearbook.

The new arrivals were Catholic and many spoke multiple languages, according to Ric Murphy, an author and descendant of John Gowan, one of the Angolan captives.

They came from a royal city and "were quite informed and educated, and several of them, based upon what they did in the latter part of their years, clearly were leaders in the community in one form or the other," Murphy said. "Many of them became landowners, which is quite different from the false narrative of what an enslaved person was."

In Jamestown, historian Mark Summers leads tourists down paths that Angelo — also known as Angela — walked after being sold to a Captain William Pierce.

Like many of that first group, her life is largely a mystery. In fact, her entire known biography "could probably fit on a 3x5 index card," Summers said. But being able to show people where she lived and walked is a spiritual experience for some, he said.

For African-Americans, "this is the same thing as going to Plymouth Rock," said Summers, who works

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at the Historic Jamestowne park. "Here's a place where you can stand and say, 'We set foot here, and we can still walk this ground.'"

The first Africans were among more than 300 taken out of the Ndongo region of Angola, a Portuguese colony of mostly Catholic Africans, on the San Juan Bautista bound for Mexico. That ship was attacked and plundered by the White Lion and the Treasurer, which together seized about 60 slaves. After stopping in the Caribbean and trading some of the slaves for provisions, the White Lion sailed for Virginia with its human cargo.

Englishman John Rolfe, who would later marry Pocahontas, documented the White Lion's arrival at what was then called Point Comfort.

"He brought not anything but 20, and odd Negars, which the Governor and Cape Merchant bought for victualle," Rolfe wrote in a letter in January 1620, meaning that the colony purchased the slaves with provisions.

A 1620 census showed 17 African women and 15 African men in Jamestown.

Although sold into servitude, many of those original Angolans fared better than the millions of African slaves who came to North America later, said John Thornton, a Boston University professor of African American studies and history.

"They had a better chance at a better future than almost anybody who followed them because they were the first," Thornton said. "A lot of them ended up owning property, and they ended up owning slaves of their own."

By intermingling with the English colonists, some had children who ended up passing for white and merging into early colonial society, Thornton said.

Some, like the Catholic John Pedro, met with tragedy, Pearson said.

Pedro "ended up owning quite a bit of land in Virginia. When the English Civil War broke out, it was Protestants versus Catholics," Pearson said. Pedro moved to Maryland to live with other Catholics, but he was captured in a battle and executed.

Antony and Isabella became servants for a Captain William Tucker, gained their freedom around 1635 and started a homestead in Kent County, Virginia, Pearson said. Around 1623, they had a son named William Tucker who "became the first documented African child born in English-occupied North America."

Descendants of Antony and Isabella are buried at a Hampton cemetery that has been in use since the 1600s, Pearson said.

Knight has a different interpretation of those early records, concluding that Frances gave birth to Peter first, making him the first African child born in Virginia.

Described in later records as a "Negro carpenter," Peter married and received his freedom with the promise of paying 10,000 pounds of tobacco to his master around 1676. He made the last payment in 1682, Knight said.

Murphy, who wrote "Freedom Road: An American Family Saga from Jamestown to World War," said it's important for black people to know about these first Africans because it "helps us have more ownership of American history."

Pearson, whose organization plans to honor the anniversary of the Africans' arrival on Aug. 24, agrees.

"From here, we see the beginnings of the Africa imprint on what would become the United States of America. It's worth remembering."

Jesse J. Holland covers race and ethnicity for The Associated Press in Washington, D.C. Contact him at jholland@ap.org and at www.twitter.com/jessejholland and www.facebook.com/jessejholland.

In soccer-mad Argentina, women fight sexism and inequality

By **LUIS ANDRES HENAO**, Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Almost 90 years after men's soccer turned professional in Argentina, the women's game is still being played by amateur athletes who get little to no money for their work on

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the field.

Macarena Sanchez wants to change that — now.

The 27-year-old Sanchez is taking legal action against her club and the Argentine soccer association in an effort to gain professional status. The case could set a precedent in a nation that is home to Lionel Messi and some of the world's greatest players, but where soccer is still largely seen as a men's only game.

"The goal is to be recognized as a professional soccer player, so it can open the doors for other women to enjoy the benefits of earning a living from what we love," Sanchez told The Associated Press.

Sanchez's introduction to soccer came when she was 5, watching her father play with friends on weekends in the province of Santa Fe, the birthplace of Messi, Gabriel Batistuta and Jorge Valdano. With her father's encouragement, she polished her skills at a local club.

During a friendly game in Buenos Aires in 2012, the coach of UAI Urquiza asked her to join his club, considered one of the best in South America.

"That year, we won the Argentine championship for the first time in the club's history," she said. "And then we won the championship three more times."

Sanchez also competed in three Copa Libertadores tournaments, the premier women's event in the South American region. But on Jan. 5, she got a call from her coach — one she didn't expect. Sanchez said he didn't provide any specifics, he just said she was being let go because of a "soccer-related decision."

For years, Sanchez had received a small stipend and worked an administrative job at UAI Urquiza. The news that she was no longer welcome came mid-season, so she wasn't able to join another club. After consulting with her sister, who is an attorney, she decided to launch her complaint seeking compensation and the professionalization of women's soccer.

"It's not easy to be the first woman to launch legal action against the Argentine soccer federation," Sanchez said. "I've had to carry a heavy burden, but the collective goal won. It won because I want to see many girls who in the future can enjoy being professional. That's my dream."

Officials at UAI Urquiza declined to comment, and the interim head of the Argentine federation's women's soccer committee could not immediately be reached.

Sanchez has, however, received strong support from FIFPro, an international organization that represents professional soccer players around the world.

"Macarena is part of a generation of leading women players in South America who are fed up with receiving derisory treatment," FIFPro said in a statement to the AP. "It's unacceptable for soccer clubs and national soccer federations in South America, or anywhere else, to treat women players as second-class citizens with vastly inferior conditions to male players."

Argentina's women's national team recently qualified for the World Cup for the first time in 12 years. Sanchez is not likely make the team that is headed to France, and the legal action does not involve the national team.

But even the national team's players have struggled financially. They went on strike in 2017 after their stipends of about \$10 went unpaid. They also lack proper changing rooms, for a while they trained on a dirt field, and they are often forced to travel long distances to play a game and return on the same day to save on hotel costs.

The female players were also angered when Adidas, the brand that sponsors a few members of the national teams of both genders, unveiled the new shirt for last year's Women's Copa America with models rather than players.

And while the men's Argentine league draws big crowds and makes millions of dollars, a woman at a top club is often forced to split her time between soccer and a second job to survive.

"There is no possibility, no matter how good a woman is in Argentina today, to make a living from it," said Brenda Elsey, a professor at Hofstra University who specializes in the history of soccer politics in Latin America. "I don't think any Argentine player in 1931 (when soccer became professional in the country) felt the same kind of outright hostility and neglect as women players feel today."

Elsey, who recently traveled to Argentina to research the issue and has a photo of women playing soccer dating back as far as 1923, pointed to a recent example. When Estudiantes won the league title, she said

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the Argentine soccer federation forgot to give them the trophy. The players tried to take it in stride, and they celebrated with a plastic jug.

The story didn't come as a shock.

"Argentina is not an exception to the rule of gender discrimination in Latin America. It's actually quite common," said Eley, who is also-co-author of "Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America."

In neighboring Chile, another World Cup qualifier headed to France this year, soccer is also amateur. Coaches have complained that men's clubs affiliated with female teams sometimes won't even lend their counterparts fields for practice and only supply them with one set of shirts.

Instead, many top female players head to the United States to play in the NWSL and get paid, while Brazil, Mexico and Colombia are among regional countries that have professional leagues. But there is still prejudice, and ignorance, to overcome.

For instance, the president of Colombian club Deportes Tolima, Gabriel Camargo, called women's soccer a "tremendous breeding ground for lesbianism."

CONMEBOL, the governing body of South American soccer, is trying to level the playing field. It recently announced that for a men's team to qualify for the Copa Libertadores, it must also have a women's team.

The women's version of the event, known as the Copa Libertadores Femenina, has been the premier women's club tournament in the region since 2009. Brazil has dominated the competition, but Atletico Huila won last year.

The prize money for the champions was \$55,000, and there was some controversy when one of the players said the money would go to the men's team, although the issue was later resolved.

There have been some recent improvements in the women's game.

Ahead of last year's World Cup qualifying tournament, the Argentine women's team was allowed to train at the same complex where Messi and the rest of the men's team prepare for their games, grounds that until recently were reserved for men only.

The team's progress and eventual qualification received the support of Messi and several professional Argentine clubs. Many female players say they feel part of a cultural change driven by Argentina's strong feminist movement, which has mobilized tens of thousands to fight against violence against women, and helped them gain ground in politics and the workplace.

A group of women known as the Pioneers of Argentine Female Soccer recently met at a field in Buenos Aires to kick around the ball and share memories about the challenges they faced playing the sport they love. A team of young men clapped when the women began to dribble, juggle and shoot at goal.

"Some people would shout at us to go wash dishes," said Elba Selva, who scored four goals in Argentina's 4-1 victory over England at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City during the 1971 World Cup. "We're so proud to be a part of this now."

Former goalkeeper Lucila Sandoval founded the group to try to keep the legacy of Argentine women's soccer alive.

"For us, who are no longer in the field, and who played with so much love, so much passion for the sport, we want to leave a legacy for these girls as they're fighting for professionalism," she said. "What Maca Sanchez has done is the kickoff in a struggle that has been waging for a long time.

"Now, we have internet, Twitter, the media, and all of this makes it much more visible, and I think it will be achieved soon."

AP Sports Writer Annie Peterson in Portland, Oregon, and Associated Press reporters Natacha Pisarenko and Yesica Brumec in Buenos Aires, Carlos Rodriguez in Mexico City, Jairo Anchique in Bogota, Colombia, and Eva Vergara in Santiago, Chile, contributed to this report.

More AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/apf-Soccer> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Blackface photo is a reminder of Virginia's racist history

By DENISE LAVOIE, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The discovery last week of a racist photo on Gov. Ralph Northam's 1984 medical school yearbook page has served as a glaring reminder that Virginia — a former bastion of slavery and white supremacy — continues to struggle with mindsets shaped by its turbulent racial history.

Even as Virginia has grown more socially liberal in recent decades, evidence that its racist tradition is not yet a thing of the past is everywhere. Statues of Confederate leaders remain the defining feature of Richmond's Monument Avenue and the state legislature still honors Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson every year.

"When Virginia voted for Barack Obama in 2008, there was talk that Virginia was now moving into a new era. In actuality, Virginia faked left and went right," said Gary Flowers, a Richmond native who is the former CEO of the Black Leadership Forum.

"This is a 400-year mode that's going to take some time, but there has to be a radical restructuring of values," Flowers said.

While there is much ugliness to overcome, the commonwealth's history is a complex one that has been marked by contrasts.

Virginia was the birthplace of American democracy, but also of enslavement; Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, but also the home of Douglas Wilder, the nation's first elected black governor. A statue of black tennis champion Arthur Ashe sits on Monument Avenue alongside those of the Confederate Generals.

This year, Virginia will mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival in Jamestown of the first Africans to be sold as slaves in North America. Richmond's now-trendy Shockoe Bottom neighborhood was the site of one of the largest slave trades in the country.

A major blot on the state's history is its "Massive Resistance," when Virginia's governor in the late 1950s closed its public schools rather than heed the U.S. Supreme Court's order to integrate them.

Northam's yearbook photo showing someone in blackface standing next to a person in a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe has been but the latest reminder of the state's hateful past.

The picture sparked outrage and widespread calls for his resignation, including condemnation from Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring. But the scandal escalated Wednesday, when Herring too was forced to acknowledge that he had put on blackface in 1980 to look like a rapper during a party as a 19-year-old student at the University of Virginia.

These were not isolated incidents.

A separate photo found in a 1983 UVA yearbook shows an unidentified student dressed up for a Halloween party wearing a blackface mask, a white hooded sheet and a noose around his neck, conjuring up an image of black lynchings.

As recently as 2013 or 2014, students who attended Eastern Virginia Medical School — the same one as Northam — were still posing in Confederate garb for the yearbook.

Virginia, the state with the largest number of Confederate monuments, statues and symbols in the nation, still hasn't come up with a firm plan to respond to years of calls from the black community to remove them. In 2017, Charlottesville became a symbol of racial turmoil after a woman was killed when white nationalists from around the country rallied and rioted to protest the removal of a statue of Lee.

A year later, Republican Corey Stewart campaigned for U.S. Senate by openly embracing Confederate monuments. He won the Republican nomination and garnered 41 percent of the vote in the general election, which he lost to incumbent Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine.

Christy Coleman, the chief executive officer of the American Civil War Museum, said Virginia struggles with its history but she also sees progress, citing the work of a coalition trying to address the state's high eviction rates, which disproportionately affect minority communities.

"What you're seeing is sort of this rippling effect, this progress that you talk about is absolutely present, but because we haven't fully reconciled our history, we have these things that bubble up," she said.

However, Jerry Falwell Jr., the Christian conservative who leads Liberty University, sought to contrast the current crisis with the state's historical values by blaming voters in the state's Democratic-leaning D.C.

suburbs.

Noting his family has lived in Virginia since the 1600s, he tweeted that the state would never have elected Democrats to the top statewide offices "without the votes of federal gov employees in" Northern Virginia. "They are all an embarrassment to VA," he said.

Historians say attitudes began to slowly change in Virginia by the late 1960s, pushed by civil rights laws mandating desegregation and other social forces.

But deep into the 1960s it was still illegal for Virginians classified as "colored" to marry those classified as "white." The 1967 U.S. Supreme Court case striking down such laws was brought by a Virginia couple sentenced to a year in prison.

In 1989, Wilder's election was hailed as a defining moment in the state's evolution on racial issues. The state's vote for Obama in 2008 was also seen as a step toward progressiveness.

Shawn Utsey, chair of the Department of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, said the black community feels betrayed by Northam because his talk of equality and inclusion during the 2017 election was seen as a welcome contrast to the racially divisive rhetoric of President Donald Trump.

"We had our hopes high and we had the wind knocked out of us," he said.

Centuries of history are hard to escape, said Karen Sherry, a curator at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture who is working on an exhibit on the struggle of black people in Virginia.

"While Virginia's demographics and politics have been evolving in recent years, social change and change in people's attitudes is often very slow in coming," Sherry said.

Tests suggest scientists achieved 1st 'in body' gene editing

By **MARILYNN MARCHIONE, AP Chief Medical Writer**

Scientists think they have achieved the first gene editing inside the body, altering DNA in adults to try to treat a disease, although it's too soon to know if this will help.

Preliminary results suggest that two men with a rare disorder now have a corrective gene at very low levels, which may not be enough to make the therapy a success.

Still, it's a scientific milestone toward one day doctoring DNA to treat many diseases caused by faulty genes.

"This is a first step," said Dr. Joseph Muenzer of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who helped test the treatment. "It's just not potent enough."

He gave the results Thursday at a conference in Orlando, Florida, and has consulted for the therapy's maker, California-based Sangamo Therapeutics. Researchers are working on a stronger version of the treatment.

Gene editing is intended as a more precise way to do gene therapy, to disable a bad gene or supply a good one that's missing. Trying it in adults to treat diseases is not controversial and the DNA changes do not pass to future generations, unlike the recent case of a Chinese scientist who claims to have edited twin girls' genes when they were embryos.

Sangamo's studies involve men with Hunter or Hurler syndrome, diseases caused by a missing gene that makes an enzyme to break down certain sugar compounds. Without it, sugars build up and damage organs, often killing people in their teens.

In 2017, Brian Madeux of Arizona became the first person to try it. Through an IV, he received many copies of a corrective gene and an editing tool called zinc finger nucleases to insert it into his DNA.

Results on him and seven other Hunter patients, plus three with Hurler syndrome, suggest the treatment is safe, which was the main goal of these early experiments. Three problems — bronchitis, an irregular heartbeat and a hernia — were deemed due to the diseases, not the treatment.

Tissue samples showed evidence of gene editing at very low levels in two Hunter patients who were given a middle dose but not in one given a low dose. Tests are expected later this year on patients who received the highest dose and on Hurler patients.

Blood tests detected slightly higher levels of the missing enzyme in a few of the Hunter patients but none

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of them reached normal levels. One patient had a larger increase but also showed signs that his immune system might be attacking the therapy. He was treated for that and symptoms resolved.

More encouraging results were seen in Hurler patients — enzyme levels rose to normal in all three after treatment, tests on certain blood cells showed.

“This is very promising” for Hurler patients, said Dr. Paul Harmatz of UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland, who presented those results.

None of the patients with either disease showed a sustained decline in urine levels of the troubling sugar compounds, though, and some other tests also did not detect intended effects of the therapy.

The key test will be stopping the patients’ weekly enzyme treatments to see if their bodies can now make enough of it on their own. Three have gone off treatments so far and one was recently advised to resume them because of fatigue and rising levels of the sugar compounds. The others have not been off long enough to know how they will fare.

“It looks like it’s safe ... that’s a very positive sign,” said one independent expert, Dr. Kiran Musunuru of the University of Pennsylvania. He called the early results promising but said “it’s hard to be sure it’s doing any good” until patients are studied longer.

“What they’re trying to do with gene editing is very challenging,” he said. “It’s much harder to make a correction or insert a gene” than to disable one.

Dr. Tyler Reimschisel of Vanderbilt University agreed.

“It’s not discouraging, it’s just early and on a small amount of people,” he said. “This is definitely a novel and innovative treatment” but it’s not clear if it’s going to help.

Sangamo’s president, Dr. Sandy Macrae, said a more potent version is being manufactured. Because the treatment seems safe, regulators recently agreed to allow teens with Hunter syndrome to join the study. The ultimate goal is to treat children at a young age, before the disease causes much damage. He said the company will wait for more results on current patients before deciding how to proceed.

“We’ve done something important” by achieving gene editing, he said. “There is a foundation to build on.”

Marilynn Marchione can be followed at @MMarchioneAP

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Dems turn focus to tax returns - and Trump’s loom largest

By MARCY GORDON, AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The new Democratic-controlled House is looking at proposals to compel presidents and presidential candidates to make public years of their tax returns. But the burning question is what Democrats might do more immediately to get such files from President Donald Trump.

That goal has been high on their list of priorities since they won control of the House in November’s mid-term elections, but asking for Trump’s returns is likely to set off a huge legal battle with his administration.

The Democrats tried and failed several times to obtain Trump’s returns as the minority party in Congress. Their newly energized leftward wing is pushing the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., to set the quest in motion, and fast. The organization funded by billionaire investor and Democratic activist Tom Steyer has run a TV ad in Neal’s home district calling on him to subpoena Trump’s tax records, as a prelude to starting impeachment proceedings.

The issue comes to the fore in a hearing Thursday by the Ways and Means oversight subcommittee. Democratic Reps. Anna Eshoo of California and Bill Pascrell of New Jersey, who’ve put forward legislation to require presidential disclosure of tax returns, say Trump has left Americans in the dark “about the extent of his financial entanglements and potential conflicts of interest.”

“We look forward to using this hearing to discuss the critical importance of full tax disclosure for any man or woman seeking the presidency,” they said in a recent statement.

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The oversight hearing comes two days after Trump faced a divided Congress in his State of the Union address, imploring the Democrats to step away from “ridiculous partisan investigations” as they move forward with oversight of his administration and his finances.

The subcommittee is examining a proposal that would require all presidents, vice presidents and candidates for those offices to make public 10 years of tax returns. It’s part of House Democrats’ comprehensive elections and ethics reform package — their first major bill for the new Congress this year. The legislation also would make it easier for citizens to register and vote, and ban executive-branch officials from lobbying their old agency for two years after they leave government.

While the ethics bill includes a range of reforms, some Democrats have made clear that one of their chief targets is Trump. Some elements of the bill have bipartisan support, but the overall package is unlikely to advance in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The oversight hearing, led by subcommittee chair Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., will also examine current tax law regarding presidents’ tax returns.

By law, as chair of the tax-writing House panel, Neal can make a written request for any tax returns to the Treasury secretary, who oversees the Internal Revenue Service. The law says the Treasury chief “shall furnish” the requested information to the members of the Ways and Means Committee for them to examine behind closed doors.

Yet there’s no guarantee that the administration will comply. That sets up the possibility of a legal battle that could take years to resolve, possibly stretching beyond the 2020 presidential election.

Neal has said little on the subject, focusing his early committee efforts on policy issues such as health insurance, retirement security and prescription drug prices.

“I think we will,” Neal said when asked whether the panel under his control would ask for the documents. If the administration then mounted a legal challenge, he added, “I assume that there would be a court case that would go on for a period of time.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Democrats’ leader, expects the White House to fight such a request and “so the question is, where do we go from there.”

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin “will review any request with the Treasury general counsel for legality,” the department has said. Trump’s attorney Rudy Giuliani has suggested the Democrats could have a hard time proving their demand was intended for pursuing legitimate congressional oversight and was not a political scavenger hunt.

Trump broke with decades of tradition for presidential candidates by refusing to release his income tax filings during his 2016 campaign. He has said he won’t release them because he is being audited, even though IRS officials have said taxpayers under audit are free to release their returns. Trump claimed at a news conference following the November elections that the filings are too complex for people to understand.

Democrats want to dive in and explore numerous questions about Trump’s personal financial webs. Among them: whether there are conflicts of interest between his companies and his presidential actions, what are the sources of his income and to whom he might be beholden as a result, whether he’s properly paid taxes and whether he benefited from the sweeping Republican-written tax law enacted in late 2017.

Parkland attack fueled big shift in America’s gun politics

By LISA MARIE PANE, Associated Press

Last year’s shooting at a Florida high school sparked a movement among a younger generation angered by gun violence and set the stage for a significant shift in America’s gun politics.

Thousands of student protesters took to the streets and inspired hashtags such as #NeverAgain and #Enough. They also mobilized to register a new generation of voters.

Candidates were emboldened too. Many of them confronted the issue in last year’s elections and were rewarded with victory over incumbents supported by the National Rifle Association. That helped Democrats take back control of the House.

“What we’ve seen here is a tectonic shift in our politics on the guns issue,” said Peter Ambler, execu-

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tive director of Giffords, the gun violence prevention advocacy group founded by former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. These people “didn’t get elected despite their advocacy for safer gun laws. They got elected because of their advocacy for safer gun laws. They made that a core part of their message to the American people.”

The political landscape began to change just days after a former student shot and killed 17 students and adults at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

At the state level, a surge of gun-control measures were enacted, including increasing the minimum age for purchasing a firearm and requiring waiting periods. The number of states with so-called “red flag” laws — which allow temporary confiscation of weapons from people deemed a safety risk — doubled.

At the federal level, for the first time in modern history, gun-control groups outspent the powerful NRA on the 2018 midterm elections. The new Democratic majority in the House this week held its first hearing on gun control in a decade.

Even under GOP-control of both chambers during President Donald Trump’s first two years in office, some of the gun industry’s top priorities — easing restrictions on firearm suppressors and making it easier to carry concealed firearms over state borders — stalled.

Still, with one of the most gun-friendly presidents in the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court now has a majority of justices who are viewed as ardent supporters of the Second Amendment, a shift that is likely to have a lasting effect on gun rights.

The most prominent shift occurred in Florida, a state that has long welcomed guns and has a strong NRA presence. Lawmakers raised the gun-purchasing age and imposed a three-day waiting period.

The Parkland attack came just a few months after two other gun tragedies: the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history that killed 59 people at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas and the slayings of 26 churchgoers in Sutherland Springs, Texas.

In the wake of those massacres, the NRA’s influence waned. Trump directed the Justice Department to ban bump stocks, the device used by the Las Vegas gunman that allowed his rifles to mimic fully automatic weaponry.

The NRA also faced boycotts from corporate America, with some financial firms refusing to do business with gunmakers and some retailers pulling firearms and ammunition off shelves. A federal investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election widened to include suspicions that agents sought to court NRA officials and funnel money through the group.

The NRA has cast itself as being in financial distress because of deep-pocketed liberal opposition to guns and what it calls “toxic lies” in news reports. Last summer, the organization raised its annual dues for the second time in two years.

Parkland “definitely marked a turning point,” said Adam Winkler, a professor at the University of California Los Angeles School of Law and gun rights expert. “There is no doubt that the energy, the enthusiasm, the mobilization of these students was very influential. It did affect a lot of people across the country.”

But, he said, the NRA “remains a powerhouse,” and it’s too early to suggest that gun groups’ troubles are insurmountable.

“No one ever made a lot of money betting against the NRA,” he said.

The NRA did not immediately return messages seeking comment. However, Erich Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, said the industry is accustomed to people believing the latest shooting will bring the gun industry to its knees.

“They said that in 2013 after the Sandy Hook shooting, and they absolutely said that again last year,” Pratt said. With the exception of Florida, the blue states got bluer and the red states got redder and expanded gun rights, he said.

Polls show that gun control is not a top priority for Americans, he said.

“I don’t think the needle has moved at all,” Pratt said.

Virginia looks to Black Caucus for cues in political turmoil

By ALAN SUDERMAN, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — With Virginia's top three elected officials engulfed in scandal, fellow Democrats were rendered practically speechless, uncertain of how to thread their way through the racial and sexual allegations and the tangled political implications.

Gov. Ralph Northam's career was already teetering over a racist photo in his 1984 medical school yearbook when the crisis seemed to spiral completely out of control Wednesday. First, the state's attorney general acknowledged that he, too, put on blackface once, when he was a college student. Then a woman publicly accused the lieutenant governor of sexually assaulting her 15 years ago.

Everyone in Richmond, it seemed, was waiting Thursday for Virginia's Legislative Black Caucus to respond. The caucus has been calling for Northam's resignation over the past week but was silent about the latest developments.

"We've got a lot to digest," the group's chairman, Del. Lamont Bagby, said Wednesday.

The crisis threatens to bring down all three of the politicians, all of them Democrats. If Northam resigns, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax stands to become Virginia's second black governor. Attorney General Mark Herring is next in the line of succession, followed by House Speaker Kirk Cox, a conservative Republican.

Herring, who had been urging Northam to step down and was planning to run for governor in 2021, admitted wearing brown makeup and a wig in 1980 to look like a rapper during a party when he was a 19-year-old student at the University of Virginia.

He apologized for his "callous" behavior and said the days ahead "will make it clear whether I can or should continue to serve." The 57-year-old Herring came forward with his statement after rumors about the existence of a blackface photo of him began circulating at the Capitol. But he made no mention of any photo.

Then Vanessa Tyson, whose sexual assault allegations against Fairfax surfaced earlier this week, put out a detailed statement saying he forced her to perform oral sex on him in a hotel room in 2004 during the Democratic National Convention in Boston. The Associated Press typically does not identify those who say they were sexually assaulted, but the 42-year-old college professor from California issued the statement in her name.

Fairfax has repeatedly denied her allegations, saying that the encounter was consensual and that he is the victim of a strategically timed political smear.

At the Capitol, lawmakers were dumbstruck over Wednesday's fast-moving developments, with Democratic Sen. Barbara Favola saying, "I have to take a breath and think about this." GOP House Majority Leader Todd Gilbert said it would be "reckless" to comment. "There's just too much flying around," he said.

President Donald Trump accused Democrats on Thursday of a political double-standard, tweeting: "If the three failing pols were Republicans, far stronger action would be taken."

Black lawmakers' response could set the tone for whether fellow Democrats demand the resignation of the lieutenant governor and attorney general.

Cox called the allegations against Fairfax "extremely serious" and said they need a "full airing of facts." The Republican leader also urged Herring to "adhere to the standard he has set for others," a nod to Herring's previous call that Northam resign.

On Thursday, a few hundred anti-abortion demonstrators gathered at the Capitol to renew their criticism of Northam for backing a bill loosening restrictions on late-term abortions. One carried a sign referring to Northam as "Gov Doctor Death."

And in a nod to the scandals facing the Democrats, GOP Sen. Amanda Chase said while leading the crowd in prayer: "The actions that have been taken by our leadership have hurt the very heart of God."

Democrats have expressed fear that the uproar over the governor could jeopardize their chances of taking control of the GOP-dominated Virginia legislature this year after making big gains in 2017.

At the same time, the Democrats nationally have taken a hard line against misconduct in their ranks because women and minorities are a vital part of their base and they want to be able to criticize Trump's

behavior without looking hypocritical.

Northam has come under pressure from nearly the entire Democratic establishment to resign after the discovery of a photo on his yearbook profile page of someone in blackface standing next to a person in a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe. Northam initially said he was in the photo, then denied it, but acknowledged putting shoe polish on his face for a dance contest in Texas in 1984, when he was in the Army.

Herring came down hard on Northam when the yearbook photo surfaced, condemning it as "indefensible," and "profoundly offensive." He said it was no longer possible for Northam to lead the state.

UK, EU leaders spar during 'robust' Brexit talks

By RAF CASERT and LORNE COOK, Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — British Prime Minister Theresa May and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker sparred on Thursday during "robust" talks on the U.K.'s Brexit plans, and agreed to hold more negotiations that could push the sealing of any deal to within a month of Britain's scheduled departure.

Looking at the ever tighter deadline and yawning divisions, May said "it's not going to be easy" but vowed: "I am going to deliver Brexit. I am going to deliver it on time."

The two leaders agreed to meet for more talks "before the end of February to take stock of these discussions," a joint statement said. Two years ago, May set Brexit day as March 29 — and originally plans were to have a deal in place six months ahead of time.

Both sides still fundamentally disagree on whether a draft legal withdrawal agreement could be changed to take the latest British objections into account, greatly reducing the chances of a quick breakthrough.

"The EU27 will not reopen the Withdrawal Agreement, which represents a carefully balanced compromise between the European Union and the U.K., in which both sides have made significant concessions," the joint statement said.

The simmering tension was evident in the leaders' body language as they met in a stiff ceremony.

Instead of his usual jovial kisses, Juncker held out his hand for May to shake and quickly ushered her off into his offices. One reporter shouted at her: "Is this hell, prime minister?"

It was a reference to comments by European Council President Donald Tusk, who exacerbated the frosty climate on Wednesday by wondering aloud what "special place in hell" might be reserved for those who backed Brexit with no idea of how to deliver it.

Highlighting the sensitivities, a public welcome appearance on camera between May and Tusk was canceled hours before the encounter.

U.K. officials said May's primary concern was not to be "trapped" in a system that could see Britain linked to the EU in a customs union for an indefinite time.

Britain's Parliament voted down May's Brexit deal last month, largely because of concerns about a provision for the border between the U.K.'s Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland. The mechanism, known as the backstop, is a safeguard that would keep the U.K. in a customs union with the EU to remove the need for checks along the Irish border until a permanent new trading relationship is in place.

Thursday's statement said that May "raised various options for dealing with these concerns in the context of the Withdrawal Agreement."

Many pro-Brexit British lawmakers say they won't vote for the withdrawal agreement unless the backstop is removed.

May is seeking changes in the 585-page legally binding withdrawal agreement to achieve that, something which the 27 other EU leaders continue to vehemently oppose.

Juncker and the other EU leaders have agreed to look for a compromise in a political text accompanying the withdrawal agreement, but not in the legal document itself.

In London, there was significant momentum from the opposition, with the Labour Party making perhaps its biggest move in months.

Party leader Jeremy Corbyn dangled a possible way out of the impasse, saying his left-wing party could support a Brexit deal if May committed to seeking a close relationship with the EU after Britain leaves,

including a commitment to maintain roughly equivalent standards in areas such as the environment and workers' rights.

Corbyn's key demand, set out in a letter to May, is permanent British membership in a customs union with the EU. May has repeatedly ruled that out, but it would solve the problem of the backstop, by making customs checks on the Irish border unnecessary.

It is the firmest signal yet that Labour lawmakers might be willing to vote for a Brexit deal in Parliament. But the party — like May's Conservatives — is divided. Corbyn's position disappointed some Labour Party legislators who had hoped he would back calls for a second referendum on whether to leave the EU.

Britain's Parliament is set to hold a debate and votes Feb. 14 on next steps in the Brexit process, giving lawmakers a chance to force May to change course toward a softer Brexit — if divided lawmakers can agree on a plan.

Corbyn said Thursday that Labour would "do everything we can in Parliament to prevent this cliff-edge exit."

"Half of our trade is with Europe. A lot of our manufacturing industries are very frightened, very worried," he said.

Greg Katz and Jill Lawless contributed to this report from London.

Anti-abortion bills: Odds good in GOP states, not Congress

By DAVID CRARY, AP National Writer

President Donald Trump's call for a ban on late-term abortions is unlikely to prevail in Congress, but Republican legislators in several states are pushing ahead with their own tough anti-abortion bills that they hope can pass muster with the Supreme Court.

Two bills proposing to outlaw abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected, as early as six weeks into a pregnancy, advanced out of House and Senate committees in the Mississippi Legislature this week. GOP Gov. Phil Bryant is pledging to sign either into law.

Efforts to pass similar bills are underway in Florida, Kentucky, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee.

In Ohio, former Republican Gov. John Kasich twice vetoed the measure; his successor, Republican Mike DeWine, has said he would sign it. In Tennessee, Republican Gov. Bill Lee and the top two GOP state lawmakers say they support the measure.

Iowa passed a heartbeat bill last year that was struck down by a state judge on Jan. 22. In response, many GOP lawmakers are trying to place a proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot that would stipulate there is no right to abortion in Iowa.

South Carolina, in addition to a heartbeat bill, will consider a measure introduced Wednesday that would broadly ban abortions and allow the possibility of criminal charges against individuals who perform them.

Trump, in his State of the Union speech Tuesday night, cited recent controversies in New York and Virginia over late-term abortions, and urged Congress "to prohibit the late-term abortion of children who can feel pain in a mother's womb."

Legislation to achieve that goal failed to win passage even when Republicans controlled both chambers of Congress. It has virtually no chance of success now that Democrats control the House.

Nonetheless, anti-abortion legislators and activists believe Trump has bolstered their cause with his appointments of conservative Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Abortion opponents foresee the possibility that the high court might either reverse *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 ruling establishing a nationwide right to abortion, or uphold specific state laws that would undermine *Roe*.

In Indiana, four anti-abortion laws have been blocked or thrown out by federal judges since 2013. Activists believe they now have a better opportunity for success, thanks to Trump's Supreme Court appointees, and are promoting legislation that would outlaw a procedure known as dilation and evacuation that's frequently used for second-trimester abortions.

Mike Fichter, president of Indiana Right to Life, says the proposed ban is "the most aggressive legislation

with the highest chance of surviving legal challenge under the new makeup of the court.”

A similar bill is being proposed in North Dakota. Ohio has enacted a ban scheduled to take effect in March. Laws banning the procedure are in effect in Mississippi and West Virginia. Others are on hold in several states because of legal challenges.

In contrast to the anti-abortion momentum in GOP-led states, several Democratic-controlled legislatures, including Massachusetts, New Mexico and Rhode Island, will consider ways to protect abortion access in the event Roe v. Wade is weakened or overturned.

New Mexico’s House of Representatives approved a bill Wednesday night that would remove a dormant criminal ban on abortion. The law has been unenforceable for 45 years because of the Roe ruling. The bill now moves to the state Senate. Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham has said she would sign it.

New York has passed the Reproductive Health Act, which codifies rights laid out in Roe and other abortion rulings. It states that a woman may abort after 24 weeks of pregnancy if her life or health is at risk, or if the fetus is not viable.

Writing Wednesday in The New York Times, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, D-N.Y., defended the law and accused Trump and his allies of “spreading lies” about it.

“Their goal is to end all legal abortion in our nation,” Cuomo wrote.

Activists on both sides of the debate are keeping a close eye on the Supreme Court to see if it’s ready to curtail abortion rights.

The justices are expected to decide soon whether Louisiana can begin enforcing a law requiring doctors who work at abortion clinics to have admitting privileges at a nearby hospital. It was passed in 2014, but has never taken effect.

The Supreme Court struck down a similar law in Texas three years ago, but since then Kavanaugh replaced retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy, who had voted to strike down the Texas law.

In another case, officials from Indiana are asking the justices to hear their appeal of a lower court ruling blocking a 2016 law aiming to ban women from deciding to have an abortion because of a fetus’ genetic abnormalities, such as Down syndrome.

Follow David Crary at <https://twitter.com/CraryAP>

Venezuela’s political fight could snarl rush to ship aid in

By **JOSHUA GOODMAN** and **CHRISTINE ARMARIO**, Associated Press

CUCUTA, Colombia (AP) — For Anahis Alvarado, whose battle with kidney failure has become more desperate as Venezuela sinks deeper into crisis, the prospect of bringing in emergency medical and food supplies can’t come soon enough.

She’s watched five fellow patients in her dialysis group die over the past few years due to inadequate care. Only a quarter of the dialysis machines where she receives treatment at a government-run clinic in Caracas still work.

And last week she had to spend almost a third of her family’s monthly income buying basic supplies like surgical gloves and syringes that President Nicolas Maduro’s bankrupt government is no longer able to provide.

“We’re losing time,” the 32-year-old Alvarado said.

She hopes relief will soon be on its way.

Some 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) away, in the Colombian border city of Cucuta, opponents of Maduro are hastily putting together plans with U.S. officials to open a “humanitarian corridor” to deliver badly needed food and medicine.

The aid convoy is seen as a key test for Juan Guaido after the opposition leader declared himself interim president in a high-risk challenge to Maduro’s authority — a move that has the backing of almost 40 countries around the world.

But getting the food into Venezuela is no easy task.

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On Wednesday, a large tanker, mangled fencing and a shipping container were scattered across a bridge connecting the two countries, a makeshift barricade reflecting Maduro's longstanding rejection of outside assistance.

"We aren't beggars," the embattled socialist said Monday in a speech to troops.

The standoff has troubled international relief organizations, many who say the issue of humanitarian aid is being used as a political weapon by both sides.

Maduro's government has steadfastly denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis that has forced some 3 million Venezuelans to flee in recent years, even while handing out heavily subsidized food staples to rally support among the poor, especially ahead of elections.

Meanwhile, the opposition is vowing to proceed with its aid plan at all costs in an effort to break the military's strong support for Maduro.

"You have a clear choice," Miguel Pizarro, a lawmaker coordinating the relief effort, said in pointed remarks Tuesday to members of the armed forces. "Either you are part of the problem, or you put yourself on the side of the people who are in need."

The International Committee of the Red Cross is among groups that have warned about the fast-escalating rhetoric. On Tuesday, it repeated an offer to distribute humanitarian assistance but only if authorities agree to guarantee the aid safely reaches those in need and isn't politicized.

"Right now, both sides are comparing muscles to see who is stronger," said Daniel Almeida, an advocacy adviser for the Switzerland-based humanitarian agency CARE. "But for the person who really needs the assistance, they don't care where it comes from."

The Trump administration has pledged \$20 million in humanitarian assistance to Guaido's government in addition to the more than \$140 million it has already made available to South American countries absorbing the exodus of Venezuelan migrants. Canada has pledged another \$53 million to Guaido.

National Security Adviser John Bolton last week tweeted a picture of hundreds of boxes of ready-to-use meals for "malnourished children," each printed with an American flag, that he said were ready to be delivered.

The show of bravado alarmed some international relief organizations, which worry the real intention is to lay bare Maduro's obstinacy and build the case for military intervention on humanitarian grounds — a worst-case scenario that would pile on even more hardships.

Bolton said he was responding to a request from Guaido, who announced at a rally last weekend that he was setting up three collection points — in Cucuta, as well as others in Brazil and the Caribbean — to receive the aid.

The 30 to 40 tons of aid includes baby formula and high-protein biscuits, according to a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the plans.

Cucuta has become the top destination for Venezuelans who travel long distances to the city in a desperate search for food and medicine.

Alvarado said if it wasn't for a friend who made the trek for her last week she wouldn't have the antibiotic she needs for an infection. She paid for the medicine with money from an aunt in Argentina because her once middle-class family struggles to survive on her mother's meager retirement pension of \$8 a month.

During dialysis sessions dangerously shortened by an hour to cope with the lack of machines and supplies, Alvarado keeps herself busy by writing poetry. Her latest poem, written the day Venezuelans poured into the street in support of Guaido, is an ode to a Venezuela she dreams of one day being replenished with "pharmacies full of medicine."

"I want to get better so that I can begin to help others," she said. "All of us are victims and all of us need to work hard so Venezuela can resurge."

In Cucuta, volunteers have been on standby for days to help with the aid's arrival but have been given no indication of how it will get into Venezuela.

"It's creating huge expectations," said Francisco Valencia, a director of CODEVIDA, a coalition of Venezuelan health advocacy groups. "If the transition doesn't take place soon, we're not going to receive the real humanitarian aid we need."

Caritas, a charity run by the Roman Catholic Church, estimates that child malnutrition more than doubled last year, while 48 percent of pregnant women in low-income neighborhoods are underfed.

Among those waiting in limbo is Aminta Villamizar, a retired cleaning woman, who lost her right leg and two toes on her left leg because she can't find enough insulin to treat her diabetes.

Lying in bed in her Caracas apartment building, she waits as her grandson, Antonio, measures her blood sugar levels. Although it's above normal, she resists the offer of a shot, preferring to safeguard her scarce supplies and instead pray to an icon of Dr. Jose Greogrio Hernandez, a 19th-century Venezuelan doctor who treated the poor and is revered throughout the country as a saint.

"I was a person who worked my entire life, but this sickness destroyed me," she said.

Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman reported this story from Caracas, Venezuela, and AP writer Christine Armario reported in Cucuta, Colombia.

Joshua Goodman on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/apjoshgoodman>

Gucci pulls 'blackface sweater' from stores after complaints

By NICOLE WINFIELD and COLLEEN BARRY, Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Gucci has apologized after complaints that a wool sweater with an oversized collar designed to cover the face resembled blackface makeup, and said the item had been pulled from its online and physical stores.

It was the latest case of a fashion house having to apologize for cultural or racial insensitivity — and further evidence that Italy in particular has a wretched record with racial insensitivity staining everything from fashion to soccer to politics.

In a statement posted on Twitter on Wednesday, Gucci said it was committed to diversity and considered it a "fundamental value to be fully upheld, respected and at the forefront of every decision we make."

The turtleneck black wool balaclava sweater, which sells for \$890 on one site, covers the nose and includes a red cut-out for the mouth. It was ridiculed on social media as insensitive and racist, at a time when the U.S. is grappling with cases of old photos of politicians with their faces blackened.

"Gucci deeply apologizes for the offense caused by the wool balaclava jumper," Gucci said, adding that it intended to turn the incident "into a powerful learning moment for the Gucci team and beyond."

Gucci, owned by French conglomerate Kering with an Italian design team, isn't alone.

In December, Italian designer Prada said it was no longer selling a line of accessories that featured a character with brown skin and exaggerated red lips after complaints they resembled blackface.

And last year, Dolce & Gabbana canceled a Shanghai runway show and apologized after promotional videos seen as racist and subsequent insulting Instagram messages stoked a furor in one of the world's largest markets for luxury goods. The ad campaign featured a Chinese model trying to eat pizza, spaghetti and a cannoli with chopsticks.

Non-Italian fashion brands have also been on the receiving end of complaints about insensitive products, behavior or ad campaigns.

British designer John Galliano was removed as creative director at the French fashion house Dior in 2011 and later given a suspended sentence by a French court for having made an anti-Semitic and racist rant at a Paris bar. The designer apologized and said he had been under the influence of alcohol and prescription drugs at the time.

In 2014, the owner of Spanish retailer Zara recalled a children's shirt that resembled the uniforms that Jews wore at Nazi concentration camps, with strips and a bright yellow six-pointed star recalling the Star of David. Owner Inditex said the shirt was designed to be part of a Wild West clothing theme and the star was intended as a sheriff's badge.

And last year, Swedish retailer H&M pulled an ad featuring a black child wearing a sweatshirt with the

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words "Coolest monkey in the jungle." The campaign sparked celebrity protests and in South Africa, members of an opposition party stormed into some stores. The retailer apologized.

But most recently it has been Italian fashion houses that have been the target of celebrity and rank-and-file outrage — magnified by social media.

Racism is particularly acute in Italy, where taunts against black players are a regular occurrence at soccer matches and the country's first black Cabinet minister was subject to repeated insults by ordinary Italians and elected officials.

Just last month, a court in Bergamo, northern Italy, convicted a senator from the anti-migrant League party, Roberto Calderoli, of defamation with the aggravating element of racial hatred for having called the former minister, Cecile Kyenge, an "orangutan."

Democrats speechless as scandal engulfs Virginia's leaders

By ALAN SUDERMAN, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — With Virginia's top three elected officials engulfed in scandal, fellow Democrats were rendered practically speechless, uncertain of how to thread their way through the racial and sexual allegations and their tangled political implications.

Gov. Ralph Northam's career was already hanging by a thread over a racist photo in his 1984 medical school yearbook when a woman publicly accused the lieutenant governor of sexually assaulting her 15 years ago, and then the attorney general admitted that he too wore blackface once, as a teenager.

Everyone in Richmond, it seemed, was waiting Thursday for Virginia's Legislative Black Caucus to respond to the latest developments. "We've got a lot to digest," the group's chairman, Del. Lamont Bagby, said Wednesday.

Attorney General Mark Herring — in line to become governor if Northam and Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax resign — issued a statement acknowledging he wore brown makeup and a wig in 1980 to look like a rapper during a party when he was a 19-year-old student at the University of Virginia.

Herring — who had previously called on Northam to resign and was planning to run for governor himself in 2021 — apologized for his "callous" behavior and said that the days ahead "will make it clear whether I can or should continue to serve."

The 57-year-old Herring came forward after rumors about the existence of a blackface photo of him began circulating at the Capitol.

Also Wednesday, Vanessa Tyson, the California woman whose sexual assault allegations against Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax surfaced earlier this week, put out a detailed statement saying Fairfax forced her to perform oral sex on him in a hotel room in 2004 during the Democratic National Convention in Boston.

The Associated Press typically does not identify those who say they were sexually assaulted, but Tyson issued the statement in her name.

Tyson, a 42-year-old political scientist who is on a fellowship at Stanford University and specializes in the political discourse of sexual assault, said, "I have no political motive. I am a proud Democrat."

"Mr. Fairfax has tried to brand me as a liar to a national audience, in service to his political ambitions, and has threatened litigation," she said. "Given his false assertions, I'm compelled to make clear what happened."

Fairfax — who is in line to become governor if Northam resigns — has repeatedly denied her allegations, saying that the encounter was consensual and that he is the victim of a strategically timed political smear.

"At no time did she express to me any discomfort or concern about our interactions, neither during that encounter, nor during the months following it, when she stayed in touch with me, nor the past 15 years," he said in a statement.

Tyson said she suffered "deep humiliation and shame" and stayed quiet about the allegations as she pursued her career, but by late 2017, as the #MeToo movement took shape and after she saw an article about Fairfax's campaign, she took her story to The Washington Post, which decided months later not to publish a story.

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The National Organization for Women immediately called on Fairfax to resign, saying, "Her story is horrifying, compelling and clear as day — and we believe her."

The string of scandals that began when the yearbook picture came to light last Friday could have a domino effect on Virginia state government: If all three top Democrats fall, House Speaker Kirk Cox, a conservative Republican, would command the state.

Cox issued a statement late Wednesday calling the allegations against Fairfax "extremely serious" and said they need a "full airing of facts." Cox also urged Herring to "adhere to the standard he has set for others," a nod to Herring's previous call that Northam resign.

At the Capitol, lawmakers were dumbstruck over the day's fast-breaking developments, with Democratic Sen. Barbara Favola saying, "I have to take a breath and think about this. This is moving way too quickly." GOP House Majority Leader Todd Gilbert said it would be "reckless" to comment. "There's just too much flying around," he said.

The black caucus quickly condemned Northam and called on him to resign after his initial comments about the yearbook photo, but the group has been silent so far on the allegations involving Fairfax and Herring.

Democrats have expressed fear that the uproar over the governor could jeopardize their chances of taking control of the GOP-dominated Virginia legislature this year. The party made big gains in 2017, in part because of a backlash against President Donald Trump, and has moved to within striking distance of a majority in both houses.

At the same time, the Democrats nationally have taken a hard line against misconduct in their ranks because women and minorities are a vital part of their base and they want to be able to criticize Trump's behavior without looking hypocritical.

Trump accused Democrats Thursday of political bias, tweeting that "If the three failing pols were Republicans, far stronger action would be taken."

Northam has come under pressure from nearly the entire Democratic establishment to resign after the discovery of a photo on his profile page in the Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook of someone in blackface standing next to a person in a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe.

The governor initially said he was in the photo without saying which costume he was wearing, then denied it a day later. But he acknowledged he once used shoe polish to blacken his face and look like Michael Jackson at a dance contest in Texas in 1984, when he was in the Army.

Herring came down hard on Northam when the yearbook photo surfaced, condemning it as "indefensible," and "profoundly offensive." He said it was no longer possible for Northam to lead the state.

On Wednesday, though, Herring confessed that he and two friends dressed up to look like rappers, admitting: "It sounds ridiculous even now writing it."

"That conduct clearly shows that, as a young man, I had a callous and inexcusable lack of awareness and insensitivity to the pain my behavior could inflict on others," he said. But he added: "This conduct is in no way reflective of the man I have become in the nearly 40 years since."

Democratic Sen. Louise Lucas said several people were crying, including men, as Herring apologized to black lawmakers Wednesday morning before issuing his public statement.

"He said he was very sorry," Lucas said.

Lucas said the black lawmakers told Herring they needed to discuss their next steps among themselves.

Herring, who was elected to his second four-year term in 2017, made a name for himself nationally by playing a central role in bringing gay marriage to Virginia. His refusal to defend the state's ban on same-sex marriage once in office was cited by a federal judge who overturned the ban, and Virginia began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 2014, nearly a year before the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage nationwide.

Associated Press writer Matthew Barakat contributed to this report.

Democrats mute calls for Va. resignations with power at risk

By ALAN SUDERMAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Prominent Democrats came down hard on Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam after he apologized for a racist photo. But they were quieter as two more scandals — one involving race, another a sexual assault allegation — rocked Virginia's statehouse.

The subdued response from national Democrats shows how their zero-tolerance approach has put them in a bind. The party has prided itself on policing its own and hoped to contrast that record with the GOP's tolerance of misbehavior by President Donald Trump. Now the party will have to decide whether to stick with its principles or retain its political power.

"The party's put in an odd position," said Liam Donovan, a Republican strategist who, like much of the political world, watched Virginia's developments with astonishment Wednesday. "Let's say they live by their standards and clean house. The stakes are very real now because the line of succession goes through the other side."

In a tweet Thursday, Trump accused Democrats of "killing the Great State of Virginia." He predicted that the state, which saw Democratic gains in 2017 and which Hillary Clinton carried in 2016, "will come back HOME Republican) in 2020!"

Last Friday, a picture of a man in blackface on Northam's medical school yearbook page surfaced. During a press conference Saturday, Northam insisted he was not in the yearbook photo but admitted he had once worn blackface. Virginia's Attorney General, Mark Herring, said, "It is no longer possible for Gov. Northam to lead our Commonwealth."

On Wednesday, the Democrat who would succeed Northam, Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, reeled from a detailed statement released by a woman who accused him of sexually assaulting her 15 years ago.

Later Wednesday, Herring, the Democrat who would succeed Fairfax, admitted he had worn blackface while in college.

If all three Democrats stepped down, Republicans would take over the state's top offices. The GOP speaker of the House of Delegates, Kirk Cox, is in line to become governor, and the Republican-controlled House would select a new attorney general. That's a different dynamic from recent efforts by Democrats to clean house.

In 2017, the party pushed Sen. Al Franken, a Minnesota Democrat, to resign after several women accused him of sexual harassment, but he was replaced by a Democrat. When interparty fury rained down on Northam after the photo came to light last Friday, it seemed likely he'd be replaced by Fairfax.

"The cost for Democrats of getting rid of the office holder are really low," Seth Masket, a University of Denver political scientist, said of the Northam and Franken scandals earlier this week. "The real test," he added, would be a scenario in which Republicans could gain a key political office.

Democrats did not seem to pass that test Wednesday. No Democratic presidential contender candidate issued any statement calling for the resignations of Herring or Fairfax, whose accuser, Vanessa Tyson, is represented by the same law firm that represented future Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's first accuser, Christine Blasey Ford.

South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who is exploring a Democratic presidential bid, told NBC, "I don't know that this is a set of decisions we can automate because each of these cases brings different elements to it."

New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker told reporters at the Capitol that "it takes tremendous courage for someone to come forward in the way that she did. This is a deeply disturbing allegation that should be thoroughly investigated."

Former HUD Secretary Julian Castro, who was the first presidential candidate to call for Northam's resignation, told MSNBC it was important for the party to confront the issue. "This can be painful," Castro said. "But I'm confident that at the end of that day, what we're going to have is not only a stronger Democratic Party, more importantly we're going to have a stronger country that lives by these values of respect for everybody."

Jennifer Wexton, a newly elected Democratic congresswoman representing Northern Virginia, tweeted,

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"I believe Dr. Vanessa Tyson." And Al Sharpton, the prominent black activist and television personality, told BuzzFeed News that Herring and Northam should resign and that he'd lead protests against the two politicians. The National Organization of Women called for Fairfax's resignation.

Part of the reticence to talk was clearly the speed at which the allegations surfaced. Northam's inner circle was taken aback by how quickly national figures piled on him. The stampede became so pronounced that Herring himself called for Northam's departure on Saturday after the governor, at a press conference, admitted he'd worn blackface before but denied he was the person in the yearbook photo.

State Sen. Barbara Favola, a Democrat, showed signs of weariness when asked about the new allegations Wednesday. "I have to think about this, I really do," she said. "I have to take a breath and think about this. This is moving way too quickly. My goal is to be fair to everyone concerned."

Democrats were also visibly frustrated that Republicans were capitalizing on the scandals. Cox, for example, said Herring "should adhere to the standards he's set for others or lose credibility" and called the allegations against Fairfax "shocking."

Guy Cecil, head of the major Democratic super PAC Priorities USA, was one of the earlier national Democrats to demand Northam's resignation. On Wednesday afternoon, he tweeted: "The past actions of Virginia's leaders are abhorrent, but many Republicans around the country are engaged in modern-day Jim Crow voter suppression. They need to sweep their own porch before sitting in judgment of another."

Sen. Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat who is close to Northam but has called for his resignation, acknowledged the frustrations of other members of his party. He told reporters in the Capitol that he couldn't judge yet what should happen to Fairfax or Herring but that Democrats shouldn't worry about the political consequences.

"When the politics are bad — and they're bad — and everything else sucks, as it does now, just follow the principles," Kaine said. "Just ask, 'What is the right way to treat people?' And that actually makes it clearer."

Associated Press writers Elana Schor and Juana Summers in Washington contributed to this report.

10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press

Your daily look at late-breaking news, upcoming events and the stories that will be talked about today:

1. VIRGINIA HAS CHECKERED RACIAL PAST

Virginia has become more diverse and socially liberal in recent years, but the state continues to struggle with mindsets shaped by its turbulent racial history.

2. BORDER WALL A DELICATE DANCE

Some Mexican homes encroach on U.S. soil, posing a dilemma for federal authorities.

3. 'REVOLUTION BABIES' REPRESENT MAJOR FORCE IN IRAN

More than half of the Islamic Republic's 80 million people are under 35 and they must deal with the country's economic struggles under re-imposed U.S. sanctions.

4. WHO IS CHANNELING THEIR INNER DONALD TRUMP

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party has plastered huge billboards of the two leaders together and launched a Trump-like weekly webcast to counter what it calls the "fake news" industry.

5. SOME STATES TAKING LEAD IN ABORTION FIGHT

Republican legislators in several states are pushing ahead with anti-abortion bills they hope can pass muster with the U.S. Supreme Court.

6. MAY IN BRUSSELS TO DISCUSS DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS

The British prime minister reopens frosty talks with the EU on the Brexit agreement and is bracing for a clash with the bloc's presidents who have said there can be no renegotiation.

7. NEW FITNESS TEST COMING FOR ARMY

The more grueling and complex exam adds dead lifts, power throws and other exercises designed to

make soldiers more fit and ready for combat.

8. GUCCI PULLS BLACKFACE ITEMS AFTER COMPLAINTS

The Italian fashion giant apologizes for a wool sweater that resembled a "blackface" and says the item has been pulled from its online and physical stores.

9. WHO'S BEING ACCUSED OF PLAGIARISM

Former New York Times executive editor Jill Abramson is facing allegations that she lifted material from other sources for her new book, "Merchants of Truth."

10. NOMAD NFL TEAM LOOKING FOR A NEW HOME

Still two years from moving to Las Vegas, the Raiders are in search of a home, any home, for the 2019 season.

New US-Mexico border barrier charts tricky course near homes

By ELLIOT SPAGAT, Associated Press

ALONG THE SAN DIEGO-TIJUANA BORDER (AP) — For all practical purposes, the purple-and-white stucco shrine that Jose Arias built to celebrate his recovery from a heart attack and honor his family lies in Mexico.

The only way in and out of his plywood shack is through one of Tijuana's oldest neighborhoods, a patchwork of dirt and paved roads where dogs roam freely and the sounds of roosters and power tools fill the morning air. The shrine's backside once rested against a wall separating the U.S. and Mexico, blocking passage to San Diego.

But, according to the U.S. Border Patrol, Arias' structure encroaches on U.S. soil, posing a dilemma for the Trump administration as it pursued a \$147 million replacement of 14 miles (22.5 kilometers) of barrier stretching east from the Pacific Ocean: Should the shrine be saved or destroyed?

The U.S. faces a similarly delicate dance as it charts a course to extend or replace barriers that blanket nearly one-third of the border. The path of the San Diego replacement cuts through a gated Tijuana subdivision of luxury homes with pink stripes on Spanish tile roofs to mark the official border. It collided with old trees that sprout on the Mexican side.

The Rio Grande marks the border between Texas and Mexico, ensuring that any land barrier on the U.S. side creates space between the wall and demarcation line established in bilateral treaties. One treaty limits construction on the Rio Grande flood plain, trapping homes in a no man's land between a wall built in the 2000s and the river.

Sometimes, soil and rugged terrain prohibit walls right on the border. In other areas, the Border Patrol wants space to access the Mexico-facing side for maintenance and repairs.

Rodney Scott, the Border Patrol's San Diego sector chief, initially thought the shrine was doomed but he sympathized with Arias as he learned more about it and a nearby shack belonging to Arias' daughter.

"They're doing the best that they can with what they have," he said. "There was no malice, there's no intent. There was really no reason that they would understand that they couldn't build right up to the border."

Arias moved to Tijuana in 1957 from central Mexico and settled in Colonia Libertad, a neighborhood where residents crossed — unimpeded and illegally — to work or play soccer and baseball in San Diego. "It was a free pass," Arias said.

He and his wife raised 14 children at the home they bought in 1978; he turned its dirt floors to wood and added a second level. In the 1980s, illegal crossings were so rampant that street vendors set up outside his house to sell clothing, shoes and other goods, as well as chicken mole, Mexican stews and tequila. Arias even opened a slow-cooked pork taco stand.

Illegal crossings slowed after an amnesty granted during the Reagan administration, and Arias returned to full-time construction work.

Scott, who grew up in the border town of Nogales, Arizona, where his father commuted to work at a Mexican factory, became a Border Patrol agent in 1992 and was assigned to a station a few miles from Arias' home. Thousands would gather on U.S. soil on a nearby soccer field and run past agents when

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night fell. Other large groups rushed inspection booths at a nearby border crossing.

Scott estimates that nine of 10 crossers eluded capture.

"We were arresting thousands of people in an eight-hour shift routinely and watching thousands more get away," he said.

The first stretch of border wall was built in San Diego in the early 1990s, made of corrugated steel matting used by the military as temporary runways. In 1994, the Border Patrol cracked down with more agents and orders not to cede an inch of ground to anyone crossing illegally. In the mid-2000s, a steel-mesh fence formed a second barrier, much of it topped with coiled razor wire.

Border Patrol arrests in San Diego plummeted 96 percent from nearly 630,000 in 1986 to barely 26,000 in 2017. A factory outlet mall with upscale brands opened on the border, near new homes that sell for more than \$500,000. An area called "Smuggler's Gulch" became nearly impenetrable.

Scott described San Diego's transformation to President Donald Trump on live television when he toured border wall prototypes in March. Trump repeatedly touts San Diego as evidence that walls work, most recently in his State of the Union address on Tuesday.

The crackdown pushed illegal crossings to less-patrolled and more remote Arizona deserts, where thousands have died in the heat. Border Patrol arrests in Tucson in 2000 nearly matched San Diego's peak. Critics say Trump's argument is undermined by the fact that building a wall in one spot will mean that migrants will find an opening elsewhere.

Scott said the Border Patrol had to start somewhere, and San Diego was the busiest corridor for illegal crossings by far in the early 1990s.

"It wasn't, 'Do it in San Diego and stop.' It was, 'Let's prove what works and then let's copy it on the southwest border so we can improve security for the whole United States,'" Scott said.

Trump inherited 654 miles (1,053 kilometers) of barriers, mostly built from 2006 to 2009, and has awarded \$1 billion in contracts, almost all of it to replace existing wall. Work on his first addition starts this month — 14 miles in Texas' Rio Grande Valley. He wants another \$5.7 billion for more than 200 miles (322 kilometers), but Democratic leaders in Congress have offered nothing, an impasse that led to a five-week partial government shutdown.

A contract awarded in December will replace San Diego's steel-mesh barrier, which worked like a fortress a decade ago but is regularly breached with powerful battery-operated saws only recently made available in home improvement stores.

The Border Patrol is almost finished replacing the first layer with steel bollards up to 30 feet (9 meters) high. Agents couldn't see through the old fence, which was only about 10 feet (3 meters) high. A Mexican highway rose above the fence at one point and cars that ran off the road occasionally tumbled over it into the United States.

The U.S. State Department and U.S. delegation to the International Boundary and Water Commission are working with Mexico on one of the few unfinished areas — the luxury homes and a tennis court that poke into the U.S., Scott said. From a distance, they look like guest quarters.

The U.S. government, coordinating with Mexico, removed some trees in Tijuana because trenches for the new barrier might sever their roots, causing them to die and possibly fall, Scott said.

Arias built his shrine about 15 years ago to celebrate his health and, later, to honor his wife and son, both deceased. Behind a locked glass case, there are family photos, a framed portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a ceramic angel, artificial flowers and a beer can and a bottle.

The Border Patrol decided the shrine could stay, although it needed a different base to avoid falling into new trenches. Officials say the shrine extends up to one foot into the U.S.

"A lot of times border security is seen as adversarial and it's really not," Scott said after chatting with Arias' daughter through the new bollards. "Compassion and law and order can go together, and I think they do go together."

Arias, now 84 with a shock of white hair, questions the wisdom of spending money on a barrier instead of schools and health care but acknowledges the U.S. has a sovereign right. He considers the wall neither

a plus nor a minus for his own home.

"Why do you build a fence around your house?" he said. "To protect it. The (U.S.) government is building a wall to protect their country."

Arias and his daughters are deeply grateful to the Border Patrol.

"They respected my shrine," Arias said.

Comedian who plays Ukraine's president on TV leads real race

By YURAS KARMANAU, Associated Press

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — Volodymyr Zelenskiy has spent more than 20 years as a comedian in Ukraine peppering his stand-up routines with imitations of politicians. So when his production company needed an actor to play an everyman who unexpectedly becomes president, Zelenskiy was a clear choice.

But in an example of life imitating art far more than the other way round, the 41-year-old film and TV star who plays the president in a popular TV series is the leading candidate in Ukraine's upcoming presidential election. It's a role he takes seriously.

"Corruption is everywhere. We need to reduce its impact on the government, on people's lives," Zelenskiy said during an interview with The Associated Press in which he outlined plans to stem a population exodus with higher wages and to bring internet service to small villages.

Zelenskiy argues that his lack of political experience is an advantage in an election climate in which voters have seen their hopes for a better future squashed. He described himself as a "fresh face" and allowed that his participation in the president's race gave some "hype" to Ukrainian politics. He also brushed aside claims that he's controlled by a powerful banker in a tug-of-war with the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko.

On "Servant of the People", the Ukrainian TV series he has starred in since the fall of 2015, Zelenskiy plays Vasyl Holoborodko, a high school teacher abruptly propelled into the presidency after a student's video of him blasting official corruption goes viral.

The show is full of crude humor and four-letter words, but the inexperienced President Holoborodko is a good leader who honestly tries to serve the people. It's not clear to what extent the popularity of Zelenskiy's campaign is driven by his standing as a celebrity, or a collective longing for a figure like his character in the presidential seat amid strong public fatigue with the current political elite.

In his stand-up routines, Zelenskiy frequently mocks the incumbent. The biting satire has boosted his popularity and irritated the president, who complained to the comic the portrayal was unfair, according to Zelenskiy's own account.

With a laugh, Zelenskiy dismissed both Poroshenko and the other leading candidate, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, as a "turned page." He voiced confidence in his ability to beat either in a runoff election between the top two finishers in the first round of voting.

"People have grown tired of the old guard, so to say," he said.

Recent opinion polls have shown Zelenskiy surging ahead of both Poroshenko and Tymoshenko in the run-up to the March 31 vote.

An election survey by four respected polling agencies in Ukraine had 21.9 percent of respondents supporting Zelenskiy, the most of any candidate. Tymoshenko was the choice of 19.2 percent, and Poroshenko came in third with 14.8 percent. Thirty-four other 34 candidates trailed behind.

The poll of 10,000 registered voters, done in face-to-face interviews, was completed last week and released Monday. It had a margin of error of 1 percentage point.

"Zelenskiy has succeeded in attracting angry voters who have lost trust in the current politicians," said Viktor Zamyatin, an analyst with the Razumkov Center, a Kiev think tank.

The comedian's rivals have tried to tarnish his newcomer's shine by pointing at his business ties to an expatriate billionaire banker and alleging that he controls Zelenskiy. The banker, Ihor Kolomoyskiy, left Ukraine following a clash with Poroshenko.

Zelenskiy announced his candidacy on New Year's Eve on the TV channel that aired "Servant of the People" and is owned by Kolomoyskiy's media company. Other stations were broadcasting Poroshenko's

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New Year's address to the nation at the moment.

Zelenskiy has acknowledged business ties with Kolomoyskiy, but denied that he is the political patron directing his presidential bid.

"There is nothing to talk about," he said. "I have no relation to him."

Born to a professorial family in the industrial city of Kryvyi Rih when Ukraine still was part of the Soviet Union, Zelenskiy is a native Russian speaker, something that helps his popularity in eastern regions where many speak Russian.

He started acting in law school and quickly became a standout on a popular TV show featuring competing comedy teams. In 2003, the team he led was turned into an entertainment production company, Kwartal 95.

Zelenskiy's easygoing charm and quick wits were on display during the interview, which was conducted during a break in work on his TV series. "Servant of the People" has been a big success, with episodes streamed with English subtitles on Netflix and a spinoff movie.

But the candidate also made it clear he isn't running for president in real life as a joke or publicity stunt. Depressed wages and public benefits have caused poverty and the flight of Ukrainians seeking better opportunities in European countries, he said.

"We need competitive salaries for Ukrainians to feel self-respect," Zelenskiy said.

Ukraine's economic troubles have led to a sharp decline in living standards since Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and a separatist insurgency in the east following the ouster of the country's Moscow-friendly president.

Zelenskiy described the continuing hostilities between pro-Russia separatists and Ukrainian forces in the eastern region of Donbass as the country's most pressing challenge. More than 10,000 people have been killed in the conflict, and the fighting has devastated the country's industrial heartland.

"We are waiting for peace to come to Ukraine," he said. "It's the most horrible thing that people die."

At the same time, he insisted that "we want and will return our territories, Crimea and Donbass."

Zelenskiy said he would pursue Ukraine's aspirations to join the European Union, if he wins the election. He wouldn't say if he would press for the country's membership in NATO.

"Ukraine has chosen its path," he said. "This is the European path, and I absolutely believe that it's the right one."

Images suggest Iran launched satellite despite US criticism

By JON GAMBRELL, Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran appears to have attempted a second satellite launch despite U.S. criticism that its space program helps the country develop ballistic missiles, satellite images released Thursday suggest. Iran did not immediately acknowledge conducting such a launch.

Images released by the Colorado-based company DigitalGlobe show a rocket at the Imam Khomeini Space Center in Iran's Semnan province on Tuesday. Images from Wednesday show the rocket was gone with what appears to be burn marks on its launch pad.

It wasn't immediately clear if the satellite, if launched, made it into orbit.

In the images, words written in Farsi in large characters on the launch pad appeared to say in part "40 years" and "Iranian made," in different sections. That is likely in reference to the 40th anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution, which authorities have been celebrating this month.

Iranian state media did not immediately report on the rocket launch, though such delays have happened in previous launches.

Iran has said it would launch its Doosti, or "friendship," satellite. A launch in January failed to put another satellite, Payam or "message," into orbit after successfully launching it from the same space center.

DigitalGlobe analysts said the images from Tuesday suggest Iran used a Safir, or "ambassador," rocket in the launch. In the January launch, engineers used a Simorgh, or "phoenix," rocket. It wasn't immediately clear what prompted the rocket choice.

The Doosti, a remote-sensing satellite developed by engineers at Tehran's Sharif University of Technol-

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ogy, was to be launched into a low orbit.

The U.S. alleges such launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Iran, which long has said it does not seek nuclear weapons, maintains its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component. Tehran also says they don't violate a United Nations resolution that only "called upon" it not to conduct such tests.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space.

Iran usually displays space achievements in February during the anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution. This year's 40th anniversary comes amid Iran facing increasing pressure from the U.S. under the administration of President Donald Trump.

The likely launch also comes after a Iran's Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi reportedly said Sunday that three researchers died "because of a fire in one of the buildings of the Space Research Center," without elaborating.

Wariness and hope in S. Korea over second Trump-Kim summit

By KIM TONG-HYUNG, Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Koreans, always deeply divided over how best to deal with their often belligerent northern neighbor, are reacting with both hope and wariness to U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement that he will hold a second nuclear disarmament summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on Feb. 27-28 in Vietnam.

But for liberal South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who is eager to push ahead with ambitious plans for engagement with North Korea, a breakthrough in Vietnam is crucial. Moon served as diplomatic middleman between the U.S. and North Korea following the North's increasingly powerful string of weapons tests and Trump's threats of military action in 2017.

A year of mostly fruitless diplomacy has led to serious doubts about Kim's sincerity and Trump's ability to force North Korea to significantly reduce the threat its nuclear weapons pose to the region and world.

"Denuclearization will be difficult because North Korea wants to keep nuclear weapons, and the United States wants them all gone," Lee Sang-won, a 68-year-old retiree, said Thursday at a bustling Seoul train station.

Trump announced Vietnam as the summit venue during his State of the Union address on Wednesday, as millions of South Koreans made visits to their hometowns during Lunar New Year holidays.

On Thursday, Trump's special envoy for North Korea, Stephen Biegun, held a second day of talks with officials in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, to hammer out summit logistics and an agenda. Biegun is expected to come to South Korea to brief officials as early as Friday. Moon's office said Wednesday that Seoul hopes Trump and Kim will make "concrete and substantial progress" in their talks in Vietnam, but few other details were released.

At Seoul Station, broadcasts of Trump's summit announcement drew crowds in front of large TV screens. Trump, Kim and nuclear weapons were also likely subjects of heated political discussions at holiday dinner tables across the country. South Korea is split along generational and ideological lines on how to handle the North.

A wave of optimism greeted the diplomatic developments of 2018, which included three summits between Kim and Moon as well as the first Trump-Kim summit in Singapore, but South Koreans may have become much more skeptical in recent months. In a December poll of some 1,000 people by Gallup Korea, 45 percent of respondents said they do not believe Kim will keep his denuclearization promises, compared to 38 percent who said they trust Kim. The margin of error was 3.1 percentage points.

Despite the hype of Trump's first meeting with Kim, the highly orchestrated one-day meeting in Singapore only produced a vague aspirational vow about a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without describing when and how it would occur.

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North Korea has since insisted that U.S.-led sanctions against the country should be lifted before there's any progress in nuclear negotiations, and Kim has yet to convincingly show that he'll voluntarily relinquish an arsenal he may see as his strongest guarantee of survival.

As skepticism mounts, the South Korean president wants to maintain an impression that things are moving toward North Korean denuclearization. Moon is trying to keep Washington hard-liners at bay and create more space for inter-Korean reconciliation, which he says is crucial for resolving the nuclear standoff.

The Koreans in past months have discussed reconnecting railways and roads across their border, resuming operations at a jointly run factory park in the North Korean border town of Kaesong and restarting South Korean tours to the North's Diamond Mountain resort.

But tough sanctions have limited what they can do, with Washington insisting on keeping up economic pressure until North Korea takes stronger steps toward irreversibly and verifiably relinquishing its nuclear weapons.

Some in South Korea hope that Kim will be ready to make meaningful concessions in Vietnam that Trump could then respond to by partially easing the sanctions on the North to allow more inter-Korean cooperation.

One potential deal could see North Korea agreeing to dismantle key parts of its Nyongbyon nuclear complex, freeze its nuclear program and allow in inspectors in exchange for the United States granting sanctions exemptions for inter-Korean activities at Kaesong and Diamond Mountain, said Koh Yu-hwan, a North Korea expert at Seoul's Dongguk University.

Ahead of his visit to the Koreas, Bigeun said last week that Kim had committed to "the dismantlement and destruction of North Korea's plutonium and uranium enrichment facilities" during a September summit with Moon and at a meeting with the U.S. secretary of state in October.

"In Singapore, Trump and Kim were chased by time and they couldn't even get to the main subject," said Koh, who is also a policy adviser to Moon. "This time they will at least have to agree on what the early steps of the denuclearization process would be. They can't let another summit be called a failure."

Shin Beomchul, a senior analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said a key point of the summit will be whether North Korea agrees to accept inspectors to verify its activities to dismantle its nuclear facilities.

"If both sides agree on the declaration, verification and dismantling of the Nyongbyon nuclear facility, we can say that it was a successful summit," Shin said.

There's also speculation about a possible four-way meeting, also including Moon and Chinese President Xi Jinping, to declare a formal end to the Korean War, which stopped with an armistice and left the peninsula still technically at war.

Both Koreas have endorsed an end-of-war declaration as a trust-building measure that could move nuclear diplomacy forward. But Washington has insisted that North Korea needs to first take more concrete steps toward denuclearization.

While such a declaration wouldn't imply a legally binding peace treaty, experts say it could create political momentum that would make it easier for North Korea to steer the discussions toward a peace regime and security concessions.

Trump predicts all IS territory will be cleared next week

By MATTHEW LEE, AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump predicted Wednesday that the Islamic State group will have lost by next week all the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. He said the U.S. will not relent in fighting remnants of the extremist organization despite his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria over the objections of some of his most senior national security advisers.

The president told representatives of a 79-member, U.S.-led coalition fighting IS that the militants held a tiny percentage of the vast territory they claimed as their "caliphate."

"It should be formally announced sometime, probably next week, that we will have 100 percent of the caliphate," Trump said.

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U.S. officials have said in recent weeks that IS has lost 99.5 percent of its territory and is holding on to fewer than 5 square kilometers in Syria, or less than 2 square miles, in the villages of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, where the bulk of the fighters are concentrated.

But there are fears the impending U.S. pullout will imperil those gains. Trump told coalition members meeting at the State Department that while “remnants” of the group were still dangerous, he was determined to bring U.S. troops home. He called on coalition members to step up and do their “fair share” in the fight against terrorism.

Even as Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defended the withdrawal decision, which shocked U.S. allies and led to the resignations of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and the U.S. envoy to the anti-IS coalition, Brett McGurk, some military leaders, renewed their concerns.

While the withdrawal would fulfill a Trump goal, top military officials have pushed back for months, arguing IS remains a threat and could regroup. U.S. policy had been to keep troops in place until the extremists are completely eradicated. Fears that IS fighters are making a strategic maneuver to lay low ahead of the U.S. pullout has fueled criticism that Trump telegraphed his military plans — the same thing he accused President Barack Obama of doing in Afghanistan.

Pompeo told the coalition that the planned withdrawal “is not a change in the mission” but a change in tactics against a group that should still be considered a menace.

“In this new era, local law enforcement and information sharing will be crucial, and our fight will not necessarily always be military-led,” he said. Trump’s announcement “is not the end of America’s fight. The fight is one that we will continue to wage alongside of you.”

He added, “America will continue to lead in giving those who would destroy us no quarter.”

Yet senior military officials acknowledged to Congress on Wednesday that the pullout would complicate their efforts.

Owen West, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations, told the House Armed Services Committee that he shared Mattis’ objections. West answered, “No, sir,” when asked by a lawmaker if he thought Mattis was wrong to disagree with the withdrawal.

At the same hearing, Maj. Gen. James Hecker, vice director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff said the withdrawal means “it is going to be difficult to keep up the pressure” on IS. “There will be a decrease in the amount of pressure that we will be able to apply,” he said.

“The concern is if we move our forces out of Syria that that may take some pressure off of the ISIS forces in Syria,” Hecker said. “So our mission is to try to figure out how we can continue to keep the pressure on in Syria without any boots on the ground.”

Hecker said others would have to carry the burden once the U.S. left. He did not offer specifics.

Pompeo called on the coalition to increase intelligence-sharing, repatriate and prosecute captured foreign fighters and accelerate stabilization efforts so IS remnants cannot reconstitute in Iraq, Syria or elsewhere. He said the fight is entering a new stage where those allied against IS must confront a “decentralized jihad” with more than military force.

Pompeo mentioned the suicide bombing claimed by IS that killed four Americans — two service members, a Pentagon civilian and a U.S. contractor — in the northern Syrian town of Manbij last month. Manbij was liberated from IS control in 2016.

The conference started hours after Trump, in his State of the Union address, lauded what he said was the near-complete victory over IS. He also reaffirmed his determination to pull out the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria. He had said in December that the pullout would proceed quickly.

In liberated areas across Syria and Iraq, IS sleeper cells are carrying out assassinations, setting up checkpoints and distributing fliers as they lay the groundwork for an insurgency that could gain strength as U.S. forces withdraw.

Activists who closely follow the conflict in Syria point to signs of a growing insurgency. Rami Abdurrahman, the head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, says IS still has 4,000 to 5,000 fighters, many likely hiding out in desert caves and mountains.

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A United Nations report circulated Wednesday said Islamic State extremists "continue to pose the main and best-resourced international terrorist threat." It said IS fighters remain under "intense military pressure" in their stronghold in eastern Syria, but they have "shown a determination to resist and the capability to counter-attack."

Defense officials believe many fighters have fled to ungoverned spaces and other pockets in the north and west.

A Defense Department watchdog report warned this week that even with the IS forces on the run, the group "is still able to coordinate offensives and counter-offensives, as well as operate as a decentralized insurgency."

Unbowed by Trump, Democrats charge ahead with investigations

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump warned Congress that investigations and legislation don't mix. But Speaker Nancy Pelosi said such threats have no place in the House, as unbowed Democrats charged ahead Wednesday with plans to probe Trump's tax returns, business and ties to Russia.

The chairman of the intelligence committee, Rep. Adam Schiff, announced a broad new investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and Trump's foreign financial interests. Other committees' actions are well underway.

The day after the president essentially laid out the ultimatum to Congress during his State of the Union address, Democrats appeared even more resolved to conduct oversight of his administration and legislate on their priorities.

"The president should not bring threats to the floor of the House," Pelosi told reporters, rebuking Trump for saying during his address that the "ridiculous partisan investigations" must end because they could harm the economy.

Pelosi said Congress has a responsibility to provide oversight, under the Constitution's system of checks and balances, and would be "delinquent" if it failed to do so.

Schiff indicated his committee's investigation will be sweeping. It will include "the scope and scale" of Russian intervention in the 2016 presidential election, the "extent of any links and/or coordination" between Russians and Trump's associates, whether foreign actors have sought to hold leverage over Trump or his family and associates, and whether anyone has sought to obstruct any of the relevant investigations.

"We're going to do our jobs, and the president needs to do his," Schiff said, noting the probe will go beyond Russia to include leverage by the Saudis "or anyone else."

Schiff said, "Our job involves making sure that the policy of the United States is being driven by the national interest, not by any financial entanglement, financial leverage or other form of compromise."

Trump immediately shot back, calling Schiff nothing but a "political hack" who has "no basis to do that."

"It's called presidential harassment," Trump said during an event at the White House as he announced his new pick to head the World Bank.

After eight years in the minority, House Democrats are releasing their bottled-up legislative energy at a time when Trump's annual joint address to Congress lacked many new initiatives of his own.

The Democrats' agenda goes beyond oversight of Trump's administration and Russian election interference to the bread-and-butter issues of jobs, health care and the economy that propelled them to the House majority. Pelosi said they still hope to work with the White House on shared priorities, particularly on lowering prescription drug costs and investing in infrastructure.

On Wednesday, one House committee held a hearing on gun violence. Two others gavelled in to address climate change. And three more were debating protecting people with pre-existing medical conditions and the Affordable Care Act.

The Foreign Affairs Committee was debating the war in Yemen and a war powers resolution to halt U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led coalition.

Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, the chairman of the Oversight Committee, said Trump has to under-

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stand "that he has to be accountable."

"It's not about partisan investigations," said Cummings. "We all have to be accountable. And it's a new day."

The flurry of activity brought a turn of events for the new Congress. Democrats had been off to a rough start as the 35-day government shutdown jammed the agenda and stifled the energetic freshmen class that swept the party to power in the midterm election.

With the longest government closure over, for now, the new majority is eager to deliver on its promises before the next election shifts attention yet again.

Pelosi made a calculation after the election to forego a traditional 100-days agenda — or the 100-hours to-do list she rolled out in 2007, the last time Democrats had the majority — in favor of a return to the legislative process.

It's partly a nod to the diverse Democratic majority, whose members hold different views on some issues. But it's also a part of Democrats' efforts to revive traditional governing, rather than lurching from crisis to crisis, as had become the norm when Republicans were unable to control their often unruly conservative flank. Under new House rules, every bill must pass through committee before coming to a vote on the floor.

James Curry, an associate professor of political science at the University of Utah, said Democrats have a short window to capture the public's attention. "They want to show voters they can legislate, they can run the government, they can do the things they said they're going to do," he said.

"Reality," Curry added, "is obviously more complicated than that."

Much of the House's legislation will fall flat in the Senate, where Republicans retain control. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is expected to ensure his chamber serves as a backstop to prevent Democratic bills from landing on Trump's desk — although the Senate's own bipartisan investigation into Russian election interference continues.

The more likely result is that the legislative agenda sets the stage for the next election, in 2020, when voters will be assessing not only the performance of the new House majority but also which party they prefer in the White House.

This month, Democrats expect to pass H.R. 1, a sweeping reform of campaign finance and voting rights laws, and then turn to legislation to expand background checks for sales and transfers of firearms.

At the Natural Resources Committee, overflow crowds of schoolkids, environmental activists and others turned out for the first of what Chairman Raul Grijalva promises will be a month of hearings on the effect of climate change on coastal communities, national parks and other areas under the committee's oversight.

"Today we turn the page from climate denial to climate action," said Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat.

The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York, expressed disappointment that Trump did not mention gun violence in his State of the Union address Tuesday night.

"It is evident from the energy and the crowd in this room, as well as the millions of people across the country fighting for sensible gun safety laws, that the public is demanding national legislation," Nadler said as he gaveled open the hearing.

But Rep. Doug Collins of Georgia, the top Republican on the judiciary panel, called the background checks measure a "fraud" that promises protection against gun violence without achieving it.

The House intelligence committee also voted Wednesday to send the transcripts from the panel's earlier Russia investigation to special counsel Robert Mueller. Republicans ended that probe in March, concluding there was no evidence of conspiracy or collusion between Russia and Trump's presidential campaign. Democrats strongly objected at the time, saying the move was premature.

The voluminous cache will include transcripts of interviews with Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr.; his son-in-law, Jared Kushner; his longtime spokeswoman, Hope Hicks; and his former bodyguard Keith Schiller. There are dozens of other transcripts of interviews with former Obama administration officials and Trump associates.

Associated Press writers Matthew Daly, Ellen Knickmeyer, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Jill Colvin contrib-

uted to this report.

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Army aims for more combat-ready troops with new fitness test

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, Associated Press

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (AP) — Army soldiers struggle to haul heavy sleds backward as fast as they can down a grassy field at Fort Bragg, filling the brisk North Carolina morning air with grunts of exertion and the shouts of instruction from their coaches.

Watching from the sidelines, Sgt. Maj. Harold Sampson shakes his head. As a military intelligence specialist he spends a lot of time behind a desk. Over his two decades in the Army, he could easily pound out the situps, pushups and 2-mile run that for years have made up the service's fitness test.

But change has come. The Army is developing a new, more grueling and complex fitness exam that adds dead lifts, power throws and other exercises designed to make soldiers more fit and ready for combat. "I am prepared to be utterly embarrassed," Sampson said on a recent morning, two days before he was to take the test.

Commanders have complained in recent years that the soldiers they get out of basic training aren't fit enough. Nearly half of the commanders surveyed last year said new troops coming into their units could not meet the physical demands of combat. Officials also say about 12 percent of soldiers at any one time cannot deploy because of injuries.

In addition, there has long been a sense among many senior officials that the existing fitness test does not adequately measure the physical attributes needed for the battlefield, said Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

The new test, "may be harder, but it is necessary," Townsend said.

Reaching the new fitness levels will be challenging. Unlike the old fitness test, which graded soldiers differently based on age and gender, the new one will be far more physically demanding and will not adjust the passing scores for older or female soldiers.

For example, in the current test — two minutes of situps, two minutes of pushups, a 2-mile run — younger soldiers must do more repetitions and run faster to pass and get maximum scores than those who are older or female.

Townsend said the new test was designed based on scientific research that matched specific exercises to tasks that soldiers in combat must do: sprint away from fire, carry a wounded comrade on a stretcher, haul cans of fuel to a truck.

The scoring is divided into three levels that require soldiers with more physically demanding jobs, such as infantry or armor, to score higher.

"We needed to change the culture of fitness in the United States Army. We had a high number of non-deployable soldiers that had a lot of muscular/skeletal injuries and medical challenges because we hadn't trained them from a fitness perspective in the right way," said Army Maj. Gen. Malcolm Frost, commander of the Army's Center for Initial Military Training and the officer in charge of developing the new fitness test. "The goal is about having a more combat-ready army."

Frost said that about one-third of the soldiers who come into the service leave before their third year, many because of muscular skeletal injuries. The new test, he said, will help screen out recruits who are less physically fit and mentally disciplined. Those who make the cut are more likely to stay in the service.

It will also challenge senior officers such as Sampson, who have been doing less physical desk jobs.

"It breaks the mindset of 'I am an intel soldier,'" said Sampson. "It changes it to 'I am a soldier,' because bullets on the battlefield don't discriminate."

The Associated Press was with Frost on a recent sunny Tuesday as he watched soldiers from three battalions go through the test. The six events take nearly an hour and are done in order with only a few minutes rest in between:

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- a dead lift, with weights between 140 pounds and 340 pounds.
- a standing power throw, which requires soldiers to throw a 10-pound medicine ball backward and overhead.
- hand-release pushups, completing as many as possible in two minutes.
- the “sprint-drag-carry” that includes a 50-yard sprint, a 50-yard backward sled drag, a 50-yard lateral, where soldiers shuttle sideways down the lane and back, a 50-yard carry of two 40-pound kettle bells and a 50-yard sprint.
- after a short rest, the soldiers do the leg tuck pullup, as many as possible in two minutes.
- a 2-mile run.

“Many folks find it easy to do the maximum standard for the current test,” Frost said. “This new test is gender and age neutral. I cannot max this test.”

Across the country, 63 battalions are working on the final test development and will eventually go back to their units and train others. By Oct. 1, the entire Army will be using the test. By October 2020, it will be the official exam that all soldiers will have to pass.

Technique is key to success.

As the soldiers lined up to fling the medicine ball back over their heads, coaches stood by ready to shove them out of the way if the ball went straight up and came right back down.

The first throws landed with a chorus of thuds; many throws fell short. But the second and third tries went farther as soldiers figured out when to release the ball.

Next they quickly moved to pushups.

Crouched beside a soldier straining to master the hand-release, Frost shouts out encouragement and then drops down to demonstrate proper form. Each time the soldier lowers his body, both hands must quickly lift off the ground and immediately press back down for the next pushup.

A few lanes away, Staff Sgt. Idis Arroyo, has started what most consider the toughest element, the sprint-drag-carry. Pulling the 90-pound sled backward down the lane, her feet slip and she stumbles.

“C’mon get up! Get up, pull, pull!” a coach yells. Arroyo bounces up, drags it to the end and shifts quickly to the next movement.

How hard was it?

“It was pretty difficult,” said Arroyo, who is with the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion. “Once we got into the sprint-drag-carry and then sprint again and the laterals and all that, I think that was actually the hardest part.”

But she said she knows it will help her when she has to embed with a combat unit.

Commanders said the test will be harder at first for less fit soldiers or longtime veterans, who are in less physical jobs, and many may fail at first. But they said that over time, as soldiers adjust and get stronger, their scores will improve.

Lt. Col. Eric Haas, commander of Arroyo’s battalion, watched as his soldiers powered through the test. He said it was very telling to watch fit leaders struggle.

“This is a good assessment of where we are physically,” Haas said. “For years I’ve been taking the Army physical fitness test and that’s the most miserable I think I’ve seen a 2-mile finish line.”

Sampson, who is also with the 519th battalion and has deployed three times to Iraq and Afghanistan, said improving fitness will make his soldiers more prepared to do their jobs.

“It doesn’t matter that 90 percent of the time I may sit in a chair working behind a computer,” he said. “I’m going to have to move a person from point A to point B.”

As for his expected embarrassment on the test? He scored well and passed.

Spotify takes a big jump into the podcasting game

By MAE ANDERSON, AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Spotify is making a bigger bet on podcasts as it looks to bring a Netflix-like model of original programs to the audio world. The music-streaming pioneer gobbled up two podcasting companies,

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Gimlet and Anchor, on Wednesday.

Although streaming is becoming an increasingly popular way to listen to music, Spotify and other services such as Pandora have struggled to make money because of the royalties and other fees that they have to pay recording labels, songwriters and performers.

The acquisitions are about "expanding our mission from just being about music to being about all of audio and being the world's leading audio platform," CEO Daniel Ek said in an interview on CNBC on Wednesday.

The company didn't disclose terms, but The Wall Street Journal cited people familiar with the transactions as saying Anchor, a podcast production and hosting platform, was valued at more than \$150 million and Gimlet at more than \$200 million. Gimlet produces high-end podcasts and was co-founded by Alex Blumberg, a veteran of the NPR radio show "This American Life."

Spotify, which is based in Stockholm and went public in April 2018, charges \$10 a month for its "premium" ad-free music service. It also offers a free ad-supported service.

Apple has become Spotify's primary rival since the tech giant launched its own music streaming service in 2015. But although it has been outgunned financially, Spotify has been able to stay a step ahead of Apple in terms of subscribers. It counted 96 million subscribers in the fourth quarter, up 36 percent from a year ago.

Meanwhile, Apple's music-streaming service has more than 50 million subscribers, according to CEO Tim Cook. Pandora, YouTube, iHeartRadio, Google, Amazon and others also offer music streaming and podcasts.

In a blog post Wednesday, Ek said that Spotify has become the second-biggest podcasting platform in less than two years.

"The format is really evolving and while podcasting is still a relatively small business today, I see incredible growth potential for the space and for Spotify in particular," he wrote.

There are many ways to listen to most podcasts — among them, streaming services, downloads and podcast-specific apps like Castbox and Stitcher for Podcasts. It wasn't clear if Spotify will distribute its new podcasts exclusively, make them widely available, or choose some intermediate step such as allowing other services to distribute them following a window of Spotify exclusivity. Spotify did not return a request for comment.

Spotify is seeking ways to become sustainably profitable. The company reported a surprise fourth-quarter profit on Wednesday, boosted by a strong holiday season and a promotion with Google Home. But it forecast a loss for 2019 even as it continues to invest in original content.

Spotify has already produced some original podcasts, including one series with comedian Amy Schumer and another with rapper and broadcaster Joe Budden.

Ek said people who listen to podcasts through Spotify spend twice as much time on the service than other users.

Spotify is hoping to emulate Netflix, which has poured billions into developing original shows and movies. So far, that strategy has produced some hits such as the series "Stranger Things" and the thriller "Bird Box."

The podcast industry is much smaller but growing. Podcasts broke into the mainstream with the success of "Serial," a 2014 investigative journalism series about a murder that became a cultural phenomenon, yielding not just tens of millions of downloads, but eventually also a new trial for the convicted killer.

U.S. podcast ad revenue jumped 86 percent in 2017 to \$314 million, according to research from the Interactive Ad Bureau and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. That's dwarfed by digital video ad spending, which totaled \$11.9 billion in 2017.

An estimated 73 million people tune in to some form of podcast on a monthly basis, according to Edison Research. They're particularly popular with the coveted "millennial" demographic.

The deals are expected to close in the first quarter. And Ek said the company is not done with acquisitions. Spotify plans to spend \$400 million to \$500 million on acquisitions in 2019.

San Francisco gas explosion shoots fire that burns buildings

By JANIE HAR, Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A gas explosion in a San Francisco neighborhood shot flames into the air for hours Wednesday and burned five buildings, sending panicked residents and workers fleeing into the streets.

It took utility crews more than two hours to put out the fire after private construction workers cut a natural gas line, igniting the towering flames, Fire Chief Joanne Hayes-White said. Authorities initially said five workers were missing, but the entire construction crew was found safe, and no other injuries were reported.

Officials evacuated several nearby buildings, including a medical clinic and apartment buildings, Hayes-White said. Vehicles on a busy street got rerouted as authorities cordoned off the bustling retail and residential neighborhood.

The fire damaged a building housing Hong Kong Lounge II, a popular dim sum restaurant frequented by tourists and students at the University of San Francisco that made many “best of” lists.

Caroline Gasparini, 24, who lives catty-corner from where the fire ignited, said she and her housemate were in their living room when the windows started rattling. She looked up to see flames reflected in the glass.

“We went into crisis mode,” Gasparini said. “We grabbed our shoes, grabbed our laptops and grabbed our passports and just left.”

Gasparini said they saw employees of the burning restaurant run out the back door and people fleeing down the block.

Nick Jalali, 28, was cooking at home when the electricity cut out.

“We didn’t hear anything,” he said. “We just felt the shaking, and the next thing we knew, people were banging on the door to tell people it’s time to start evacuating.”

Firefighters worked to keep the fire from spreading while Pacific Gas & Electric crews tried to shut off the natural gas line.

PG&E spokeswoman Melissa Subbotin said state excavation rules required crews to dig by hand around other pipelines before they were eventually able to “squeeze” a 4-inch (10-centimeter) plastic line.

She said that because the fire was contained to a limited area, the utility had to weigh the threat from the fire with the risk of more drastic action.

“Had we turned the gas off to a transmission system, we would have shut off gas to nearly the entire city of San Francisco,” she said. “The objective of this was to turn the gas off safely and as quickly as possible.”

In an earthquake, Subbotin said PG&E would shut off a transmission line. The company stressed that the workers who cut the gas line are not affiliated with the nation’s largest utility.

The fire began around 1:20 p.m., apparently by crews working on fiber-optic wires, Hayes-White said.

Joseph Feusi lives four blocks away and said he was awoken by what sounded like a jet engine. Feusi, who works nights and sleeps in the afternoon, said he could see the towering flames from his home.

“I think the eight guys are really lucky they didn’t get blown to bits,” he said.

PG&E is under heightened scrutiny over its natural gas pipelines after one exploded under a neighborhood south of San Francisco in 2010, killing eight people and wiping out a neighborhood in suburban San Bruno.

A U.S. judge PG&E \$3 million for a conviction on six felony charges of failing to properly maintain the pipeline, and the utility remains under a federal judge’s watch in that case.

Associated Press writers Paul Elias, Olga R. Rodriguez and Juliet Williams in San Francisco contributed to this report.

Woman accuses elected Virginia official of sexual assault

By MICHAEL BIESECKER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A California woman went public with her sexual assault accusation against Virginia Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax on Wednesday, saying in a statement that she suppressed the memory for years but

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came forward in part because of the possibility that the Democrat could succeed a scandal-mired governor .

Vanessa Tyson, a 42-year-old political science professor who studies the intersection of politics and the #MeToo movement, said Fairfax held her head down and forced her to perform oral sex on him in his hotel room at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004.

"I cannot believe, given my obvious distress, that Mr. Fairfax thought this forced sexual act was consensual," Tyson said in a three-page statement issued by her attorney . "To be very clear, I did not want to engage in oral sex with Mr. Fairfax and I never gave any form of consent. Quite the opposite."

The accusation comes amid calls from top Democrats for the resignation of Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam over a racist photo that appeared on his 1984 medical school yearbook page. Fairfax, who would be in line to become governor if Northam resigned, said Wednesday that his sexual encounter with Tyson was consensual and questioned why she waited so long to come forward.

At the time of the 2004 convention, Fairfax, now 39, was a law student serving as an aide to then-Democratic vice presidential nominee John Edwards.

While Tyson said in her statement that she never spoke to Fairfax again, Fairfax said Tyson made efforts to keep in contact with him after their encounter and even wanted him to meet her mother.

"At no time did she express to me any discomfort or concern about our interactions, neither during that encounter, nor during the months following it, when she stayed in touch with me, nor the past 15 years," Fairfax said .

Tyson said Wednesday the incident left her feeling deeply humiliated and ashamed but she suppressed the memory to focus on her career as an academic. She only began to tell friends about the alleged assault in October 2017, after seeing a photo of Fairfax with an article about his campaign. She said she was inspired in part by the #MeToo movement to contact The Washington Post, which investigated her accusation and decided not to publish a story because it could not corroborate it.

Tyson said she became embroiled in the issue most recently in a cryptic Facebook post she wrote after news stories suggested that the racist photo scandal surrounding Northam could elevate Fairfax to the governor's job.

"I felt a jarring sense of both outrage and despair," she said in the statement. "That night I vented my frustration on Facebook in a message that I wrote as a private post. I did not identify Lt. Governor Fairfax by name but stated that it seemed inevitable that the campaign staffer who assaulted me during the Democratic Convention in 2004 was about to get a big promotion."

Fairfax, who has been married since 2006, has called Tyson's accusation part of a political smear campaign. Tyson said that she has no political motive and is a "proud Democrat."

"My only motive in speaking now is to refute Mr. Fairfax's falsehoods and aspersions of my character, and to provide what I believe is important information for Virginians to have as they make critical decisions that involve Mr. Fairfax," Tyson said.

The Associated Press typically does not identify those who say they were sexually assaulted, but Tyson issued the statement in her name.

Tyson said she met Fairfax while they were working at the convention and he suggested they get some fresh air by walking to his hotel room.

She said that "what began as consensual kissing quickly turned into a sexual assault" and that Fairfax forced her head to his crotch, where he had unzipped his pants.

"Utterly shocked and terrified, I tried to move my head away, but could not because his hand was holding down my neck and he was much stronger than me," she said.

Tyson, an associate professor in politics at Scripps College in California, is on a yearlong fellowship at Stanford University, where she's studying the political discourse of sexual assault. She is slated to lead a symposium there next week titled: "Betrayal and Courage in the Age of #MeToo."

In a 2007 YouTube video , Tyson talks about her work at a Boston rape crisis center, about being a victim of incest at age 8 and about the importance of sexual assault victims coming forward.

"People don't want to hear the message — so we just have to get a little louder," Tyson said. "Build the

numbers, keep the message going — do what we have to do until they start seeing us.”

Since the #MeToo movement emerged, Tyson has been frequently quoted as an expert about the intersection of politics and sexual assault and harassment claims, including the allegations by multiple women that triggered the 2017 resignation of Sen. Al Franken, the Minnesota Democrat.

Tyson this week hired the same Washington law firm that represented Christine Blasey Ford, the California psychology professor who accused then Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her. He denied the accusation.

During the Kavanaugh hearings last fall, Tyson posted on Twitter: “Sending love to all the survivors out there whose rapists/assailants called it ‘consensual’ and whose society privileges an old boys club over all else.”

AP Washington Bureau Chief Julie Pace contributed to this report. Kunzelman reported from College Park, Maryland.

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Warren struggles to move past Native American heritage flap

By ELANA SCHOR, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Elizabeth Warren is on the verge of launching a presidential campaign that should be all about her vision for the future. But first she has to explain her past.

For the second time in two weeks, the Massachusetts Democrat apologized Wednesday for claiming Native American identity on multiple occasions early in her career. The move followed a report that she listed her race as “American Indian” — in her own handwriting — on a 1986 registration card for the Texas state bar.

By providing fresh evidence that she had personally identified her race, the document resurrected the flap just as she’s trying to gain momentum for her 2020 presidential bid, which she’s expected to formally announce on Saturday. Warren didn’t rule out the possibility of other documents in which she identified as a Native American.

In a Democratic primary already dominated by candidates expressing remorse for past actions, Warren’s repentance stood out, both for the distraction the controversy has become for her candidacy and the complexity of her efforts to move beyond it. While her competitors are fine-tuning their messages and trying to demonstrate competence and polish, Warren has repeatedly opened herself up to criticism by relitigating the past.

“It’s not exactly how you’d want to enter the arena” as a presidential candidate, said Paulette Jordan, a former Democratic state representative in Idaho and a member of the Coeur d’Alene Tribe who became the party’s gubernatorial nominee last year. Jordan warned that Warren’s treatment of her heritage raises “a whole lot of questions and doubt” about her integrity: “If you cannot uphold that, then it makes things challenging.”

Questions about Warren’s heritage date to at least 2012, when her Republican opponent seized on the issue during her first Senate campaign to wrongly argue she identified as a Native American to advance her career. President Donald Trump frequently deploys a racial slur to criticize Warren.

Still, Warren has sometimes compounded the problem. In October, she released a DNA analysis that purported to bolster her claims to Native American heritage. Instead, it drew quick criticism from some Native Americans, including a Cherokee Nation official, as insensitive and fumbling.

She apologized in private last week to the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation for “causing confusion on tribal sovereignty and tribal citizenship and the harm that resulted,” said tribal spokeswoman Julie Hub-

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bard. And after The Washington Post reported on the Texas state bar registration, Warren addressed the issue publicly Wednesday, telling reporters outside her Senate office that her answers in the past were "based on my understanding of my family's story."

"I am not a tribal citizen. Tribes, and only tribes, determine citizenship," Warren said, adding, "I have apologized for not being more sensitive to that distinction. It's an important distinction."

The episode threatens to undermine the progress Warren has made since she launched a presidential exploratory committee in December. She was well-received in Iowa, home to the nation's first caucuses, last month. She's also appealed to the Democratic base with arguments that wealthy politicians shouldn't self-fund their campaigns and proposed an "ultra-millionaire tax."

Warren's allies are hopeful that she can focus on the substance of her campaign, but they acknowledge she may have more work to do.

Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, a vocal critic of the double standards facing women who seek executive office, said in an interview that "now, everybody's being scrutinized" over their pasts.

"There's a tremendous sensitivity to that, with regard to Elizabeth," Hirono said, referring to relationships with Native American communities. "She is going to need to address it, deal with it. But she has a lot of other issues that she cares about and has fought for for decades. And I hope people will look at that, too."

Waleed Shahid, a spokesman for the liberal group Justice Democrats, praised Warren's apology as confidence-building "with people in the Democratic Party electorate who are skeptical about the way she's handled this issue." He suggested the flap "could be a moment for her to do a landmark speech" addressing blind spots that have beleaguered white candidates — making a subtle allusion to the racism scandal that is engulfing Virginia's Democratic leaders.

The GOP is seizing on the moment to sow doubt among voters about Warren. The Republican National Committee filed a formal grievance with Texas bar officials on Wednesday, requesting that Warren be disciplined for making "false claims."

But it's unclear whether the controversy will wound Warren with Democratic voters. Some of her primary rivals have also aired regret for their past decisions. New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, for example, has disavowed her previously right-leaning approaches to immigration and guns. Others, including California Sen. Kamala Harris, have made more limited attempts to patch perceived trouble spots.

Reuben D'Silva, a Democrat in North Las Vegas, Nevada, and former congressional candidate, said he's not sure how much the average voter is paying attention to Warren's apology. But "among primary voters, it seems to be a cause of concern."

D'Silva, a history teacher whose family is from India, said he could give Warren the benefit of the doubt because he understands that people often don't have extensive records about their family history.

"But if there's proof she used this to land jobs or advance her career or maybe profit off it in some way, then maybe that could become a problem," he added.

Warren reiterated on Wednesday that she did not exact any career benefit from her Native American self-identification. But not every tribal citizen is assuaged.

David Cornsilk, a member of the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma, pointed out that Warren had identified as a minority in professional settings beyond the Texas state bar.

"The conclusion I draw is that she may not have gotten benefit from it, but I believe she certainly was trying to," he said.

Fawn Douglas, a Democratic activist, professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a member of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe, said she thought Warren cleared up the matter with her DNA test because she made no formal claim to tribal membership. But Douglas now sees the Texas document as a detriment.

"I really don't like that further evidence was just introduced after her apology" to the Cherokee Nation, Douglas said. "It's just one of those smack-my-head kind of moments."

Douglas said Warren can recover by speaking about issues important to Native American communities, such as tribal sovereignty and missing and slain women.

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Bob Mulholland, a Democratic National Committee member from California who's backing Harris, warned that the distraction would likely follow her to the early voting states of Iowa and New Hampshire. But, he said, "every story is an opportunity for you, the candidate, to have a conversation with the voters."

Not to mention, he added, Warren's issues are "nothing like the problems the Democrats are having in Virginia," where the state's top Democrats are engulfed in scandal over racism and sexual misconduct.

Associated Press reporters Michelle Price in Las Vegas; Felicia Fonseca in Flagstaff, Ariz.; Meg Kinnard in Clemson, S.C.; Michael R. Blood in Los Angeles; and Michael Biesecker in Washington contributed to this report.

With anti-abortion push, Trump woos evangelicals again

By **JONATHAN LEMIRE** and **NICHOLAS RICCARDI**, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With a fierce denunciation of late-term abortions, President Donald Trump is making a move to re-energize evangelical voters whose support will be vital in heading off any possible 2020 primary challenge.

Trump, at arguably the weakest point of his presidency, seized on abortion during his State of the Union address Tuesday to re-engage on a divisive cultural issue, using both religious rhetoric aimed at conservative Christians and scathing attacks on Democratic lawmakers who support abortion rights — in particular, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam.

Trump went after Northam — by title, not by name — in his speech and incorrectly claimed that the governor "stated he would execute a baby after birth." As the speech was being drafted, Trump had wanted to use even harsher language about Northam, and call him out by name, but he was reined in by aides, according to three White House officials and Republicans close to the White House who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss private conversations.

The message from Trump, an unlikely champion of the anti-abortion cause, was aimed squarely at evangelicals who play an outsized role in Republican politics. Battered by the fallout from a damaging government shutdown, Trump has seen his poll numbers tumble and support within his own party slip, forcing his campaign to work to ward off any primary foes, including shoring up support among religious conservatives who could be wooed by an intraparty challenger.

Ralph Reed, a prominent GOP evangelical strategist, said the White House worked closely with evangelicals during the fight over Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination, but contact dropped off during the midterm elections and the government shutdown.

"Now we see it picking up again," Reed said, calling Trump's State of the Union comments "important and deeply appreciated."

Religious voters, including Roman Catholics in the industrial Midwest, will be a key constituency in a Trump re-election, Reed said.

"He's got a proven, demonstrable record of performing with (evangelicals)," Reed said. "As with the Bush re-elect in 2004, it could become a building block to a strong re-election."

In the days before the speech, White House aides telegraphed that an anti-abortion passage in the address using faith-based language would become a re-election theme. The issue is expected to be in the spotlight again Thursday as the president attends the National Prayer Breakfast.

"To defend the dignity of every person, I am asking Congress to pass legislation to prohibit the late-term abortion of children who can feel pain in the mother's womb," Trump said Tuesday. "Let us work together to build a culture that cherishes innocent life. And let us reaffirm a fundamental truth: All children — born and unborn — are made in the holy image of God."

The White House did not immediately reveal if it had a firm plan for federal legislation or supported an existing congressional measure, raising questions about whether Trump's call was concrete or simply early election season rhetoric. A bill passed the House last year but died in the Senate, and prospects of similar legislation being passed by a Democratic-controlled House are remote.

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Still, Trump's attention to evangelicals during one of the low points in his presidency makes sense, said Jennifer Lawless, a political science professor at the University of Virginia.

"If anyone is counting on challenging him in that primary, to the extent that Trump can count on evangelicals, that makes the path that much harder," she said.

Lawless noted that Trump has arguably delivered more for evangelicals than for the white populist voters who are often credited with electing him.

"We know that evangelicals are reliable voters, and we know that a lot of the white working-class voters who turned out for him haven't voted in the past," she said.

According to AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of the American electorate, 80 percent of white evangelical voters nationwide voted for Republican candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. Fully 79 percent of white evangelical midterm voters also expressed approval of Trump's job as president.

For decades, the United States has been deadlocked politically on abortion. The VoteCast poll showed that among all midterm voters, 60 percent said they want abortion to be legal in most or all cases, while 38 percent said it should be illegal in most or all cases. About 8 in 10 Democrats thought the procedure should be legal in all or most cases, and about 6 out of 10 Republicans thought it should be illegal in all or most cases.

Trump went on the attack during his national address, blasting New York's Reproductive Health Act, enacted to make sure the state would continue to ensure the right to an abortion if the Supreme Court were to overturn all or part of *Roe v. Wade*.

In Virginia, Northam, a pediatric neurologist, told a radio interviewer last week that he supported state legislation that would allow late-term abortions and noted that the procedures were usually done if the fetus had severe deformities or wasn't viable. Describing a hypothetical situation, he said if a woman were to desire an abortion as she's going into labor, the baby would be "resuscitated if that's what the mother and the family desired, and then a discussion would ensue" between doctors and the mother.

Some Republicans said that showed Northam was supporting infanticide.

Ilyse Hogue, head of the abortion-rights group NARAL, said the renewed focus on late-term abortions is a sign of Trump's desperation.

"Donald Trump's use of the State of the Union address for little more than using real women's lives as political red meat to rile up his base shows how politically weak he is," Hogue said in a statement.

Riccardi reported from Denver. Associated Press writer Emily Swanson in Washington contributed to this report.

Follow Lemire on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/@JonLemire> and Riccardi at <http://twitter.com/@NickRiccardi>

Some workers still unpaid after shutdown, dread what's next

By MICHELLE R. SMITH, Associated Press

Nearly two weeks after the end of the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, many federal workers still have not received their back pay or have only gotten a fraction of what they are owed as government agencies struggle with payroll glitches and other delays.

And even as they scramble to catch up on unpaid bills and to repay unemployment benefits, the prospect of another shutdown looms next week.

"President Trump stood in the Rose Garden at the end of the shutdown and said, 'We will make sure that you guys are paid immediately.' ... And here it is, it's almost two weeks later," said Michael Walter, who works for the U.S. Department of Agriculture food safety inspection service in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and only got his paycheck Wednesday. He said two co-workers told him they still had received nothing.

The government has been short on details about how many people are still waiting to be paid.

Bradley Bishop, a spokesman for the Office of Management and Budget, said the Trump administration had taken "unprecedented steps to ensure federal employees impacted by the shutdown received back

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pay within a week.”

“Much opposite of ‘slow and chaotic,’ an overwhelming majority of employees received their pay by Jan. 31,” he said, though he didn’t respond to questions about how many people still hadn’t been paid.

The USDA said in a statement that pay was its top priority, but also did not respond to questions about how many workers were still awaiting paychecks. Asked to confirm that some people hadn’t been paid, USDA spokeswoman Amanda Heitkamp replied, “I’m not sure.”

Donna Zelina’s husband works for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in South Dakota. He has received only a portion of his back pay, and does not expect to be fully paid until Feb. 12. The couple had to drain their savings shortly before the shutdown when both his parents died, leaving them in a precarious financial position.

Zelina said she called her creditors, but they wouldn’t work with her. Her husband’s car loan went into forbearance, causing them to rack up fees.

“I don’t think people really understand what people do in government and just assume that everybody ... makes millions of dollars,” she said.

A spokesman for the Department of Interior, which handles payroll for more than five dozen government offices, did not answer when asked how many workers were due back pay, but said a “small group of employees” had not received anything. Spokesman Russell Newell said others received “interim payments of back pay” that would be made up in the next pay period.

The Census Bureau acknowledged Wednesday that about 850 employees nationwide have yet to receive back pay or have only gotten a fraction of what they’re owed. A spokesman said they expected most of those workers to be paid by Friday.

Other affected agencies include the Federal Aviation Administration, where two unions representing FAA workers said their members had not yet received all of their back pay.

Doug Church of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association said members who worked during the shutdown had not gotten overtime, which he said was a violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act. They also had not received the extra pay they were due for working nights and holidays, he said.

David Verardo, a union local president, said he was still owed \$2,000 and estimated that the 1,000 workers his union represents at the National Science Foundation in Alexandria, Virginia, are each due between \$1,200 and \$3,000 for the two pay periods they missed.

“It’s good that we got back pay at all, but it seems to have been clumsily done. When people ask questions, the answer they get is, ‘We’re doing the best we can,’” said Verardo of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3403.

Making matters even more confusing, he said payments for things like supplemental health plans and court-ordered alimony and child support were not withheld from paychecks. He said workers were told to pay them on their own, but many didn’t know how to do that and were concerned about possible legal implications.

In addition to the pay delays, workers are struggling with issues like navigating the bureaucracy of paying back unemployment benefits and the looming question of whether there would be another shutdown after Feb. 15.

Trish Binkley, a tax examiner at the Internal Revenue Service in Kansas City, Missouri, is setting aside money, including her tax refund and an emergency loan she got from her credit union, in case of another shutdown.

She received two unemployment checks of \$288 each during the shutdown before getting a letter informing her she was ineligible for the benefits — even though she had been told she qualified. Binkley has paid the money back, but worries about another shutdown.

She and others have grown increasingly frustrated at seeing social media posts that downplayed the impact of the shutdown.

“This was not a vacation. Vacations are supposed to be fun and relaxing. You have money to go do fun things or whatever. This was one of the most stressful periods of my life,” Binkley said.

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The shutdown motivated Cheryl Inzunza Blum to re-evaluate her career as a government contract lawyer representing immigrants in federal court in Tucson, Arizona. She has not been paid since before the shutdown began.

Blum realized she must diversify her solo law practice and plans to do more personal injury work. For the long term, she is making a bigger change. She enrolled in an online course in international relations at Harvard Extension School to educate herself on what drives migration, and hopes to work on solutions to the issues surrounding immigration.

"I did it because I don't want to go through this again," she said. "I want to carve out another career, I really do."

Among the groups hardest hit by the shutdown are contract workers who were kept home and who are not entitled to back pay.

The shutdown affected some 2,000 people with disabilities who got their government contract jobs with help from the nonprofit SourceAmerica, according to John Kelly, its vice president of government affairs and public policy.

Nearly 60 percent still had not been called back to their jobs as of Wednesday.

It's been a difficult time for those workers, who often have a hard time finding a job in the first place, Kelly said. Their jobs include custodial and mailroom work at agencies like NASA, the Coast Guard and the Department of the Interior, he said.

The shutdown has also damaged some workers' credit scores.

Pearl Fraley, of Greenville, North Carolina, who works for the food safety inspection service, had to work unpaid through the shutdown and used credit cards to get by. Fraley asked her landlord to waive the late fees on her rent, but has not heard back. She said her car's heater broke during the shutdown, and she hasn't had the money to get it fixed.

She's dreading another possible shutdown.

"I don't know if we can do this a second time," she said.

Associated Press writer Juliet Linderman in Washington contributed to this report.

Politics prevail in rush to supply Venezuela much-needed aid

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and CHRISTINE ARMARIO, Associated Press

CUCUTA, Colombia (AP) — For Anahis Alvarado, whose battle with kidney failure has become more desperate as Venezuela sinks deeper into crisis, the prospect of bringing in emergency medical and food supplies can't come soon enough.

She's watched five fellow patients in her dialysis group die over the past few years due to inadequate care. Only a quarter of the dialysis machines where she receives treatment at a government-run clinic in Caracas still work.

And last week she had to spend almost a third of her family's monthly income buying basic supplies like surgical gloves and syringes that President Nicolas Maduro's bankrupt government is no longer able to provide.

"We're losing time," the 32-year-old Alvarado said.

She hopes relief will soon be on its way.

Some 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) away, in the Colombian border city of Cucuta, opponents of Maduro are hastily putting together plans with U.S. officials to open a "humanitarian corridor" to deliver badly needed food and medicine.

The aid convoy is seen as a key test for Juan Guaido after the opposition leader declared himself interim president in a high-risk challenge to Maduro's authority — a move that has the backing of almost 40 countries around the world.

But getting the food into Venezuela is no easy task.

On Wednesday, a large tanker, mangled fencing and a shipping container were scattered across a bridge

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connecting the two countries, a makeshift barricade reflecting Maduro's longstanding rejection of outside assistance.

"We aren't beggars," the embattled socialist said Monday in a speech to troops.

The standoff has troubled international relief organizations, many who say the issue of humanitarian aid is being used as a political weapon by both sides.

Maduro's government has steadfastly denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis that has forced some 3 million Venezuelans to flee in recent years, even while handing out heavily subsidized food staples to rally support among the poor, especially ahead of elections.

Meanwhile, the opposition is vowing to proceed with its aid plan at all costs in an effort to break the military's strong support for Maduro.

"You have a clear choice," Miguel Pizarro, a lawmaker coordinating the relief effort, said in pointed remarks Tuesday to members of the armed forces. "Either you are part of the problem, or you put yourself on the side of the people who are in need."

The International Committee of the Red Cross is among groups that have warned about the fast-escalating rhetoric. On Tuesday, it repeated an offer to distribute humanitarian assistance but only if authorities agree to guarantee the aid safely reaches those in need and isn't politicized.

"Right now, both sides are comparing muscles to see who is stronger," said Daniel Almeida, an advocacy adviser for the Switzerland-based humanitarian agency CARE. "But for the person who really needs the assistance, they don't care where it comes from."

The Trump administration has pledged \$20 million in humanitarian assistance to Guaidó's government in addition to the more than \$140 million it has already made available to South American countries absorbing the exodus of Venezuelan migrants. Canada has pledged another \$53 million to Guaidó.

National Security Adviser John Bolton last week tweeted a picture of hundreds of boxes of ready-to-use meals for "malnourished children," each printed with an American flag, that he said were ready to be delivered.

The show of bravado alarmed some international relief organizations, which worry the real intention is to lay bare Maduro's obstinacy and build the case for military intervention on humanitarian grounds — a worst-case scenario that would pile on even more hardships.

Bolton said he was responding to a request from Guaidó, who announced at a rally last weekend that he was setting up three collection points — in Cucuta, as well as others in Brazil and the Caribbean — to receive the aid.

The 30 to 40 tons of aid includes baby formula and high-protein biscuits, according to a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the plans.

Cucuta has become the top destination for Venezuelans who travel long distances to the city in a desperate search for food and medicine.

Alvarado said if it wasn't for a friend who made the trek for her last week she wouldn't have the antibiotic she needs for an infection. She paid for the medicine with money from an aunt in Argentina because her once middle-class family struggles to survive on her mother's meager retirement pension of \$8 a month.

During dialysis sessions dangerously shortened by an hour to cope with the lack of machines and supplies, Alvarado keeps herself busy by writing poetry. Her latest poem, written the day Venezuelans poured into the street in support of Guaidó, is an ode to a Venezuela she dreams of one day being replenished with "pharmacies full of medicine."

"I want to get better so that I can begin to help others," she said. "All of us are victims and all of us need to work hard so Venezuela can resurge."

In Cucuta, volunteers have been on standby for days to help with the aid's arrival but have been given no indication of how it will get into Venezuela.

"It's creating huge expectations," said Francisco Valencia, a director of CODEVIDA, a coalition of Venezuelan health advocacy groups. "If the transition doesn't take place soon, we're not going to receive the real humanitarian aid we need."

Caritas, a charity run by the Roman Catholic Church, estimates that child malnutrition more than doubled

last year, while 48 percent of pregnant women in low-income neighborhoods are underfed.

Among those waiting in limbo is Aminta Villamizar, a retired cleaning woman, who lost her right leg and two toes on her left leg because she can't find enough insulin to treat her diabetes.

Lying in bed in her Caracas apartment building, she waits as her grandson, Antonio, measures her blood sugar levels. Although it's above normal, she resists the offer of a shot, preferring to safeguard her scarce supplies and instead pray to an icon of Dr. Jose Gregorio Hernandez, a 19th-century Venezuelan doctor who treated the poor and is revered throughout the country as a saint.

"I was a person who worked my entire life, but this sickness destroyed me," she said.

Associated Press writer Joshua Goodman reported this story from Caracas, Venezuela, and AP writer Christine Armario reported in Cucuta, Colombia.

Joshua Goodman on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/apjoshgoodman>

After tornado, Cuban state loses monopoly on disaster aid

By ANDREA RODRIGUEZ, Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Nearly two weeks after a devastating tornado struck Havana, the worst-hit neighborhoods are filled with government crews restoring power and phone service and starting repairs to decimated homes.

There's also a far rarer sight: Hundreds of young people in designer T-shirts and jeans hauling black plastic bags full of clothes, food and water donated by private businesses, artists and other members of Cuba's small but growing upper-middle class.

For the first time in communist Cuba, prosperous individuals and successful entrepreneurs have taken on an important role in disaster recovery, long a point of pride for a government that boasts of its organizational ability and focus on caring for the neediest.

"Why is it only the state and big institutions that can show up? Why not everyone?" asked Camila Gonzalez, a 19-year-old sociology student taking clothes, shoes and personal care items to the Cuban Art Factory, a privately run cultural complex and performance space.

On Monday, the Art Factory hired a dozen classic American-made convertibles, normally used to ferry around tourists, to take donations to the devastated Luyano neighborhood.

Much of the private effort has been organized on Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media, thanks to the roughly 2 million Cubans who have signed up for mobile internet since the service became available last year. Cuba is one of the least-connected countries in the world, but that has been changing quickly since the government began providing home and cellphone connections.

"The organizational capacity and impact we've seen in recent days would have been unthinkable a decade ago," journalist Sergio Alejandro Gomez noted in a blog post titled: "The government loses the monopoly on social assistance in Cuba."

Former President Raul Castro's opening of the centrally planned economy to a limited amount of private enterprise, and more internet, "has changed the socio-economic landscape of the country for the better," Gomez wrote.

Disaster recovery was long seen as one of the greatest strengths of Cuba's communist bureaucracy, whose rigid centralization seems to work best in situations of national emergency.

The state boasts an impressive record of avoiding deaths and providing basic services during natural disasters, although its ability to provide adequate housing long-term is mixed at best.

Private aid started almost immediately after the extremely rare Category F4 tornado struck on the night of Jan. 27 with winds of 186 miles per hour (300 kph), damaging 4,800 homes and completely destroying 500 others.

In some neighborhoods, individuals began arriving the next day with boxes of donated rice, water and clothing. In others, restaurants and bakeries set up stands where they distributed free food.

"We've gotten aid from everyone, the government, artists, foreigners," said Ivis Rivero, whose home

partially collapsed in the city's Luyano neighborhood.

The Cuban government and official organizations like university student groups also sent in thousands of people to help, but unlike the donations brought in by private groups the state response involved selling food and construction supplies to the disaster-struck.

"This is something that has affected us all," said Luis Ernesto Morales, who brought food and water from the restaurant he manages in the beach resort city of Varadero, an hour's drive away.

Still, the good intentions of the private donors has created some chaotic scenes in the worst-hit neighborhoods, where the government has at times struggled to impose order and make sure the aid is flowing to the neediest.

President Miguel Diaz-Canel made an unusual appearance on national television Wednesday along with virtually his entire cabinet to explain the government's attempt to make the recovery effort as fast and efficient as possible.

Many people say privately that they are skeptical of the government's ability to deliver or coordinate aid without bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption.

Well-known musicians have held benefit concerts and personally distributed aid in the disaster zone — though they have sometimes run into problems with the authorities.

Renowned conductor Zenaida Romeu complained in a widely shared post online that she and 18 members of her all-female chamber orchestra were escorted out of the Regla neighborhood by police after trying to distribute donations.

"Sure, the artists want to help, but artists are pulling up and starting to distribute clothes and food, and that creates chaos," said Ismael Rodriguez, a self-employed worker in Regla whose home was damaged by the tornado.

"They shouldn't just be giving out aid haphazard."

Senate panel approves Trump's attorney general nominee

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ERIC TUCKER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate Judiciary Committee approved William Barr's nomination for attorney general along party lines Thursday, with Republicans praising his credentials and Democrats questioning how transparent he'll be once special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation concludes.

The vote now heads to the full Senate, where Barr is expected to be confirmed in a vote as soon as next week.

Barr, who previously served as attorney general from 1991 to 1993, would succeed Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was pushed out by Trump last year over the president's anger that he had recused from the Russia investigation. Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker is currently filling the position.

"I appreciate what Mr. Whitaker has done, but I think it's time for new leadership at the department," Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and committee chairman, said at the outset of Thursday's meeting.

Democrats and many Republicans have said they believe Mueller's final report should be fully released. Barr has said he will be as transparent as possible under Justice Department regulations, but many Democrats are skeptical.

Barr said he takes seriously the department regulations that say Mueller's report should be confidential. Those regulations require only that the report explains the decisions to pursue or to decline prosecutions, which could be as simple as a bullet point list or as voluminous as a report running hundreds of pages.

"I don't know what — at the end of the day, what will be releasable. I don't know what Bob Mueller is writing," Barr said at his hearing last month.

Democrats have also criticized a memo Barr wrote to the Justice Department before his nomination in which he criticized Mueller's investigation for the way it was presumably looking into whether Trump had obstructed justice. In the memo, Barr wrote that Trump could not have obstructed justice by firing former FBI Director James Comey since it was act the president was constitutionally entitled to take.

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"This is not the time to install an attorney general who has repeatedly espoused a view of unfettered executive power," Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, said Thursday.

The top Democrat on the Judiciary panel, California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, said last week that she is worried that Barr won't be a check on the president who appointed him.

"This memo is of serious concern to me and appears to be seminal in his appointment to this position," Feinstein said.

Trump had repeatedly criticized Sessions for recusing himself from Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election that includes examining the ties between Russia and the Trump campaign. Trump calls the probe a "witch hunt."

Barr said in his hearing last month that he is a friend of Mueller's and that "it is vitally important" that the special counsel be allowed to complete his investigation.

"I don't believe Mr. Mueller would be involved in a witch hunt," Barr said.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 7, the 38th day of 2019. There are 327 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 7, 1962, President John F. Kennedy imposed a full trade embargo on Cuba.

On this date:

In 1795, the 11th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, dealing with states' sovereign immunity, was ratified.

In 1812, author Charles Dickens was born in Landport, Portsmouth, England.

In 1817, America's first public gas street lamp was lighted in Baltimore at the corner of Market and Lemon streets (now East Baltimore and Holliday streets).

In 1904, a fire began in Baltimore that raged for about 30 hours and destroyed more than 1,500 buildings.

In 1943, the government abruptly announced that wartime rationing of shoes made of leather would go into effect in two days, limiting consumers to buying three pairs per person per year. (Rationing was lifted in October 1945.)

In 1948, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower resigned as U.S. Army chief of staff; he was succeeded by Gen. Omar Bradley.

In 1964, The Beatles arrived at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport to begin their first American tour.

In 1971, women in Switzerland gained the right to vote through a national referendum, 12 years after a previous attempt failed.

In 1984, space shuttle Challenger astronauts Bruce McCandless II and Robert L. Stewart went on the first untethered spacewalk, which lasted nearly six hours.

In 1986, the Philippines held a presidential election marred by charges of fraud against the incumbent, Ferdinand E. Marcos. Haitian President-for-Life Jean-Claude Duvalier (doo-VAHL-yay') fled his country, ending 28 years of his family's rule.

In 1998, the Winter Olympic Games were opened in Nagano, Japan, by Emperor Akihito.

In 1999, Jordan's King Hussein died of cancer at age 63; he was succeeded by his eldest son, Abdullah.

Ten years ago: A miles-wide section of ice in Lake Erie broke away from the Ohio shoreline, trapping about 135 fishermen, some for as long as four hours before they could be rescued (one man fell into the water and later died of an apparent heart attack). Walls of flame roared across southeastern Australia, leveling scores of homes, forests and farmland in the country's worst wildfire disaster in a quarter century. Bolivia's new constitution took effect. Death claimed jazz singer Blossom Dearie at age 84, country singer Molly Bee at age 69, and Jack Cover, inventor of the Taser stun gun, at age 88.

Five years ago: The Sochi Olympics opened with a celebration of Russia's past greatness and hopes for

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future glory. President Barack Obama, during a visit to Michigan State University, signed an agriculture spending bill spreading benefits to farmers in every region of the country while trimming the food stamp program that had inspired a two-year battle over the legislation.

One year ago: St. John's beat top-ranked Villanova, 79-75, for its second win that week over a top-five team. (St. John's had earlier snapped an 11-game losing streak by beating fourth-ranked Duke.) Biotech billionaire Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong struck a \$500 million deal to buy the Los Angeles Times, the San Diego Union-Tribune and some other publications; the deal would take effect in June.

Today's Birthdays: Author Gay Talese is 87. Former Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., is 84. Reggae musician Brian Travers (UB40) is 60. Comedy writer Robert Smigel (SMY'-guh) is 59. Actor James Spader is 59. Country singer Garth Brooks is 57. Rock musician David Bryan (Bon Jovi) is 57. Actor-comedian Eddie Izzard is 57. Actor-comedian Chris Rock is 54. Actor Jason Gedrick is 52. Actress Essence Atkins is 47. Rock singer-musician Wes Borland is 44. Rock musician Tom Blankenship (My Morning Jacket) is 41. Actor Ashton Kutcher is 41. Actress Tina Majorino is 34. Actress Deborah Ann Woll is 34. NBA player Isaiah Thomas is 30.

Thought for Today: "No one is useless in this world... who lightens the burden of it for any one else." — From "Our Mutual Friend" by Charles Dickens (born this date in 1812, died in 1870).