

Groton Daily Independent

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No School This Week

State COVID-19 Update

On March 4, 2020, CDC updated the clinical criteria for testing a symptomatic individual after evaluation by their healthcare provider. As a result, the South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) expects the number of persons under investigation (PUI) being tested for COVID-19 to increase.

The number of PUI being tested does not reflect the level of risk to the public in the state. For more information about the outbreak, potential risks, and protective recommendations, visit the SD-DOH website or CDC website.

This table shows the total number of positive COVID-19 cases in South Dakota residents, the total number of persons that tested negative, and the total number of PUIs that are pending results.

As of March 15, 2020

Positive*	9
Negative	327
Pending	6

South Dakota Counties with COVID-19 Cases

Beadle	1
Bon Homme	1
Charles Mix	1
Davison	1
McCook	1
Minnehaha	3
Pennington	1

Note: All cases had travel history outside South Dakota prior to illness onset. There is no community transmission at this time.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Glimpses by Brock Greenfield

The final week of session was more productive than any of us could have imagined as we entered the Capitol last Monday morning. However, through discussions and negotiations between Senate appropriators and the Governor's office, and subsequently the remainder of the Senate and House members, it was determined that there were dollars available to achieve our statutory inflationary increase for education, as well as for nursing homes, community-based service providers, and state employees. As virtually everybody knows, the initial budget proposal reflected no inflationary increases for any of those priority areas. Thankfully, with higher-than-projected revenues coming in and with a remarkably better trend with respect to Medicaid utilization, we were able to make the necessary changes to achieve 2% increases. This was no small feat, as that required approximately \$32 million in general fund reallocations. Also, we were able to provide increases in the current fiscal year for several budgetary line items. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for members from the Governor's team and the legislators who were able to navigate to a much better scenario than we thought possible.

Some of the additional items that were funded are as follows: I pushed hard for additional funds for dyslexia professional development. The Department of Education had launched a program to equip teachers to teach students with dyslexia last year, but they had very limited resources. This year, we allocated \$250,000 to vastly enhance their efforts. It is estimated that up to 27,000 South Dakota children suffer from some form of dyslexia. By providing the additional monies for this program, teachers in grades K-2 or possibly K-3 will be trained to educate those students to provide them a solid foundation from which they can launch into successful academic careers. On another note, \$250,000 was also allocated for deaf education services.

We appropriated \$1,125,000 to provide scholarships to those college education majors who choose to focus their studies on teaching in areas identified as critical needs areas. This has been an ongoing effort for several years, dating back to 2008 when I brought the first bill dealing with the matter. It wasn't until four years later we were able to put the program in place as a tuition reimbursement program. Going forward, we are hoping to increase the pipeline of education majors who enter those fields by incentivizing them on the front end, rather than engaging in the repayment model.

\$ 4,011,837 was earmarked to the highway fund specifically for the purpose of improving county and township roads and bridges. In an article several weeks ago, I highlighted this issue, as I had brought SB 90 seeking more money in order for townships to address issues exacerbated by the flooding last year and the anticipated flooding this year. Although the bill was killed, the issue did not die. Depending on how the money is utilized by the Department of Transportation, there would be an opportunity to leverage some federal dollars to enhance the state allotment. However, that would put constraints on how the money can be used. Regardless, this should be very welcome news to a whole lot of people in rural South Dakota who travel county and township roads.

One of the unfortunate results of this year's session is that we did not come to a resolution on an issue that has existed for several years but has really reached a fever-pitch the past two sessions. This is a dispute between the rural electric associations and the municipal electricians. Many of you are aware of the situation, as I am often asked how we are progressing on the topic. Last year, we thought we were going to come to an agreement, but we ran out of time and made it a summer study topic. Again, they worked tirelessly, but they were not able to come up with something both sides were willing to shake hands on. In the waning days of session, we got as close as we have been. I believe if we'd had one or two more days, we would have threaded the needle with language that would've resulted in a mutual agreement. This gives us hope that next year we will have a good starting position, and I am confident will be able to put the issue to bed with both sides feeling it is a fair and equitable solution.

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We fell short on a couple issues that would have effectively protected children from those who would prey upon them or profit from them. It was mind-blowing to hear people arguing that we need to further restrict young drivers learners' permits (drivers' licenses) because their frontal lobes are not fully developed, but we did not pass bills that outlawed gender reassignment surgeries or prescriptions of puberty blockers for kids under 16. Our legislature was excoriated by Tucker Carlson for refusing to pass that bill. Further, we did not pass a bill that would have exposed pornographers to civil liability for coercing and exploiting individuals by advertising modeling opportunities and then feeding them alcohol or drugs and getting them to sign contracts followed by forcing them into "bad" situations. This goes to the very heart of what the likes of Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, and Girls Gone Wild producers have done. In documented cases, these individuals have exploited many young women, some of whom were as young as 13 years old. In another scenario, a sixteen-year-old girl went missing. After a year, it was discovered the young lady was being trafficked. Still a minor, she appeared in over 60 explicit movies that had been circulated on the internet. Regardless of the biological sex of the person, if anybody preys upon them in this way, I would like to spell out that the victims have civil recourse against the human trash that have wronged them in so many ways. But, hey, we protected the young drivers with still-developing frontal lobes! At least that's what the proponents suggested. Keep in mind that many of the supporters of that bill were ardent opponents of the other two bills.

As I consider the body of work of this legislature, I can point to MANY successes—especially on the fiscal front—and far fewer failures. I am proud of what we have accomplished. More work remains to be done, but that will have to wait for another day. For now, we await word on gubernatorial vetoes. To-date two have been issued.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that the legislators were briefed by the Governor and other key individuals on what we are doing to prepare for the coronavirus pandemic. Our leaders have been as proactive as they can be in assessing the risk and planning for whatever may befall us. That has certainly gripped our state, nation, and world. I am definitely concerned for our individual and collective well-being, but I am not sounding the doomsday alarm yet. People need to be vigilant about protecting themselves and making good decisions about the scenarios they place themselves in. As for me, I am doing just that and practicing good hygiene...but I am NOT responsible for the raid on toilet paper that has occurred! If this persists for another few months, I may be calling on you to borrow a roll or two! :)

Once again, it has been a joy working for you. Thank you for the trust you have placed in me, and thank you for the support, feedback, and prayers you have offered throughout the session. I will see you along the trail.

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Lana's Annals by Lana Greenfield

Greetings once again. We spent the week making decisions regarding final bills and budgetary measures. It was a long week as 105 lawmakers (minus the ones who were absent) had different views as to how effectively complete our tasks. Compromise is a key component in these last days. Many of us were pleased to be able to give a 2 per cent raise to our schools, state workers, and community service providers. In addition, the special education budget was allocated over 7 million in extra dollars over previous years. Dual credit programs did not change so students can do both high school and college credit at the same time at a very minimal cost to them. Our community service providers were awarded a one time amount of 1.4 million dollars to help boost their salaries. Currently, there is a worker turnover rate of 60 per cent per year, and it is hoped that this money will help to lessen the problem. We did not know if some of these dollars would be possible, but some extra money was taken out of maintenance and repair budgets (as one example) to help us do so. We are grateful for that!

We also were able to receive 4 million dollars to be put toward bridges in our state and with that money, we will use it to leverage federal funds that will turn the amount into an extra minimum of 25 million dollars. Not every county will be privy to this money, but it will address some of our widely travelled bridges that see a lot of daily travel. Establishing some scholarship money for critical teaching needs gained momentum. This is a very worthwhile program as our state will use the money to retain incoming teachers who qualify for these scholarships; in return, they must be willing to remain in our state for a three year minimum. We also were able to fund the broadband and state radio systems, which are critical for business and for law enforcement communication. In addition, we will have a statewide centralized resource information system known as 211 which will enable people to call for help with crises they may be encountering.

The hemp bill awaits the Governor's approval as do all the bills. We budgeted 350,000 dollars toward ongoing expense it will incur. I hope that this will add yet another option to boost to our ag economy.

The Dakota Promise Scholarship bill did not come to fruition. This would have been a needs based scholarship to attend an institution of higher learning. After careful study, it was the consensus that many college scholarships already exist at each institution. Also if students go online, more are available for which to apply. Another avenue for scholarships is campus work study. Many students are able to successfully coordinate this program with their regular class schedule. It is important to check with colleges early (like now) to see what is available. Also available is part-time work off campus; most college towns welcome the extra help as we have a shortage of workers in a variety of businesses.

USD received 5 million dollars toward building a science structure said to house dental hygiene students, physician assistants, etc. I have to admit that I did not cast a favorable vote on this. A couple of years ago, Northern built a brand new science building with private donations. I thought if Northern could do it, so could USD. I expressed my opinion to a lobbyist who tried to recruit my vote. At that point, I found out he donates to USD sports programs. When I encouraged him to allocate money for the science building, he said he had limited funds to donate. We all have priorities, and this was his point.

SB157, the county zoning bill, was passed after being amended. Many east river counties have zoning laws in place, but it is not a stream-lined process. We collectively looked at the proposed legislation, and it appeared to be reasonable; however, an amendment was added to require passage by the majority of the present and voting members. Hopefully, this bill, created by the Economic Development Office, will give more clarity to people who present projects and to county zoning boards who have to decide if all criteria is being properly met and in a timely manner. The public also still has an active part in any reasonable appeal according to section 8 of the bill. We spent a lot of time discussing the bill, and I applaud the Governor and the staff who received calls from both sides and spent much time trying to mediate this matter.

We will be having Veto Day on March 30; we will wait as bills are carefully reviewed before we know which ones and how many we will be asked to re-consider. Until next time, stay safe and well. We are getting very close to spring, and it is a good feeling! Thank you for the positive support as we try to do the State's business in a productive manner.

Rep. Lana Greenfield

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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

One of the biggest issues facing the Minnesota Vikings this offseason is their lack of cap space, which is why we're breaking this into two articles. After covering the offense last week, we turn our attention to the defensive side of the ball.

Since last week's article came out, the Vikings have made some moves to give themselves a little breathing room. On March 13, the Vikings announced they were releasing three players, including two defensive veterans and Pro Bowlers – Xavier Rhodes and Linval Joseph. Rhodes' release was expected, as the cornerback hasn't lived up to his contract over the last couple of years. However, the release of Joseph is a bit of a surprise, even considering the defensive tackle was one of the highest paid defensive tackles in the league. With those two players no longer on the roster, along with tight end David Morgan's release, the Vikings gained more than \$19 million.

Here are a couple more defensive players the Vikings could consider releasing to free up more cap space.

With Rhodes and Joseph gone, Danielle Hunter and Harrison Smith are the two defensive players who would free up the most cap space if they were to be cut. But let's be real, there's no way the Vikings would cut either player, considering they may be the best players in the league at their respective positions.

Shamar Stephen started 15 games at defensive tackle last season, but the 29-year-old didn't seem to make the most of his opportunities. He had a Pro Football Focus grade of only 61.2, and with a cap hit of over \$5 million for the 2020 season, his time in purple and gold may be nearing the end. Should the Vikings choose to release him, it would leave Hercules Mata'afa, Jalyn Holmes, and Jaleel Johnson as the only defensive tackles on the roster.

Speaking of Jaleel Johnson, he is another player who could be on the chopping block. This move is less likely than the release of Stephen, but the move would save the Vikings nearly a million dollars. The reason this move is unlikely is because Johnson is only 25 years old and has made significant strides since joining the Vikings as a rookie in 2017. In fact, against the Cowboys last season, Johnson got the start in place of an injured Linval Joseph and played well enough that he was singled-out and praised by head coach Mike Zimmer after the game.

The Vikings have made it clear they would like to re-sign the players they have cut, but that will be unlikely considering they have less than \$20 million in cap space and tons of holes to fill on the roster. For now, the Vikings' defensive line appears to have gone from one of the best in the league to one that boasts Danielle Hunter and a bunch of players who are inexperienced but have potential. I really hope Zimmer and General Manager Rick Spielman have a plan.

Free agency officially starts on March 18, but there is a legal tampering period that starts on March 16 so we will hear plenty of deals being agreed to but not technically official until Wednesday. Who knows, we might even see another Anthony Barr situation, where a player agrees to a deal but ends up changing his mind!

If you have any questions or comments, reach out to me on Twitter (@JordanWrightNFL). Skol!

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Debaters at National Speech and Debate Congressional Debate National Qualifying tournament

The GHS Debate Team wrapped up the 2019-20 season at the National Speech and Debate Congressional Debate National Qualifying tournament in Aberdeen on March 12, 2020. Representing Groton was senior KaSandra Pappas and juniors Sam Pappas, Hailey Monson, and Sage Mortenson. At this contest S Pappas was placed as first alternate to the 2020 National Debate Contest.



Sam Pappas was placed as first alternate to the 2020 National Debate Contest.
(Courtesy Photo)



KaSandra Pappas, Sam Pappas, Hailey Monson and Sage Mortenson.
(Courtesy Photo)

Attention Students:

Students ages 15 and up
Under 15 need parental oversight

Don't let CORONA-19 stop you from your workouts!



**Keep Healthy!
Keep Fit!**



13 Main St., Downtown Groton

GDI Living Fitness

Open 24/7

Call/Text Paul
605/397-7460
or Tina at
605/397-7285

Membership Fee is only \$10 from now until the school gym is reopened!

NorthWestern Energy announces health and safety response, suspends service disconnections

Butte, Mont. – March 14, 2020 – NorthWestern Energy activated a company-wide plan to address the implications of the COVID 19 outbreak while providing reliable energy service for our customers in Nebraska, South Dakota and Montana.

Our business continuity and pandemic plans are designed to protect people and ensure energy operations and infrastructure are supported properly.

“NorthWestern Energy is prepared and we will continue to provide you with reliable, safe energy service as we all work together through this,” said NorthWestern Energy President and CEO Bob Rowe. “We are working to support all the communities we serve in the collective efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. As stewards of critical infrastructure, providers of energy service and members of the communities we provide that service to, our priority is the health and safety of our employees and customers.”

NorthWestern Energy has implemented a number of protocols to help slow the spread of the virus.

- NorthWestern Energy Customer Service Centers are temporarily closed and personnel who serve walk-in customers are assigned other duties. All NorthWestern Energy facilities will be closed to the public.

- NorthWestern Energy voluntarily suspended service disconnections for non-payment, effective immediately, to help customers who may be financially impacted as the result of this outbreak. This suspension will apply primarily to residential customers and will remain in effect until further notice.

- As members of our communities self-isolate and work from home, we are ready around the clock to answer questions about your energy service and are here to help if you are having difficulty paying your bill. Montana customers can call 888-467-2669 and South Dakota and Nebraska customers can call 800-245-6977 to speak with a Customer Service Representative.

- NorthWestern Energy is encouraging customers to activate their My Energy Account at northwesternenergy.com to pay bills and manage accounts online. Customers can also make one-time payments at northwesternenergy.com with their 8-digit account number. Click on “Pay My Bill”

- Payment drop boxes are available outside NorthWestern Energy Customer Service Centers. However the centers are closed to walk-in traffic.

- NorthWestern Energy employees who have traveled to areas impacted by coronavirus cases are notifying their supervisors. Employees are notifying supervisors of all personal travel plans. Travel restrictions have been implemented.

- Access to all NorthWestern Energy critical facilities will be restricted to essential employees only.

- NorthWestern Energy is using technology for meetings and cancelling assemblies.

- NorthWestern Energy is splitting works groups, instituting work from home practices and assigning separate shifts to prevent spreading any virus or other communicable disease through the entire group in the event of an exposure.

NorthWestern Energy is in direct and continuous contact with local health officials, and state emergency task forces in Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska.

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Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller

This is going to be an update as to the numbers, and that's about it. I've spent the better part of the day answering various extremely complex and difficult questions, and you'll see most of that, if you're interested, in the comment stream from last night's update. Tonight, we'll do as Joe Friday asked, "Just the facts, Ma'am."

I want to note that today's update comes less than 24 hours after the last one, so it represents less than a full day's increase. So bad as these numbers are, they are not fully reflective of how things are progressing day by day.

We presently have 3453 reported cases in 49 states, DC, and 3 territories, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands. WV is still a holdout. This is a staggering increase of 758 cases over yesterday, but we should note that, as a percentage, it's pretty much in line with what we've been seeing. In the last 10 days, it is as small an increase as we've seen. For reference, the case count on March 1, just a couple of weeks ago, was 70.

Numbers in the top states are as follows: NY - 722, WA - 665, CA - 422, MA - 138, CO - 132, FL - 110, and LA - 103. LA and FL are new entrants in the >100 club. We have five states between 50-100 cases, 23 plus DC between 10-50, and 14 plus Puerto Rico, Guam, and Virgin Islands in single digits.

There have been 62 deaths in 12 states, the lion's share (42) of those in WA.

Social distancing is operational in many places across the nation. I am hearing from many folks who have chosen to stay close to home, even in localities where authorities are not placing official requirements or advisories. This is all to the good.

On the other hand, I'm hearing about (and seeing pictures of) plenty of revelers crowding into bars and clubs for St. Patrick's Day celebrating last night. Sigh.

Still, we do what we can, knowing every single thing we do has the potential to make big impacts around us. Keep on keeping on. And stay well.

I'll update when there's news.

"In the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, doctors made life-or-death decisions last month when 1,000 people needed ventilators to support their breathing, but only 600 were available."

"And in northern Italy, doctors took the painful step last week of issuing guidelines for rationing ventilators and other essential medical equipment, prioritizing treatment for the young and others with the best chance of survival."

That couldn't happen here, could it? Here where we have the best health care system in the world? Here, with our vast resources?

The last time we really gave much thought to preparing for a pandemic was in 2005 in the wake of the SARs outbreak. We haven't done much since, including even to finalize or approve the plans for preparedness we started writing back when it was all fresh in our minds. And so here we are today.

"A 2005 federal government report estimated that in the event of a pandemic like the 1918 flu, we would need mechanical ventilators for 740,000 patients. Currently 160,000 ventilators are available for patient care, with at least another 8,900 in the national stockpile, according to a February estimate by the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins."

Bit of a shortfall, don't you think? Especially when you consider a patient might need to be on one for 15 days to three weeks.

So turns out you need a plan for that too. Many states have one--or are writing one right now.

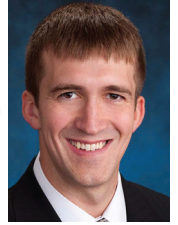
"The plan's basic outlines are simple and 'fairly draconian,'" Rosoff explained. "If you are in respiratory failure and there is a ventilator available and an ICU bed, and you meet certain medical criteria, you go on the ventilator. You have a certain amount of time to get better. If you don't, we'll take you off and give it to someone else."

"If you take it off someone who is not doing very well," he added, "the reality is they die."

This is why we want to flatten that curve. So we don't have to do this. Because, as hard as closing down schools and bars and big events is, this--this--would be harder.

Work Together to Contain Covid-19

With the coronavirus causing school to be cancelled, my son brought his schoolwork home. He shared with us a Greek mythology worksheet about Pandora's Box. If you aren't familiar, the Greek god Zeus gave a wedding present to beautiful Pandora but instructed her not to open it. Like many of us, impatience and curiosity got the best of her and she opened it anyway which caused a lot of new problems.



By Andrew Ellsworth, MD ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

Similarly, with Covid-19, this new virus is already out of the box. This is a global pandemic and we are being asked to be patient and conform to social distancing to help slow down the spread. This is our current challenge. Every day we hear about sporting events, concerts, schools, and travel plans being cancelled. This is the best-known method to slow the spread of Covid-19. The less we are mixing and mingling, the less the virus is spreading.

When we slow the spread, we give our healthcare systems the best chance at having the resources on hand to keep up with the number of people who need help at any given time. In areas of the world where cases of Covid-19 were allowed to spike, the healthcare systems are overwhelmed. Some hospitals don't have enough beds, enough ventilators, enough medicine to treat everyone that needs help. They don't have enough masks and gowns to protect their staff. In these situations, doctors are having to decide who gets treatment, and who doesn't.

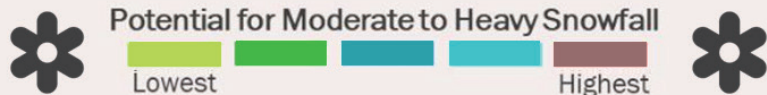
Thankfully, of those who become infected, possibly 80 percent will have only mild symptoms. Some may not have symptoms at all. However, we need to understand that some will become very sick and some will die. Unlike influenza, Covid-19 is a new virus. Therefore, none of us have immunity from the past or from immunizations. There is no herd immunity.

That is why events are cancelled. That is why social distancing is urged. Since most people will only have mild symptoms and some people may not have symptoms at all, the virus can be spread easily without us realizing it. We all need to be patient and follow the instructions from health officials. By doing so, we can hopefully prevent a large spike of a lot of sick people at once and avoid a worst-case scenario.

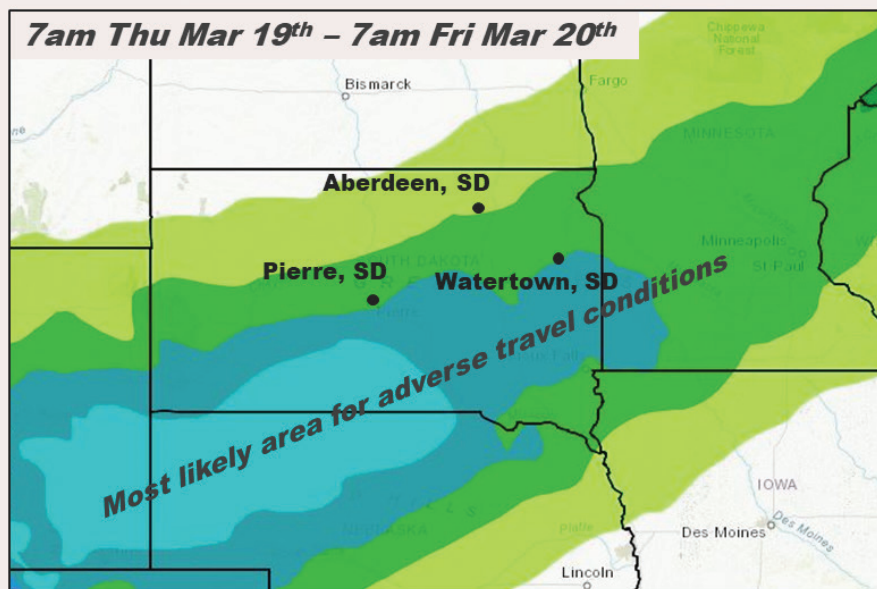
My son's main impression from his school lesson was that despite the sickness and problems that were released, Pandora closed the lid and held hope inside the box. I have hope that together we will contain this virus and, in the end, this, too, shall pass.

Andrew Ellsworth, MD is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

Late Week Winter Storm Potential



Updated: 3/15/2020 3:59 PM Central



What We Know

- Increasing confidence for plowable snow and strong winds in the Northern Plains Thursday into Friday.
- **Potential for adverse travel conditions.**
- Moisture from this system may worsen spring flooding.

What We Don't Know

- The exact track of this system and the rain to snow transition time, both of which affect snowfall totals for any given location. Exact timing is also uncertain. **Stay tuned!**

What You Can Do

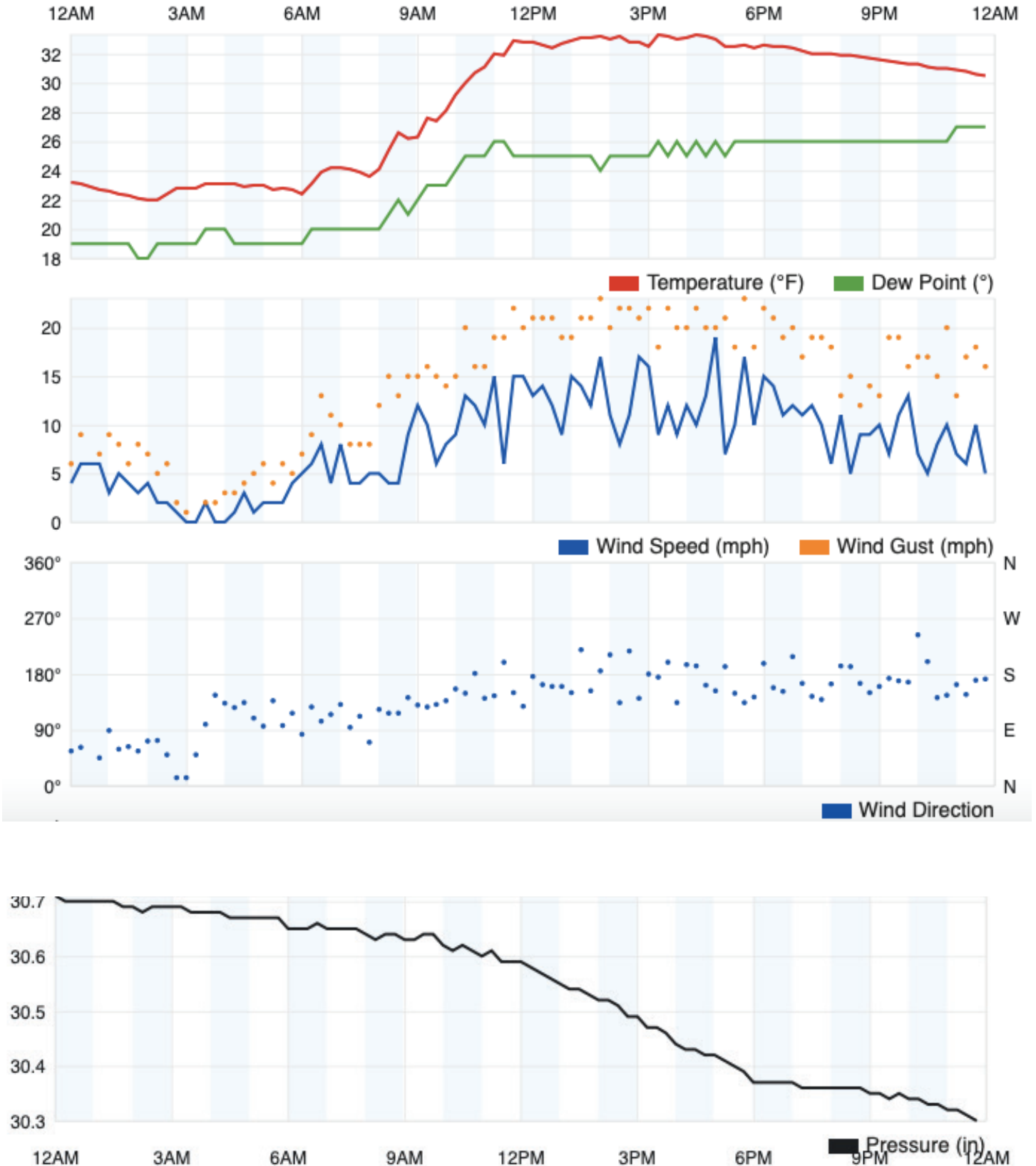
- Continue to monitor the latest forecast from a reliable source, especially if you have travel plans.

Heads up for potentially disruptive weather late in the week. Stay tuned for more information as models paint a clearer picture in the coming days.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Chance Wintry
Mix then
Partly Sunny

High: 32 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 19 °F

Tuesday



Sunny

High: 40 °F

Tuesday
Night



Slight Chance
Rain/Snow

Low: 32 °F

Wednesday




Chance
Rain/Snow
then Chance
Rain

High: 43 °F


Today

Light Wintry Mixed
in the Morning.
Dry in the Afternoon




Highs in the 30s

Tuesday



Highs in the 40s

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

3/16/2020 4:38 AM

A light mix of rain and snow can be expected through the morning hours. Patchy freezing drizzle will also be possible. The area will see dry conditions this afternoon through at least Tuesday afternoon.

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Today in Weather History

March 16, 2012: Temperatures reaching eighty degrees or higher in March across central and north-east South Dakota is a rare occurrence, and for this to occur in mid-March is exceedingly rare. On March 16th, several locations across the area set record highs by topping the 80-degree mark, including Aberdeen, Mobridge, and Pierre. Sisseton and Watertown also set records for March 16th. Aberdeen topped out at 81 degrees, Mobridge reached 83 degrees, with 86 degrees at Pierre.

1885: On this date through the 21st, Pointe-des-Monts, Quebec Canada, received 98 inches of snow-fall.

1942: A deadly tornado outbreak occurred over the Central and Southern US on March 16-17th. The tornado outbreak killed 153 people and injured at least 1,284. The best estimate indicates this event contained 13 F3 tornadoes, 6 F4s, and one F5. The F5 tornado occurred north of Peoria, Illinois, in the towns of Alta, Chillicothe, before crossing the Illinois River and striking the town of Lacon. A quarter of the homes in Lacon were destroyed, and debris was carried for 25 miles.

1975 - A single storm brought 119 inches of snow to Crater Lake, O,R establishing a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1986 - A small but rare tornado touched down perilously close to Disneyland in Anaheim CA. (Storm Data)

1987 - Softball size hail caused millions of dollars damage to automobiles at Del Rio TX. Three persons were injured when hailstones crashed through a shopping mall skylight. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) (The Weather Channel)

1988 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in the Central Rockies. Winds gusted to 80 mph at Centerville UT. Eighteen cities in the southeastern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date, including Tallahassee FL with a reading of 24 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A winter storm brought heavy snow and high winds to the southwestern U.S. Winds gusted to 60 mph at Lovelock NV, Salt Lake City UT, and Fort Carson CO. Snow fell at a rate of three inches per hour in the Lake Tahoe area of Nevada. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced large hail and damaging winds from northwest Florida to western South Carolina. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 75 mph at Floridatown FL. Sixteen cities across the northeastern quarter of the nation reported record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 78 degrees at Burlington VT smashed their previous record for the date by 23 degrees. New York City reported a record high of 82 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

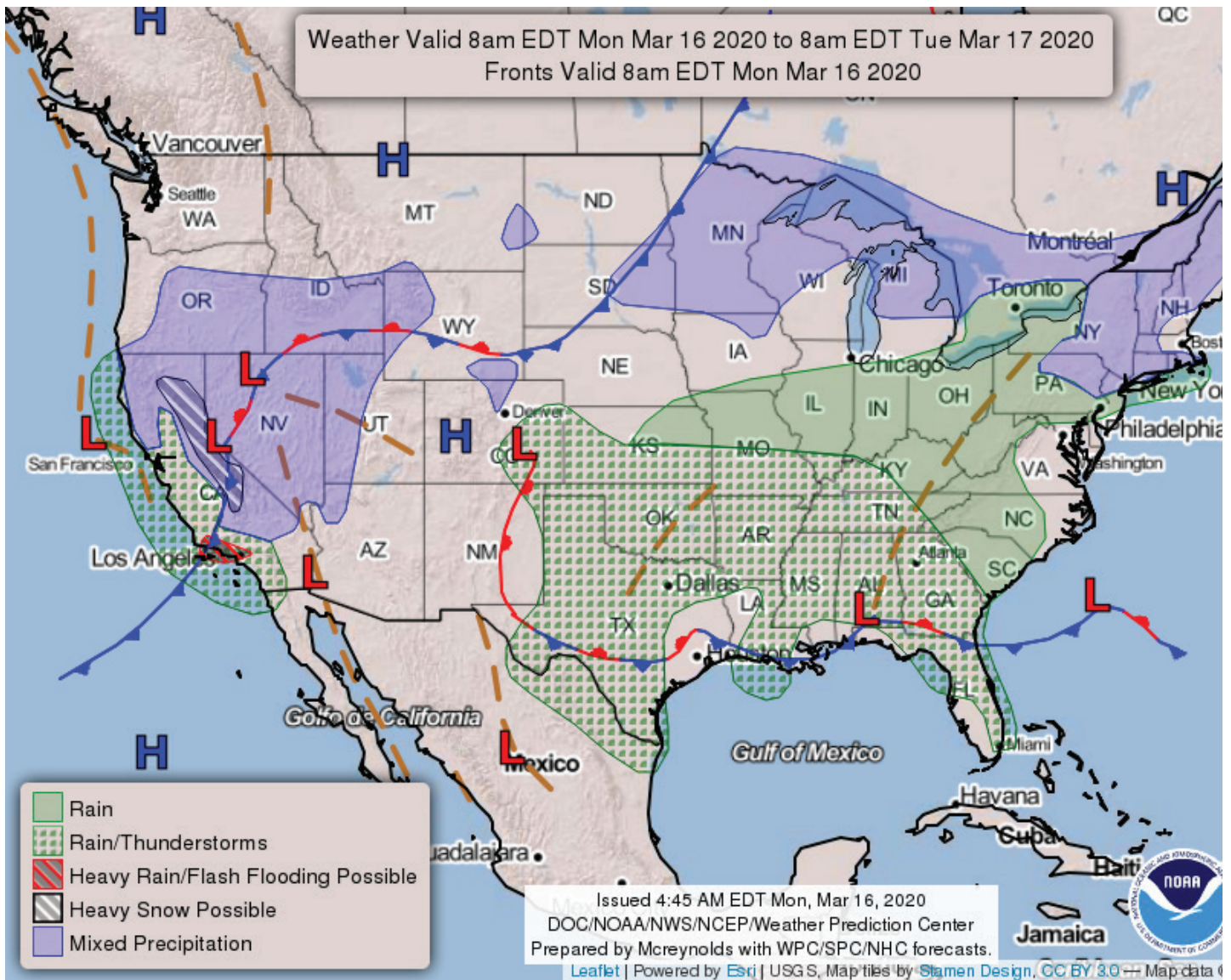
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 34 °F at 3:21 PM
Low Temp: 22 °F at 2:01 AM
Wind: 25 mph at 2:05 PM
Snow

Record High: 81° in 2012
Record Low: -17° in 1906
Average High: 40°F
Average Low: 20°F
Average Precip in March.: 0.47
Precip to date in March.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.49
Precip Year to Date: 0.35
Sunset Tonight: 7:42 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:41 a.m.



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MAKING GOOD TIME

The pilot of the company aircraft had been flying the corporate executives from one city to another on a whirlwind tour. After they landed, the plane serviced, and their meeting over, they would leave for another city.

One day the pilot decided he would have a little fun with his passengers and made the following announcement: "Gentlemen, there's no cause for alarm, but I feel that you should know that we've been flying without a radio, compass, radar, or navigational beam for the last hour. I'm not sure where we are heading, but we are making great time." They all gasped.

All of us are on a journey – to the Kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of darkness and hell. Jesus once said that the only way to enter into God's Kingdom is through a "narrow gate." He did not say that it is impossible to enter the Kingdom, but that there was only one way to enter His Kingdom. Many individuals believe that they can find God without following His specific directions. So, they design their own plan to suit their own interests and meet their own needs. It is like traveling without a map or compass, a GPS or road signs. What they do seems right to them but they are going in the wrong direction - even though they enjoy it and make "great time."

The "narrow gate" is coming to God through Jesus Christ as Savior and then making Him Lord.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for providing the way, the truth and life eternal through Your Son, our Savior. As citizens of Your Kingdom, may those around us see Your Son as the Lord of our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 7:13-14 You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

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2020 Groton SD Community Events

- 03/14/2020 Youth Girls/Boys Basketball Tourney Grades 4th-6th (Baseball/Softball Foundation Fundraiser)
 - 04/04/2020 Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt - City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
 - 04/04/2020 Dueling Piano's Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion
 - 04/25/2020 Fireman's Fun Night (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
 - 04/25-26/2020 Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip
 - 04/26/2020 Father/Daughter dance.
 - 05/02/2020 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, (1st Saturday in May)
 - 05/11/2020 Girls High School Golf Meet at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services
 - 06/05/2020 Athletic Fundraiser at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 06/8-10/2020 St. John's VBS
 - 06/19/2020 SDSU Golf at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 06/20/2020 Shriner's Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 06/22/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Ladies Invitational
 - 06/26/2020 Groton Businesses Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
 - 07/16/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Pro Am Golf Tourney
 - 07/31-08/04/2020 State American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
 - 08/07/2020 Wine on Nine Event at Olive Grove Golf Course
 - 09/12/2020 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Sat. after Labor Day)
 - 09/13/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Couples Sunflower Classic
 - 10/09/2020 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
 - 10/10/2020 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
 - 10/31/2020 Downtown Trick or Treat
 - 10/31/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat
 - 11/14/2020 Groton Legion Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
 - 11/26/2020 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center
 - 12/05/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
 - 12/05/2020 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services
 - 01/--/2021 83rd Annual Carnival of Silver Skates
-
- Bingo every Wednesday 6:30pm at the American Legion Post #39
 - Groton Lions Club Wheel of Meat, American Legion Post #39 7pm (Saturday nights November 30th thru April 11th)
 - Groton Lions Club Wheel of Pizza, Jungle Lanes 8pm (Saturday nights November 30th thru April 11th)
-
- All dates are subject to change, check for updates here

News from the Associated Press

Canton 'cat lady' makes it her mission to rescue animals

By ABIGAIL DOLLINS Argus Leader

CANTON, S.D. (AP) — Ninety-one paws pitter-patter around the hardwood floors of Heather Swanson's home in Canton.

Swanson, a self-proclaimed cat lady, cares for 16 cats she fosters through All Cats Rescue and seven cats she calls her own. One of them has three legs.

All Cats Rescue, a not-for-profit-rescue, is solely dependent on volunteers who foster cats in their homes. The rescue has around 20 current volunteers but is always looking for more. Approximately 3.2 million cats enter U.S. animal shelters every year, according to ASPCA.

People like Swanson have made it their mission to prevent that.

After losing her cat in 2016, Swanson looked into becoming a foster. She has fostered around 70 cats per year since, but her love of animals extends beyond cats. Swanson has trained horses her entire life, and it's this experience she carries into rescuing and fostering cats.

"Rescue has this stigma of people with big hearts and no education," Swanson told the Argus Leader. "It's kind of that way, but you have to be smart about it. You can't save everything."

Swanson's goal is to find each cat a forever home. All Cats Rescue sets up a meet and greet at PetSmart twice a month.

'It's hard to foster'

Her face lights up as she sees a bond made between one of her foster cats, Ramble, and someone who is looking to adopt. While it is a happy moment for Swanson, it is also bittersweet.

"It is hard to foster," Swanson said. "But I can't help them if I keep them, so I have to let them go."

Swanson takes off her shoes at her front door after a morning of tending to her horses and cats. Tripping over cats as she walks, she sits down in her reading chair in the next room. Three cats climb on her lap, one cat climbs on the decorated table next to her and another cat sits on the floor at her feet. Swanson wouldn't have it any other way.

"I've seen so much ugliness toward animals my whole life," Swanson said. "A lifetime of commitment towards animals makes you realize your pets are the lucky ones. There's a lot of unlucky ones out there."

Sturgis veteran completes 3,000th honor guard

By DEB HOLLAND Black Hills Pioneer

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — Arvid Meland stood at attention with an American flag fluttering over his right shoulder. He steeled his jaw and fixed his gaze on the flag-draped casket being wheeled past him and other members of the Sturgis Honor Guard on a sunny, yet breezy, March afternoon.

Meland, 90, a U.S. Army veteran, goes about his duties precisely and honorably. On this day, the service is for a fellow Army veteran, Roger Rosenow of Reeder, North Dakota.

Meland is not only a veteran of military service, but also a veteran of the Sturgis Honor Guard. Rosenow's service was the 3,000th of which Meland has participated since joining the group in 1999, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

But it was nearly 50 years prior to that when Meland answered the call to serve his country. After enlisting in the Army and being drafted on Sept. 1, 1951, he was put into the occupation of Germany with the heavy mortar company.

In a time before the Berlin Wall was built, it was Meland's job to keep the border safe during the Cold War.

Meland was honorably discharged in 1953. He attended South Dakota State University from 1954 to 1957, and graduated with a degree in soils. He worked for the soil conservation service from 1957 to 1986, retiring with more than 29 years of federal service.

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In 1989, Meland went to work in the Meade County assessor's office and retired from there in 1999.

In August of 1999, Meland said he was asked to join the Sturgis Honor Guard.

"I had retired from everything else, so I had time," he said. "I like the camaraderie. We all have the same interests being ex-military."

For a time, Meland served as commander of the Sturgis Honor Guard. He suffered a stroke in 2017 and decided to hand off the commander duties.

But the group members encouraged him to continue to participate, so it's been his job to serve as flag bearer.

Meland said he believes many of the families of military members who die are quite impressed by the guard's professionalism.

"We've gotten hundreds of thank-yous in appreciation for what we do," he said.

Meland said he hadn't really thought about just how many services he had done until fellow members mentioned he was closing in on 3,000.

"I was aware that I had done over 2,000, but I hadn't paid much attention to it until they told me I had about 2,800. Then I started watching it," he said.

Sturgis Honor Guard Commander Craig Sanderson said the guard keeps track of the participation of each of their members and knew Meland was getting close to the 3,000 mark.

Since joining the Sturgis Honor Guard in 1999, Meland has participated in an average of about 150 funerals a year.

"We've done as many as eight in one day," Sanderson said.

The majority of services are done at Black Hills National Cemetery, but the group also travels to private cemetery service around the Black Hills region, he said.

Having served in the military is one of the few qualifications someone needs to be a member of the honor guard, Sanderson said.

"We want a commitment out of you to do at least 50 percent of the services we do in a year," he said.

Last year the Sturgis Honor Guard participated in 181 services. At most services there are from 10 to 12 honor guard members present.

"We've done funerals with as few as three of us, and we've had as many as 15 show up. It depends on who's in town and who can make it," Sanderson said.

A primary purpose for an honor guard is to provide funeral honors for fallen comrades. At the service of Rosenow on a recent Monday, the guard stood at attention on either side of the sidewalk leading to the rotunda at Black Hills National Cemetery. Meland and Bud Kopp, the flag bearers, stood near the casket throughout the committal service. Other members marched outside and fired three shots from their rifles followed by the playing of taps.

The flag draped over the casket was then carefully removed, folded and presented to the family.

Sanderson said families are grateful for the military presence at their loved one's funeral.

"To most of them it means the world," he said.

It's anyone's guess how long Meland may continue to serve with the Sturgis Honor Guard. Meland said that as long as he continues to feel OK he will participate.

"I haven't got anything else to do," he joked.

The Latest: Hungary closes its borders to foreigners

By The Associated Press undefined

The Latest on the coronavirus pandemic, which has infected more than 169,000 people and killed more than 6,500. The COVID-19 illness causes mild or moderate symptoms but most people, but severe symptoms are more likely in the elderly or people with existing health problems. More than 77,000 people have recovered from it so far, mostly in China.

Hungary's prime minister says the country is closing its borders to foreigners and only citizens will be

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allowed in. Prime Minister Viktor Orban said Monday in Parliament that international coordination about the border closures is underway.

Orban also said all bars, restaurants and shops will have to close daily at 3 p.m., with only food stores, pharmacies and drug stores allowed to stay open longer.

Cinemas, cultural institutions and nightclubs will also be closed, while sporting events can still be held if organizers assume responsibility, but only without spectators.

Schools were closed to students on Monday, with distance learning programs starting to be implemented. So far, 30 people in Hungary have been infected with one virus-related death.

European Union leaders will hold a video-conference summit on efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus, which has now infected around 40,000 people across Europe, and claimed some 2,000 lives.

EU Council President Charles Michel, who chairs summits of prime ministers and presidents from the 27 EU nations, said via Twitter on Monday that he was calling on Tuesday what will be the second meeting of its kind in two weeks.

"Containing the spread of the virus, providing sufficient medical equipment, boosting research and limiting the economic fallout is key," Michel tweeted.

The EU is urging its member countries to put common health screening procedures in place at their borders to limit the spread of the virus, but not to block the transport of important medical equipment.

U.K.-based airlines, including British Airways and Ryanair, are scaling back flights dramatically in response to the coronavirus crisis that has seen Europe and the wider world go into lockdown.

EasyJet said it is introducing "further significant cancellations" as a result of the restrictions and "significantly reduced levels of customer demand." It added that these will continue on "a rolling basis for the foreseeable future" and could result in the grounding of most of its fleet.

BA's parent company IAG, which also owns Spain's Iberia, also announced plans to reduce capacity. For April and May, it said it plans to reduce capacity by at least 75% from the previous year. It also said it is reducing operating expenses, by grounding surplus aircraft and implementing voluntary leave options.

And Ryanair said it expects that the restrictions will mean the grounding of the majority of its aircraft fleet across Europe over the next seven to 10 days.

China is relaxing travel restrictions in the hardest-hit virus province of Hubei, sending thousands of workers back to jobs at factories desperate to get production going again.

The official Xinhua News Agency reported Monday that cities just outside the epicenter of Wuhan were chartering buses to send back to work residents who had returned home for the Lunar New Year in late January.

The move comes as Chinese officials say the outbreak that spread from Wuhan starting in December has mostly run its course domestically, while they remain vigilant against imported cases.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on China's service sector and industries from autos to cell phones, although President Xi Jinping has pledged that economic growth targets for the year will still be met.

Xinhua cited local officials as saying that 750,000 migrant workers alone in the city of Huangguang adjacent to Wuhan have been unable to return to their jobs.

Iranian state TV says the new coronavirus has killed another 129 people, pushing the country's death toll to 853 amid 14,991 confirmed cases.

Iran is struggling to contain the worst outbreak in the Middle East. Monday saw the biggest one-day rise in the death toll since the epidemic began. Even senior officials have been infected.

World Health Organization officials say that Iran's outbreak is being reported.

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All Disney owned hotels at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, will close at 5 p.m. on March 20, the company announced Monday.

The closure also includes Disney's Vero Beach Resort on Florida's Atlantic Coast. In a tweet, the company said the Friday closure will give guests the ability to make other arrangements.

In addition, the company announced it is closing all Disney stores in North America, beginning Tuesday. Online shopping will still be available.

Liberia has announced its first COVID-19 case Monday as the executive director of the Environmental Protection Agency, Nathaniel Blama, among the first officials on the continent to contract the virus.

Blama came to Liberia from Switzerland on Friday. Information Minister Eugene Nagbe said "there is no cause for panic" given measures put in place by the government to contact, trace, test and control any emergence of the virus.

Liberia, along with its neighbors Sierra Leone and Guinea, were devastated Ebola outbreaks from 2014 to 2016 that killed more than 11,300 people, including 4,000 in Liberia alone.

Belgium's political parties have agreed to temporarily put their differences aside to fight the coronavirus outbreak more efficiently. After months of failed negotiations, opposition parties agreed to grant Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes' caretaker government special powers for up to six months.

Wilmes said late Sunday on Twitter that her team will be "driven by a sense of duty. This great union is up to the challenges of the moment."

Belgium has been in a political impasse for months after last May's general election exposed deep linguistic and regional divisions in the country. Belgium's first female prime minister, Wilmes was appointed in October to succeed liberal leader Charles Michel, who became president of the European Council.

In an attempt to stop the spreading of the COVID-19 virus, Wilmes' government has closed schools, bars and restaurants and suspended all sports and cultural events. Belgium has 1,085 confirmed cases and four deaths.

The Czech Interior Ministry is calling on all citizens to use any face protection available, especially while shopping and using the public transport.

"Any protection is better than no protection," the ministry said. It advised people to stay at home, if possible.

Czech Health Minister Adam Vojtech acknowledged over the weekend that the medical sector lacks up to a million respirators.

The government has banned traveling across the country, starting Monday. People still can travel to work, visit doctors or do shopping. The Czech Republic has 298 COVID-19 cases.

South Africa will revoke nearly 10,000 visas issued this year to people from China and Iran, and visas will now be required for other high-risk countries that had been visa-free, including Italy and the United States.

Health Minister Zweli Mkhize says a lockdown might be necessary if tough new measures announced Sunday, including travel restrictions and school closings, don't work. He warns of a high risk of internal virus transmission with "the problem of inequality in our society."

South Africans worry about the spread of the virus to crowded townships or public transport. Confirmed virus cases have doubled every two days over 10 days to 61, a rate he called "explosive."

Elsewhere, Africa's second most populous nation, Ethiopia, has suspended schools, sporting events and other large gatherings for 15 days.

Bavarian authorities say that runoff mayoral elections in the southern German state will be conducted entirely by postal vote to reduce risks of infection with the new coronavirus.

Polling stations opened as usual, though with increased hygienic precautions, for the first round of mu-

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municipal elections on Sunday.

On Monday, though, Bavaria's state government tightened its restrictions on public life, saying that it would close bars, cinemas and some shops among other things. The regional interior minister, Joachim Herrmann, said that the runoff votes in two weeks will be held "exclusively by postal ballot."

Among the cities and towns where a runoff vote will be needed is the state capital, Munich, where center-left mayor Dieter Reiter fell narrowly short of the 50% support needed to avoid a second round.

The government of Kosovo has declared the state of emergency due to the coronavirus threat. Kosovo has 13 COVID-19 cases. It has closed all its borders and suspended flights from its only international airport. The government has closed all schools, cafes, restaurants and gyms and banned mass gatherings.

Greece's Olympic committee says the handover ceremony for the Olympic flame for the Tokyo games scheduled this Thursday will take place behind closed doors as part of efforts to contain the coronavirus outbreak.

The Hellenic Olympic Committee said the accreditation cards that had been issued for the ceremony at the Athens Panathenaic Stadium, where the first modern Olympics were held in 1896, will not be valid. The IOC's headquarters will also be closed from Monday until further notice, it added.

Last week, the committee canceled the remainder of the Olympic torch relay after crowds gathered in Sparta in southern Greece to watch part of the torch relay, where the torch was carried by actor Gerard Butler.

Germany has partially closed its borders with five neighbors, leading to queues at some crossings.

German police launched new controls at the usually check-free borders with France, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg and Denmark on Monday. Police turned back some pedestrians at Kehl, across the Rhine river from the French city of Strasbourg.

People who commute across the border to work are still allowed to cross, as can trucks carrying goods, and Germans are being allowed back in. But Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said that people "without a valid reason to travel" wouldn't be allowed across.

That, for example, ends trips to shops across the border for now.

Denmark shut own border over the weekend -- as did two eastern neighbors of Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. Lithuania's government said a convoy of some 500 vehicles -- mostly Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians and Ukrainians -- will be allowed to enter Poland from Germany and transit toward Lithuania on Monday.

Germany has confirmed over 4,800 infections with the new coronavirus, including 12 deaths.

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles announced Monday that it is suspending production across most of its European plants through March 27.

The Italian-American carmaker is closing six plants in Italy that make cars under the Fiat, Alfa Romeo and Maserati nameplates as well as a plant in Serbia that makes the Fiat 500L and in Poland that makes the Fiat 500. The closure in Italy will affect lines producing the Panda sub-compact, the Jeep Renegade and Compact and the Alfa Romeo Giulia and Stelvio.

South Korea's central bank has executed an emergency rate cut of 0.5 percentage point to help ease the economic fallout from the coronavirus, which has sickened more than 8,200 people in the country.

The Bank of Korea's move on Monday brought its policy rate to an all-time low of 0.75% amid concerns that the global spread of COVID-19 will rattle South Korea's trade-dependent economy.

The bank says the rate cut will help ease volatility in financial markets and help pump money into the economy by lowering borrowing costs for companies.

But some experts say it's unclear whether lower interest rates will meaningfully boost economic activity

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that's largely suppressed by preventive measures against the virus.

Bangladesh's government has shut down all educational institutions and private tutorial centers across the country until March 31.

Education Minister Dipu Moni said at a news conference Monday in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, that the measures were taken as a precautionary step against the coronavirus. Bangladesh confirmed three more cases of infection on Monday, taking the total to eight.

Czech authorities are ordering a lockdown of 21 towns and villages in an area some 250 kilometers (150 miles) east of the capital to prevent the coronavirus from spreading.

The health authority in the nearby city of Olomouc barred residents from leaving those places and no one without residency can travel there. The extraordinary measure initially for two weeks includes confining people to their homes except to shop for food and medicine and go to and from work.

The Czech Republic has 298 cases of infection with the virus that causes COVID-19.

The measure comes just hours after the government banned traveling across the country.

Iranian news agencies say a 78-year-old member of the Iranian clerical body that chooses the country's supreme leader has died from the illness caused by the new coronavirus.

He was the latest of several senior Iranian officials to have been infected in the worsening outbreak.

The outbreak has infected nearly 14,000 people in Iran and killed more than 700, with the toll jumping by more than a hundred in the last 24 hours. The real numbers may be even higher, as some have questioned the government's reporting.

The semi-official Fars and Tasnim news agencies reported that Ayatollah Hashem Bathaei, a low-profile, moderate member of the Assembly of Experts, died from the COVID-19 illness.

Turkey is closing bars and nightclubs to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, meanwhile, reported on his Twitter account 12 more coronavirus cases, including seven people who had returned from European countries and three from the United States. The update raised Turkey's confirmed cases to 18.

Bars and nightclubs will be temporarily closed as of Monday, the Interior Ministry said.

Turkey has also suspended flights to several countries and closing schools and universities.

On Sunday, Turkey set up quarantine locations for more than 10,300 people returning from pilgrimages to Islam's holy sites in Saudi Arabia.

The Peace Corps is evacuating all of its volunteers and suspending operations in dozens of countries.

Director Jody Olsen says Sunday's decision comes as "international travel becomes more and more challenging by the day." She said the agency wanted to avoid leaving volunteers stranded in host countries.

As of September 2019, the service program run by the U.S. government said it operates in more than 60 countries and has more than 7,300 volunteers and trainees. Volunteers in China and Mongolia have already been evacuated over virus concerns.

Olsen says host country staff will remain in their current roles.

The Associated Press receives support for health and science coverage from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Virus toll in Iran climbs as other countries lock down

By AMIR VAHDAT and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran reported a record rise of 129 fatalities from the new coronavirus on Monday, pushing its total death toll to 853 amid nearly 15,000 confirmed cases. Lebanon went into lockdown and

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Iraqis prepared for a curfew as part of regional efforts to contain the new coronavirus.

Businesses have nevertheless remained open in Iran, with the divergent approaches adopted by local authorities reflecting continued uncertainty over how to slow the spread of a virus that has infected around 170,000 people worldwide and caused more than 6,500 deaths.

Some have opted for an even more aggressive response, with Israel authorizing the use of phone-snooping technology long used against Palestinian militants to track coronavirus patients. Civil liberties advocates say the practice will renew debate over privacy issues.

Most people experience only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and recover within weeks. But the virus is highly contagious and can be spread by people with no visible symptoms. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

Panic broke out in Iraq after authorities announced a weeklong curfew late on Sunday. People raced to supermarkets and swiftly emptied shelves, while others stocked up on kerosene and cooking gas. The curfew, which is set to begin late Tuesday, includes the suspension of all flights from Baghdad's international airport.

Iraq's Health Ministry has reported 124 cases of coronavirus and nine deaths.

In Lebanon, where the government ordered a lockdown starting Sunday night, traffic was thin and in some cases streets were completely empty on Monday, the start of the working week. Restaurants, cafes and bars have been closed since last week and most private businesses were also shuttered Monday.

In some areas, police were going around and asking shop owners to close in line with the government orders. Few people could be seen at Lebanon's seaside corniche, and police were asking them to leave. Pharmacies, bakeries and other businesses related to making or selling food were allowed to stay open. The small country has reported 99 cases and three deaths from the new coronavirus.

Hamra Street, the Lebanese capital's most famous shopping street and a residential district, was eerily quiet as shops, restaurants and cafes along the usually bustling thoroughfare were closed.

Both Iraq and Lebanon have been largely in disarray since anti-government protests broke out last year, and Lebanon was mired in its worst financial crisis in years even before the pandemic began.

One of the worst outbreaks in the world has unfolded in Iran, which has close ties to both Iraq and Lebanon. Authorities there have reported 14,991 confirmed cases and Monday's jump in fatalities was the largest one-day rise since the epidemic began. The real numbers may be even higher, as some have questioned the government's reporting.

Authorities have not ordered businesses to close, however, and many Iranians have dismissed fears about the virus and advice from public health officials to avoid social contact. Restaurants and cafes have remained open, though business has diminished.

A member of the Assembly of Experts, which has the power to appoint or dismiss the country's supreme leader, died from the COVID-19 illness caused by the virus, the semi-official Fars and Tasnim news agencies reported Monday.

Ayatollah Hashem Bathaei, 78, is the latest of several senior Iranian officials to have died from the virus. Cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Revolutionary Guard members and Health Ministry officials have caught the virus, compounding fears about Iran's response to the global pandemic.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is 80 years old and has been in power since 1989, wore disposable gloves at a recent public event, apparently as a precaution.

The official leading Iran's response to the virus on Sunday expressed concerns that health facilities could be overwhelmed if the rate of new cases continues to climb.

"If the trend continues, there will not be enough capacity," Ali Reza Zali, who is leading the campaign against the outbreak, was quoted as saying by the state-run IRNA news agency.

Iran is believed to have around 110,000 hospital beds, including 30,000 in the capital, Tehran. Authorities have pledged to set up mobile clinics as needed.

Elsewhere in the region, the number of infections has continued to climb even as authorities have im-

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posed strict travel and quarantine measures.

Mideast stock markets also tumbled Monday, with the Dubai Financial Market closing down 6.14% and the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange down 7.83%. Both have closed their trading floors over fears about the virus.

Israel on Monday said its total number of infections had climbed to 250, more than double what it was just a few days ago. Authorities have closed all malls, restaurants, cinemas, gyms and day care centers, and have urged anyone who can work from home to do so.

Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial announced Monday that its annual Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony would be held this year without an audience. The ceremony typically draws the country's top leadership, foreign dignitaries and elderly Holocaust survivors. This year's ceremony was scheduled to take place on April 20.

Later on Monday, Israel will swear in its new Knesset, or parliament, after elections earlier this month. The 120 members will take the oath of office in groups of three, in keeping with bans on large gatherings.

Pakistan reported a surge of 41 new cases in its Sindh province, which borders Iran. That brought its total number of infections to 94. Authorities there have closed schools and universities, and postponed an annual military parade planned for March 23.

In Dubai, a major global business and travel hub, authorities announced all bars and pubs would be closed through the end of the month. Community pools across Dubai were locked on Monday, closed by developers for the same period.

The Persian Gulf island nation of Bahrain, meanwhile, reported its first death from the virus. It has reported 221 confirmed cases.

Kullab reported from Baghdad. Associated Press writers Joseph Krauss and Aron Heller in Jerusalem; Zeina Karam in Beirut, Iran; Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and Munir Ahmed in Islamabad contributed to this report.

The Associated Press receives support for health and science coverage from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Asia urges vigilance to keep hard-won gains against virus

By FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — As millions of people in Europe, the United States and beyond began holing up at home, stocking up on supplies and keeping a wary eye on how close they get to friends and neighbors, the coronavirus outbreak marked a distinct shift in focus Monday, with China's total infections reported at less than half of the rest of the world's.

But while the outbreak appears to be moving away from its original epicenter, many in Asia, where the virus has been a brutal fact of life for months, continue to urge vigilance against anything that might hurt hard-won gains.

"If we loosen our grip on the quarantine, it could be a matter of time for the embers of small-scale cluster infections to be revived," the South Korean mass-circulation Dong-a Ilbo newspaper said in an editorial Monday.

Around the globe, societies inched toward a shutdown of much of public life — bars, restaurants, school, work. Resorts closed on the Las Vegas strip. Many restaurants offered only takeout, if they were open at all. Schools, concerts, sporting events — even small-scale St. Patrick's Day parties — were canceled.

China, where the virus was first detected in December, now accounts for less than half of the world's 169,000 cases, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

A shutdown of public gatherings and a quarantine of the hardest-hit central region has steadied China's caseload as the virus spreads rapidly elsewhere. Most of the world's 77,000 recovered patients are in China.

Traffic has begun returning to Beijing. Office buildings, however, are enforcing strict screenings for fever,

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and many restaurants only offer takeout. Children usually snowed under with classes and homework found themselves glued to screens, shopping, chatting and watching video clips.

A number of Asian cities have become increasingly worried about importing cases of the virus from abroad after making inroads in containing its spread at home.

Starting Monday, travelers arriving in Beijing from overseas will be quarantined for 14 days in designated facilities at their own expense. Previously, people without symptoms could self-quarantine at home.

In the latest tally, China's National Health Commission reported 16 new cases of the coronavirus in the previous 24 hours. Twelve of them were imported from overseas.

China now has 80,860 confirmed cases. The health commission said that 67,749 patients have recovered and been discharged from hospitals. Fourteen more deaths were reported in the last 24 hours, raising the toll to 3,213.

Though China still has the most infections, a dozen other countries have more than 1,000 cases, mostly in Europe.

Religious leaders gave sermons to empty pews or to the faithful watching online Sunday after public worship was curtailed in many places. The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City was being closed indefinitely, and the Vatican closed off next month's Holy Week services to the public. Still, 83-year-old Pope Francis ventured out of the Vatican to visit two churches in Rome to pray for the sick.

In the United States, health officials recommended a limit to groups of 50 or more people and a government expert said a 14-day national shutdown may be needed. Americans returning from abroad encountered chaotic airport health screenings and closed-down communities.

There are signs that the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea is slowing down, but officials are still scrambling to prevent infections from exploding again.

South Korea on Monday reported 74 more cases over the past 24 hours, a day after it announced 76 new cases. The figures are the lowest daily increase in new infections in about 25 days. That's a stark contrast with the more than 900 new cases reported on one day in late February.

There are still worries that infections might surge again from those returning from Europe or from local people who are reportedly resuming attending gatherings like church services. There have been calls for authorities to further postpone the new school year, which was to begin on March 23 after two rounds of delays.

South Korean Prime Minister Chung Se-kyun said the country's decline in cases is a "hopeful sign" but urged caution over widening outbreaks across Europe and the United States.

Chung said South Korea should "never loosen its guard."

On the first day of Spain's quarantine, long lines formed for food as police patrolled. Soldiers and police sealed off the Philippines' densely populated capital, Manila, from most domestic travelers. Austria planned to limit people's movement, and Lebanon was put on lockdown, closing down Beirut's famed seaside corniche.

As the public curtailed their daily lives, governments also adjusted.

The prime ministers of Australia and Singapore announced on Monday that they will meet by video conference after Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong canceled an Australian visit this week.

"Business and governments can carry on even through the midst of all this," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Seven Network television.

Several Australian states on Monday declared public health emergencies that create punishments for failing to comply with self-isolation orders. Australia's most populous state, New South Wales, has suspended new jury trials because of the virus.

In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government secured a law allowing him to declare a state of emergency in case things worsen, though he says it still hasn't reached that point.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and those with mild illness recover in about two weeks. But severe illness including pneumonia can occur, especially in the elderly and people with existing health problems, and recovery could take six weeks in

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such cases.

Efforts to stop the virus from spreading to the most vulnerable and to not overwhelm health care systems with sick patients are pushing calls for people to avoid public crowds or just stay home.

"I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing," Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health told NBC's "Meet the Press."

Ireland ordered all pubs and bars to close for two weeks — including on Tuesday, St. Patrick's Day — and urged people not to hold house parties. Two pub industry groups had warned of the "real difficulty" in keeping people apart in the country's famous watering holes.

Italy on Sunday reported its biggest day-to-day increase in infections — 3,590 more cases in a 24-hour period — for a total of almost 24,747. And 368 more deaths brought its toll to 1,809, more than a quarter of the global death toll.

"It's not a wave. It's a tsunami," said Dr. Roberto Rona, who is in charge of intensive care at Italy's Monza hospital.

Governors in California, Illinois and Ohio told all bars and restaurants to close or reduce their number of customers. New York City will shutter the nation's largest public school system as early as Tuesday, sending over 1.1 million children home.

With fears increasing that the pandemic will depress U.S. economic growth, the Federal Reserve took emergency action by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and deciding to buy \$700 billion in Treasury and mortgage bonds.

Spain was under lockdown amid a two-week state of emergency. Spain's Health Ministry said the country has recorded 288 deaths, up from 136 on Saturday. The number of infections rose to 7,753 from 5,700.

"From now, we enter into a new phase," said Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose wife tested positive. "We won't hesitate in doing what we need to beat the virus. We are putting health first."

Associated Press writers Ken Moritsugu in Beijing, Kim Tong-hyung and Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea, Rod McGuirk in Canberra, Australia, and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed to this report.

The Associated Press receives support for health and science coverage from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

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Tuesday's primaries offer chance for Biden to reach Latinos

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — In Joe Biden's pursuit of the Democratic presidential nomination, he's run repeatedly into a wall in the West, where Bernie Sanders' strength among Latinos propelled his campaign even as he struggled with other groups.

Tuesday's primaries in Arizona and Florida offer Biden a chance to show he can make up ground with Latinos, a crucial group of voters he'll need in his corner to defeat President Donald Trump.

Biden is playing catch-up when it comes to engaging Latino voters and is weighed down by anger over the high rate of deportations during the Obama administration, which left scars for many immigrants and their families.

"We need more. And we need commitments as we move into the general," said Regina Romero, a Democrat who recently took office as Tucson's first Latina mayor. Biden can win over reluctant Latinos with a bold and progressive stance on immigration, she said.

"I hope that he doesn't eat up the lie that he has to be more conservative on the immigration issue," said Romero, who hasn't endorsed Biden or Sanders since her favored candidate, Elizabeth Warren, dropped

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out. "We shouldn't be afraid of an issue that is so important for Latino voters, water it down and not have policies that Latinos can get excited about."

Arizona and Florida are both likely to be battlegrounds in November. In Arizona, 1 in 3 residents is Latino; in Florida, it's 1 in 4.

Sanders' strength with Latinos helped him to an overwhelming victory in the Nevada caucuses and contributed to his Super Tuesday wins in California and Colorado on a night when Biden built a formidable lead in delegates.

But Biden's success is a recent phenomenon. His slow start amid a crowded Democratic field left him with a shoestring budget and virtually no campaign infrastructure beyond the early states, which limited his ability to reach out to Latinos on the ground or air Spanish-language television ads. That's changed now that his burst of success since South Carolina made him the overwhelming favorite for the nomination and helped his fundraising.

"He definitely needs to work it, and he needs to up his game and engage with Latino voters," said Janet Murguía, president and CEO of UnidosUS, the Latino advocacy group formerly known as National Council of La Raza. Tuesday could make for "a big reset" for Biden, she said.

Biden has had to answer for the big spike in deportations during Barack Obama's presidency, when Biden served as vice president.

Early in his administration, Obama aggressively increased efforts to deport immigrants living in the country illegally. He'd hoped to convince members of Congress and the public that he was serious about border security in order to secure a comprehensive immigration reform bill that would extend legal status to millions of people living in the U.S. without authorization. The reform bill never passed, but the deportations disrupted families, drove fear in immigrant communities and left deep wounds.

Any Democrat's immigration policies would be superior to Trump's, but that won't be enough to excite Latinos, said Tomás Robles, co-director of Living United for Change in Arizona, or LUCHA, a Latino organizing group that has endorsed Sanders.

"You cannot depend on people's hatred or fear of Trump to inspire them to turn out in droves for Vice President Biden," Robles said. "Bernie has worked hard to motivate Latinos as a base. But the entire establishment part has failed at doing the same."

Lucha's other co-director, Alejandra Gomez, said Biden could make big strides by choosing a progressive running mate.

The Obama administration deported more than 3 million people during his eight-year tenure, especially in the early years before Obama gave up on Congress and changed course, using executive orders to extend temporary legal protections to young immigrants and their parents through programs known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents, or DAPA.

"We took far too long to get it right," Biden said in an interview last month with Univision anchor Jorge Ramos, for the first time characterizing the administration's actions as a misstep. The former vice president later added: "I think it was a big mistake. Took too long to get it right."

Biden and his allies focus on the later years of the Obama administration.

U.S. Rep. Ruben Gallego, who represents largely Latino areas of Phoenix and endorsed Biden this month, predicted that Latino voters will come around. But he said Biden could help himself by talking up his own progressive proposals, such as a \$15 minimum wage and a public option for health insurance. He should also talk about the Obama health care law that extended coverage to millions of Americans, including a disproportionate number of Latinos, Gallego said.

While Arizona Latinos are frustrated with the Obama-era deportations, Gallego said, they also remember that the administration sued to block the state's anti-illegal immigration bill known as SB1070, sued Sheriff Joe Arpaio for racial profiling and enacted DACA.

"Even those voters who aren't supporting Vice President Biden right now, I think they still have positive feelings toward him and at the end of the day will be very supportive in the general," Gallego said.

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Biden's defenders also point to Sanders' work to help kill a 2007 immigration bill, which Sanders warned would drive down wages.

"No one's perfect, but let's not forget that he made a fatal mistake by doing that," Gallego said.

Latinos in the West, where Sanders has done so well, are mainly of Mexican and Central American descent. It's a different story in Florida, where Cubans and Puerto Ricans predominate, making the state a potential bright spot for Biden. Sanders' self-identity as a democratic socialist and his recent defense of certain aspects of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's regime are a liability with Cuban voters.

"Miami is a melting pot for people from all over," said José Javier Rodríguez, a Democratic state senator from Miami who was an early Biden supporter. "Biden's appeal hits a cross-section in ways that Sen. Sanders does not."

Biden's campaign is upping its Latino organizing in Arizona through its "Todos con Biden" or "Everyone with Biden" program, including Spanish-language phone banks and door-to-door outreach. In Florida, Biden's Spanish-language ads use a Cuban narrator in Miami, a Puerto Rican in Orlando and a Mexican in Fort Myers to reflect the backgrounds of Latinos in each area.

Biden will need that outreach in a matchup against Trump. In Arizona, the growth of Latinos combined with Trump's weaknesses in the suburbs have turned a solidly red state into a battleground. And for the president, there's virtually no path to reelection without winning Florida and its trove of electoral votes.

Sanders put to rest the old adage that Latinos don't vote, said Chuck Rocha, a senior strategist for Sanders.

The Latino vote, he said, "is no longer the sleeping giant. It just needed a little attention and a little love and it will show up."

Catch up on the 2020 election campaign with AP experts on our weekly politics podcast, "Ground Game."

10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press undefined

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

1. ASIA URGES VIGILANCE TO MAINTAIN DROP IN INFECTIONS While the focus of the pandemic appears to be shifting away from its original epicenter, many in Asia urge public to be mindful of anything that might hurt hard-won gains.

2. AS AMERICANS STRUGGLE WITH NEW REALITY, CDC ISSUES DRAMATIC RECOMMENDATION Because large events can fuel the spread of coronavirus, it said gatherings of 50 people or more should be canceled or postponed for the next eight weeks.

3. 'I FEEL LET DOWN BY THE WORLD' The city of Idlib is the last urban area still under opposition control in Syria and many there feel the end is near.

4. PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE TAKES ON PANDEMIC Former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders both sought to cast themselves as best-positioned to lead the nation through a global pandemic.

5. 'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BUY SO MUCH' President Trump calls on people to stop hoarding groceries and other supplies as one of the nation's most senior public health officials said he would like to see aggressive measures such as a 14-day national shutdown.

6. CLINICAL TRIAL SET TO BEGIN FOR NEW CORONAVIRUS VACCINE A government official says the first participant will receive an experimental dose Monday, however officials say it will take up to 18 months to fully validate any potential vaccine.

7. FEDERAL RESERVE'S RATE CUT TANKS FINANCIAL MARKETS Asian stock markets and U.S. futures fell after the Fed slashed its key interest rate in the face of mounting global anti-virus controls that are shutting down business and travel.

8. CORONAVIRUS KILLS IRANIAN CLERIC New agencies report a 78-year-old member of the Iranian clerical body that chooses the country's supreme leader has died.

9. SPORTS COULD BE CANCELED MUCH LONGER Professional sports seasons in North America could

be on longer hiatus after CDC recommends all events involving 50 people or more be called off for the next eight weeks.

10. WHO IS EVACUATING STAFF WORLDWIDE The Peace Corps is telling its volunteers around the world that it is suspending all operations globally and evacuating all volunteers in light of the spread of the new coronavirus.

Analysis: Biden's pragmatism shines in virus-centered debate

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As he campaigns for president, Joe Biden's moderate approach to governing often fails to excite his party's most passionate voters. But on the debate stage, as the nation wrestled with the consequences of a frightening pandemic, Biden's pragmatism broke through in ways that affirmed why he has become the front-runner for the Democratic nomination.

The former two-term vice president and longtime senator, who has spent the last four decades as a Washington insider, faced off Sunday night against Sen. Bernie Sanders and his burn-it-down progressive politics in the first one-on-one debate of the Democratic Party's 2020 primary season.

It was Biden's first chance to show how he might be seen in a face-off with President Donald Trump. He was crisper in his answers than he had been in forums with multiple candidates and he was more focused when framing his differences with Sanders, who used the evening as perhaps a last, best shot at slowing Biden's march. But in the midst of an escalating global health threat, it was much more than that.

With the nation focused on the coronavirus outbreak rather than traditions like Selection Sunday for the NCAA basketball tournament, the debate provided a national moment for Americans to more closely consider the final two men who want to be the alternative to Trump in November.

They offered dramatically different visions of leadership to an anxious nation suddenly held captive by crisis, giving Democratic primary voters, and the broader electorate, a chance to take an up-close measure.

Biden and Sanders faced each other from lecterns strategically placed 6 feet (1.83 meters) apart in line with the recommendations of health experts. A live audience was barred from attending. They did not shake hands. The dynamic was far different from the forums of six or more candidates, narrowcasting the choices.

It was a moment seemingly made for someone with extensive governing experience. And if nothing else, Biden has that.

He leaned hard on his experience as vice president, and how he worked in other times of national crisis, something that Sanders simply could not do.

Demonstrating a command of the tools available to the federal government in crises, Biden said he would mobilize the military to strengthen the health care system's capacity in the short term. He repeatedly cited his experience in the White House situation room, where he and the Obama administration contained an Ebola threat and helped avoid a global economic collapse.

"People are looking for results, not a revolution," Biden charged, repeating a familiar attack against Sanders that seemed to carry new weight as millions of home-bound Americans watched. He added: "We have problems we need to solve now."

The stakes had never been higher for Sanders, who is undoubtedly on the path to losing the presidential nomination for a second consecutive campaign. The Vermont senator has fallen behind Biden in the delegate hunt, and he's bracing for another bad primary night Tuesday when Arizona, Florida, Illinois and Ohio weigh in.

Already, he's under pressure from the Democratic establishment to drop out.

Sanders, an experienced debater by now, outlined his own plan for combating coronavirus, which included a call to increase the number of ventilators and intensive care units at hospitals. But he also did what he has done for his long political career: He pivoted to his broader concerns about the nation's health care and economic systems and tried to frame the current crisis as further proof of the need for his signature Medicare for All plan.

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His consistency is often his strength, yet in an election transformed by an unexpected pandemic, that consistency has its limits.

Discussing the ongoing health threat at one point, Sanders declared: "It is time to ask the question of where the power is in America. Who owns the media? Who owns the economy?"

Yet many voters are focused on the immediate health and safety of their loved ones. And they're looking for political leaders for reassurance and decisive action.

Polls do suggest that Sanders' plans to transform health care and income inequality are popular. Yet, they are not necessarily seen as realistic.

For his part, Biden showed flashes of the fighting spirit that first signaled his presidential mettle when he sought the White House the first time, more than 30 years ago.

He put Sanders on the defensive repeatedly, including for favorable comments the senator had made about authoritarian regimes in Cuba and other Latin American countries. And he defiantly beat back attacks against his own record on the 2008 economic bailout, his support for the Iraq War, and his past willingness to cut Social Security as part of a deficit-reduction package.

Yet the night will be most likely remembered for a virus that has suddenly turned American politics, and American life, upside down, and in the process, may have driven voters even closer to the candidate who represented far more experience and far less risk.

"This is a crisis," Biden said. "We're at war with a virus."

EDITOR'S NOTE — National Political Writer Steve Peoples has been covering national politics for The Associated Press since 2011.

Catch up on the 2020 election campaign with AP experts on our weekly politics podcast, "Ground Game."

Global stock markets, US futures fall after Fed rate cut

By **JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer**

BEIJING (AP) — Global stock markets and U.S. futures fell Monday after central bank moves to shore up economic growth failed to dispel investor's fears over anti-virus controls that are shutting down global business and travel.

There were no glimmers of optimism: Paris tumbled 9% shortly after the open, London sank 7% and Frankfurt gave up 7.5%. In Asian trading, Sydney's benchmark plunged 9.7%, Hong Kong's Hang Seng lost 3.4% and India shed 5.9%.

Tokyo closed 2.5% lower after Japan's central bank expanded asset purchases to inject money into the economy and promised no-interest loans to help companies cope with the crisis. Chinese shares fell after Beijing reported consumer spending and factory output were even worse than expected.

On Wall Street, futures for the benchmark S&P 500 index and Dow Jones Industrial Average were off nearly 5% following Sunday's emergency rate cut by the Federal Reserve.

The Fed cut its key rate by a full percentage point — to a range between zero and 0.25%. The central bank said it would stay there until it feels confident the economy can survive a near-shutdown of activity in the United States.

"Despite whipping out the big guns," the Fed's action is "falling short of being the decisive backstop for markets," said Vishnu Varathan of Mizuho Bank in a report. "Markets might have perceived the Fed's response as panic, feeding into its own fears."

The Fed action came as Western governments expanded travel curbs and closed more public facilities, raising the cost of efforts to contain the outbreak that has infected nearly 170,000 people worldwide. China, where the coronavirus emerged in December, accounts for about half of those, but a dozen other countries have more than 1,000 cases each.

London's benchmark FTSE 100 index lost 6.9% to 4,995.46. Frankfurt's DAX shed 7.6% to 8,532.05. The CAC 40 in France sank 8.8% to 3,755.99.

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The S&P 500 future was down 4.8% and the Dow's was off 4.6%.

The S&P 500 future fell 5% on Sunday night following the Fed's announcement, triggering a temporary trading halt.

The Fed said it also will buy at least \$500 billion of Treasury securities and \$200 billion of mortgage-backed securities. This amounts to an effort to ease market disruptions that have made it harder for banks and large investors to sell Treasuries and to keep longer-term rates borrowing rates down.

That followed a dizzying week in which the Dow twice fell by more than 2,000 points and also record its biggest point gain ever — 1,985 points on Friday. The bull market that began in 2009 in the depths of the financial crisis came to an end.

In Sydney, the S&P-ASX 200 fell to 5,002.00. Hong Kong's Hang Seng tumbled to 23,063.57. In India, the Sensex retreated 6.6% to 31,812.12.

The Shanghai Composite Index declined 3.4% to 2,789.25 after the government reported retail sales fell 20.5% from a year ago in January and February after shopping malls and other businesses were closed. Factory output declined by a record 13.5% after the Lunar New Year holiday was extended to keep manufacturing workers at home.

The figures were even bleaker than economists expected. Some cut their forecasts for the world's second-largest economy. ING said this year's growth might fall as low as 3.6%, the weakest since at least the 1970s.

The Bank of Japan's decision to expand purchases of stocks, corporate bonds and other assets viewed as riskier than Japanese government bonds fell flat.

The Nikkei 225 in Tokyo sank to 17,002.04 while Seoul's Kospi lost 3.2% to 1,714.86.

The BOJ also announced plans to provide up to 8 trillion yen (\$75 billion) in no-interest, one-year loans to companies that face cash crunches.

Bank of Japan Gov. Haruhiko Kuroda has pledged to do whatever is needed to help buttress an economy that contracted by 7.1% in the last quarter, even before the virus hit.

Over the weekend, Spain followed Italy's lead in imposing nationwide curbs will allow its 46 million people to leave home only to go to work, to buy food and medicine or on errands to care for the young and elderly.

In the Philippines, soldiers and police sealed off the crowded capital, Manila, from most domestic travelers.

New York City announced it will shut down the largest U.S. public school system as early as Tuesday, sending more than 1.1 million children home. Governors in California, Illinois and Ohio told all bars and restaurants to close or reduce their number of customers.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and those with mild illness recover in about two weeks. But severe illness including pneumonia can occur, especially in the elderly and people with existing health problems, and recovery could take six weeks in such cases.

There are 169,000 confirmed cases of the virus worldwide, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. Most of the world's 77,000 recovered patients are in China.

Experts expect the disruptions to travel and even to daily life to last for weeks, possibly months.

Brent crude lost \$2.10 to \$31.84 per barrel in London. Benchmark U.S. crude tumbled \$1.29 to \$30.44 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

In currency markets, the dollar declined to 106.35 yen from Friday's 107.91. The euro gained to \$1.1196 from \$1.1105.

JPMorgan Chase now is forecasting the U.S. economy will shrink at a 2% annual rate in the current quarter and 3% in the April-June quarter.

The Fed's decision to act before a meeting scheduled for mid-week indicated its policymakers felt they needed to move immediately to shore up investor confidence. Most market watchers expect more volatility ahead because the number of U.S. virus cases is rising and more industries face a downturn.

United Airlines said it needs to cut flying capacity by 50% in April and May and expects the cuts to extend into the summer travel season. American Airlines said it cutting international flying 75%.

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Walmart is limiting hours to ensure stores can keep sought-after items such as hand sanitizer in stock. Late Friday, Apple said it was closing all retail stores outside of China.

The magnitude of the central bank moves indicated to some analysts that Chair Jerome Powell and other members of the Fed were worried about the health of the financial system. But others noted the Fed was just reacting to signs the situation in Europe and the U.S. was only getting worse.

"The Fed's actions were very bold and it does appear to have spooked the markets," said Nate Thooft, head of global asset allocation at Manulife Investment Management.

"Markets were going to be spooked anyway due to the scale of the shutdowns across the U.S. and sobering implications of a \$20 trillion dollar economy that is about to grind down to a crawl," said Yung-yu Ma, chief investment strategist at BMO Wealth Management.

"Also, developments in Europe are raising the prospect that what was just a week ago considered 'worst case' might be closer to 'base case' for the U.S.," Ma said. "Big picture, the Fed's actions are all positive."

The Associated Press receives support for health and science coverage from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

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'Bigger than any one of us': Biden, Sanders tackle pandemic

By JULIE PACE and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders sought in the Democratic debate to cast themselves as best-positioned to lead the nation through a global pandemic, uniting in their criticism of President Donald Trump's response to the fast-moving coronavirus but diverging in how they would confront the spiraling public health and economic crisis.

Biden pledged Sunday to deploy the United States military to help with recovery efforts and warned that a federal financial bailout may be necessary to stabilize the economy. Sanders leaned into the same domestic policy proposals that have dominated his campaign, arguing that the government-run health insurance system he has long championed would allow the U.S. to respond faster to a health crisis.

The coronavirus outbreak has rapidly reshaped nearly all aspects of American life, shuttering schools across the country and significantly curtailing travel. Virus fears have also halted campaign rallies and prompted some states to delay upcoming primaries because of warnings from public health officials against large gatherings.

"This is bigger than any one of us — this calls for a national rallying for one another," Biden said.

Indeed, the stakes in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination have shifted dramatically since Biden and Sanders last debated less than three weeks ago — as have the contours of the contest. After a sluggish start to the primary season, Biden has surged to the front of the field, drawing overwhelming support from black voters and consolidating the backing of several more moderate rivals who have dropped out of the race. He's also actively courting the endorsement of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a liberal ally of Sanders who dropped out without throwing her support behind him.

The former vice president appeared determined throughout Sunday's contest to keep his focus on the general election, making direct overtures to Sanders' loyal supporters and committing for the first time to select a woman as his running mate if he becomes the Democratic nominee. After Biden's announcement, Sanders said he would "in all likelihood" do the same.

For Sanders, the reality is that his path to the nomination is rapidly shrinking, and he faces the prospect of more stinging defeats in the four states that vote on Tuesday. Still, he appeared determined to draw sharp contrasts with Biden throughout the debate, challenging him aggressively on the Iraq War and free trade deals. He argued that "I have taken on every special interest that's out there," adding, "That's a very different record than Joe's."

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Though Sunday's debate was the first one-on-one contest of the Democratic primary, Biden and Sanders have been the leaders of their party's ideological poles throughout the yearlong campaign. Their prescriptions for addressing the coronavirus outbreak highlighted the contrasting approaches they are pledging to bring to the White House.

Biden, a centrist who backed the 2008 bailout of the financial industry during the recession, warned that another government-backed rescue plan may be needed in the coming months to shore up the economy. Sanders, a fierce liberal critic of Wall Street, opposed the earlier bailout and said it would be a mistake to take a similar approach now; instead, he suggested a tax on the wealthiest Americans.

The Vermont senator also repeatedly pushed questions regarding the coronavirus toward a now-familiar debate between him and Biden over health care. Sanders argued that the troublesome shortages in coronavirus tests and anxiety over the preparedness of the nation's health care system to deal with an impending increase in patients highlight why the U.S. should move to the government-run, "Medicare For All" system he has long championed.

"One of the reasons that we are unprepared, and have been unprepared, is we don't have a system. We've got thousands of private insurance plans," Sanders said. "That is not a system that is prepared to provide health care to all people in a good year, without the epidemic."

Biden, who supports adding a public insurance option to the current system, argued that a pandemic was not a moment to attempt to push through an overhaul of the American health insurance system, a politically arduous endeavor.

"This is a crisis," Biden said. "We're at war with a virus. It has nothing to do with copays or anything."

As the debate opened, Biden and Sanders skipped a handshake, greeting each other instead with an elbow bump. They took their positions at podiums spaced 6 feet apart in keeping with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for limiting the spread of the novel coronavirus. They addressed the nation, and each other, from a television studio in Washington without an in-person audience.

The pandemic has upended the campaign for days, prompting Biden and Sanders to cancel rallies and instead hold virtual events with voters around the country. Their campaign staffs are also working remotely, and the candidates — both in their late 70s — said they were taking personal precautions to guard against a virus that is a greater risk to the elderly.

"I'm using a lot of soap and hand sanitizer," Sanders said.

The senator found himself on the defensive at several points in the night, including about favorable comments he's made about authoritarian regimes in Cuba and other Latin American countries — remarks that could hurt Sanders in Tuesday's key primary in Florida, a state with a large population of residents from those nations. Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist, said that while he condemns authoritarianism in Cuba and elsewhere, it's possible to recognize positive changes made by their governments.

"To simply say that nothing ever done by any of those administrations had a positive impact on their people would, I think, be incorrect," Sanders said.

Sanders also responded to criticism about his inability to draw support from black voters by raising questions about whether Biden can rally young people and new voters, saying he has doubts about whether Biden can generate "energy and excitement and voter turnout." Still, he vowed to mobilize behind Biden if he becomes the party's nominee.

"If I lose this thing, Joe wins, Joe, I will be there for you," Sanders said.

Catch up on the 2020 election campaign with AP experts on our weekly politics podcast, "Ground Game."

'There is nothing now': Syrians in Idlib fear end nearing

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

IDLIB, Syria (AP) — "There's nothing now. Nothing at all," said Yasser Aboud, as he looked away from his family's few remaining belongings, dumped on the floor of the bare single room that would now be their home in the northwest Syrian city of Idlib.

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It was a far cry from the house, the farm, and the job that he, his wife and three children left behind two months ago, fleeing their hometown just 15 kilometers (9 miles) down the road as it was overwhelmed by Syrian government troops in furious fighting. He managed to salvage some jerrycans of olives, a few rugs, cushions and pots and pans, and his motorbike. They sold their washing machine and some of his wife's gold.

Now they were moving into an apartment in a district full of buildings shattered by government bombardment. He and his wife and three kids will share the place with over a dozen relatives. They're jobless in a city teeming with thousands of others displaced like them — and they are hardly out of danger.

The city of Idlib is the last urban area still under opposition control in Syria, located in a shrinking rebel enclave in the northwestern province of the same name. Syria's civil war, which entered its 10th year on Monday, has shrunk in geographical scope — focusing on this tiny corner of the country — but the misery wreaked by the conflict has not diminished.

A bloodier and possibly more disastrous phase is on the horizon if government forces, backed by Russia and Iran, go ahead with threats to recapture Idlib city and the remaining rebel-held north, crammed with over 3 million people.

Over the past three months, government troops recaptured nearly half of Idlib province and surrounding areas, forcing nearly 1 million to flee their homes, around half of them into other parts of the province, including Idlib city. During the advances, government forces neared Idlib city outskirts, bombing parts and sending thousands fleeing north.

"I feel everything has ended, and this is a final migration, not displacement," Aboud said. "I feel let down by the world."

The government offensive has been paused by a Russian-Turkish cease-fire deal, leaving residents of the rebel enclave, including Idlib city, in a state of terrifying limbo. They are skeptical that the cease-fire will last and well aware they are likely the next target of the government's assault.

Though government airstrikes have hit it regularly, the city has suffered far less violence than other places since 2015, when rebels seized it from government forces. Over the years since, multiple waves of displaced people flowed in, from other opposition areas further south retaken by the government, and now more from other parts of Idlib.

The Associated Press traveled to Idlib on a trip arranged through Turkish authorities. Its team, like other journalists who have been into the enclave recently, was escorted by members of a media outfit linked to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an al-Qaida-linked group that dominates the area.

Driving into Idlib city, the AP team witnessed the scale of the displacement. Dozens of tents lined the main road into the city. Other families were crammed into bombed out buildings, the city's stadium or unfinished construction sites. Shops have sprung around the enclave bearing the names of different cities and towns in Syria — a testimony and a token to the homes they left behind.

The city has been shaped by the different layers of conflict. Many city streets are clean and well maintained by the opposition administration. But on other streets, buildings are in ruins — some wrecked in previous fighting, others bombed during the most recent offensive. Residents can point out buildings and remember the date they were hit. The city gets only two hours of electricity a day, and Aboud said he chose to buy bread over more power from generators.

If President Bashar Assad resumes the government offensive, everything here will be vulnerable.

In past advances, the government's tactic was to bombard urban areas relentlessly — including with Russian warplanes — flattening residential areas and pummeling the population into submission. Residents, opposition activists and fighters were offered the choice either to stay under "reconciliation" deals or be evacuated to the rebel-held north.

In Idlib, the residents overwhelmingly fear living under government rule but have nowhere else to run, with Turkey refusing to open its border wall to more refugees.

Aboud said it was out of the question for him to accept "reconciliation." Holding his 2-year-old twins by the hand, he said his family fled his hometown of Saraqeb "not fearing death but fearing to be under the rule of Assad again."

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He took part in the early anti-government protests in 2011 and was detained for it; two of his brothers were shot and killed by government forces in 2012; his mother-in-law was killed in an airstrike the same year.

If Assad captures Idlib, "we will run to Turkey, we will sleep under the (border) wall," Aboud said. "The most crucial thing is that we won't enter territories" held by the government.

Turkey has deployed thousands of troops in the enclave, operating alongside its Syrian opposition allies. That has diminished the lock on power that the al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has held over Idlib since it drove out rival factions in past fighting.

Mustafa Berro, a commander of a Turkey-backed rebel faction from Aleppo that has now sent forces to Idlib, said his fighters have not lost faith.

"We are worse off than in 2014" — when rebels held nearly half of Syria — "but we are better off than 2011" when they had no territory to control, he said. "We still have an area to work from and operate in."

The massive displacement of past weeks has strained international aid deliveries into the enclave, where 1.5 million receive food assistance. In January alone, 1,227 trucks were sent across the border from Turkey, the largest number in seven years of cross-border operations, said U.N. Assistant Secretary of State Kevin Kennedy, who is also regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria.

The cease-fire has allowed deliveries to increase, but Kennedy warned that resumption of hostilities in the densely populated urban area would mean more displacement. "The needs are so enormous, the gaps will always be there unfortunately," he said.

At Idlib's Central Hospital, Abdullah AlHassan lay in a bed in excruciating pain. He lost both legs last week when he went back to his village, Afes, to inspect the home he had fled and stepped on a mine planted in the house. His hand was also bandaged and his face full of cuts.

Afes, on the strategic highway that was the government's first main objective in its offensive, was all but destroyed and totally deserted, he said. His house had been looted, even metal wires stripped out. The carnage will be similar if the offensive hits Idlib city, he said.

"No one can stay once such an attack comes. Everyone must leave. If anyone stays, (government forces) won't spare him."

In the center of Idlib city, nearly 90 displaced families found refuge in a deserted prison. They fled here from Maaret al-Numan, a key town in Idlib that fell to government forces in January.

"We couldn't afford rent. We opened the door of the prison and we came in," said Hossam Ajjaj, member of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army who was among the first to move in with his family.

Families, men and women, live on top of each other in the prison rooms, divided into sleeping, cooking and bathing areas by hung sheets and blankets, giving a deceptive sense of privacy.

Fida, 44, and her 20-year old daughter Heba share the same room with 11 other relatives. On the day the AP visited, they were stuffing zucchini and eggplants in their living area, where they also cook and bathe — taking turns keeping watch to ensure no one intrudes. A younger brother of Heba who lost a foot in a war injury slept in the room behind the "kitchen." A baby with Down syndrome slept in his cradle next to the women cooking.

They had long resisted fleeing their home, just outside Maaret al-Numan. Early in the war, when Heba was 12, they left for six months, but returned. Earlier in 2019, they were displaced for 20 days but again went back. When the Syrian army advanced on Maaret al-Numan in December, they moved into caves just next to their home, hoping it was again just temporary.

When an airstrike hit just outside the cave, they knew they had to leave. They gave up their large farm growing olives and grapes to live crammed in a prison.

"We don't like the word displacement," Fida said. Her daughter added: "It's shameful. We like our hometown."

Heba said she can't forget a single day since 2011 — every day marked by violence and loss. She worried about her children, a 3- and a 2-year-old, and can't let them go outside because of airstrikes.

"We sleep in fear," she said. "I don't imagine there will be a future. I don't imagine this will be settled with us alive."

Peace Corps evacuating volunteers worldwide amid outbreak

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Peace Corps is telling its volunteers around the world that it is suspending all operations globally and evacuating all volunteers in light of the spread of the new coronavirus.

In an open letter to volunteers posted Sunday on its website, the federal agency's director, Jody Olsen, says the decision follows recent evacuations in China and Mongolia due to the outbreak. Olsen says that with evacuations now underway at other posts and travel becoming more challenging by the day, the agency decided to expand the suspension and evacuations.

"As COVID-19 continues to spread and international travel becomes more and more challenging by the day, we are acting now to safeguard your well-being and prevent a situation where Volunteers are unable to leave their host countries," Olsen says.

Olsen says the posts are not closing and that the agency looks forward to returning to normal operations when conditions permit.

The letter says country directors would be providing more information to volunteers.

The Peace Corps was established in 1961 during the Kennedy administration as a government-run volunteer program serving nations around the world. Its website says volunteers perform community work in more than 60 countries today and that more than 235,000 Americans have served in 141 countries since its inception.

AP FACT CHECK: The Dems on pandemic, Social Security, more

By HOPE YEN and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders sparred one-on-one Sunday in a Democratic debate held without a live audience in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic. The growing crisis prompted some questionable statements from the presidential rivals, as did issues they argued about for months on once-crowded stages.

A look at how some of their claims compare with the facts:

SANDERS: "We're the only major country on earth not to guarantee health (care for) all people. We're spending so much money and yet we are not even prepared for this pandemic."

BIDEN: "It has nothing to do with 'Medicare for All' — that wouldn't solve the problem at all."

THE FACTS: Biden has a point. The coronavirus pandemic has taken countries by surprise regardless of the type of health care system that they have. Spain has a single-payer system, known as "social security" in that country. Italy guarantees coverage for all through a regionally based system. But both countries have struggled to get control of the outbreak, and their governments have been forced to take stringent measures not yet seen in this country.

BIDEN: "A Medicare option. We can do that now. I can get that passed. I can get that done, if I'm president of the United States of America."

THE FACTS: That's no guarantee. It's a promise. The health insurance industry is dead set against a public option — a government plan that would compete with private insurers — and would fight it. So would many Republicans and perhaps even some Democrats.

Democrats originally sought a public plan as part of the Obama-era Affordable Care Act. But they lacked the votes to get it through the Senate, even when they held a commanding majority in that chamber. The same fight would play out again if Biden is elected president. Whether he's able to secure a public plan depends on the composition of Congress.

SANDERS, to Biden: "You have been on the floor of the Senate time and time again talking about the need to cut Social Security, Medicare and veterans programs. Is that true or is that not true?"

BIDEN: "That is not true."

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THE FACTS: Sanders' accusation is misleading. He suggests that Biden's record shows that he would be hostile to preserving Social Security. In fact, Biden's position has actually evolved over his long public career as a centrist senator. Cutting Social Security is not what he is proposing now.

Biden's campaign has pointed to a long list of legislation he supported that increased Social Security benefits. But as an influential legislator who had a hand in passing major bills, he also was willing to enter negotiations with Republicans by considering a reduction in cost-of-living increases.

Often these changes were presented as a way to cut costs that would save the program.

During a 1996 candidate debate, for example, he floated the possibility of reducing cost-of-living increases and raising the retirement age to 68.

Sanders and his allies have also circulated video footage, news stories and transcripts of Biden's past remarks. But in some cases, what appears to be a sweeping statement by Biden lack crucial context.

One of the principal examples is a clip from a 2018 speech in which Biden appeared to discuss in favorable terms then-House Speaker Paul Ryan's comments that a rising deficit demanded action on the popular entitlement programs. However, video, circulated on Twitter by a top Sanders adviser, used only a snippet of Biden's remarks and avoided his larger criticism over how Ryan handled the 2017 tax cuts and subsequent budget debates.

Other widely distributed videos of Biden as a U.S. senator from Delaware in 1995 and presidential candidate in 2007 show him explaining his support for a more austere federal budget, including putting Social Security and Medicare "on the table."

"When I argued that we should freeze federal spending, I meant Social Security, as well," Biden said during a 1995 speech on the Senate floor. "I meant Medicare and Medicaid. I meant veterans' benefits. ... And I not only tried it once, I tried it twice, I tried it a third time and I tried it a fourth time."

The remarks were delivered in support of a federal balanced budget amendment that ultimately failed to win approval and did not relate directly to legislation that would have cut or frozen Social Security spending — or any other specific program. Yet as Biden himself acknowledged at the time, Social Security would likely have faced cuts if such a measure had been approved.

As the Democratic Party moved leftward — a development that tracks along ever-widening income and wealth inequality — Biden has moved with it. His 2020 campaign platform now calls for raising taxes on upper-income households to shore up Social Security and expanding benefits for some of the oldest seniors.

"There will be no compromise on Medicare and Social Security, period," Biden said Jan. 20 in Des Moines, Iowa.

SANDERS: "I voted against the bailout because I believed that the illegal behavior being done by the people on Wall Street should not be rewarded by a bailout. ... The Fed gave trillions and trillions of dollars in zero interest loans to every financial institution in this country and central banks all over the world. That was essentially a grant."

THE FACTS: Sanders is mischaracterizing the steps taken by the Federal Reserve and the stimulus efforts by the Bush and Obama administrations as merely giveaways to banks and Wall Street. It's true that banks disproportionately benefited from the bailout, but the layoffs and foreclosures of that time would have been even worse without the government's fiscal and monetary intervention.

First, the Fed cut the interest rate that banks charge each other for overnight loans to near-zero in late 2008 as the economy was cratering. It also bought government debt and mortgage-backed securities that expanded the central bank's balance sheet to historic highs. These were not grants as Sanders suggests, but efforts to increase the flow of money into the U.S. economy in order to halt the downturn and boost hiring, business investment and consumer spending.

Second, Sanders suggests that efforts such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program were in spirit rewarding bankers who should have been criminally prosecuted. But the loans and other initiatives stemming from TARP were about stabilizing the financial markets and other sectors of the economy. Biden correctly noted that failing to stabilize those institutions could have made the situation even bleaker for everyday Americans.

BIDEN: "I'm taking all the precautions. I make sure I don't touch my face."

THE FACTS: As many Americans have discovered, that's easier said than done. He defied two recommended precautions during the debate, coughing into his hand, not his elbow, and touching his face several times, once with his hand on his chin. He defied two recommended precautions during the debate, coughing into his hand, not his elbow, and touching his face.

Associated Press writers Josh Boak, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Bill Barrow, Brian Slodysko and Stephen Braun contributed to this report.

EDITOR'S NOTE — A look at the veracity of claims by political figures.

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Arc of Trump's coronavirus comments defies reality on ground

By AMER MADHANI and BEV BANKS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the course of a few weeks, President Donald Trump veered from confidently assuring Americans his administration had the coronavirus outbreak "very well under control" to declaring a national emergency and tweeting all-caps caution about the pandemic that has upended every facet of American life.

Trump meandered from denial to grudging acceptance, and he seeded conflicting, inaccurate and eye-brow-raising commentary on a country desperate for unvarnished, even shock-to-the-system, guidance.

Throughout the global coronavirus crisis, Trump's statements have been colored by baseless optimism. Sometimes, his commentary has been flatly wrong. Frequently, it's been amplified by aides and allies with the help of conservative media.

As he confronts the most serious national crisis of his presidency, the lack of precision has cut into Trump's credibility at a moment when he needs it more than ever, analysts say.

"It started out with really what can only be described as full-blown denial," said Brian Ott, a communication studies professor at Texas Tech University who has done extensive research on the president's social media rhetoric. "Then as the crisis spread and as it became a pandemic ... it just wasn't viable rhetoric anymore because it wasn't at all where the American public was at."

Early on, the president downplayed the coronavirus as something similar to the seasonal flu — nothing that Americans should be overly concerned about and something that would quickly pass.

His optimistic public comments often didn't match the reality on the ground or even how U.S. public health agencies were approaching the looming crisis behind the scenes.

In one of his first substantive public remarks on the virus, during a visit in late January to an auto parts manufacturer in Michigan, Trump acknowledged that the U.S. had seen a smattering of infections but predicted a "very good ending for it."

At that moment, there were only a handful of known cases in the United States, but the virus had already infected thousands in China, and the World Health Organization had declared the virus a "public health emergency of international concern."

"We think we have it very well under control," Trump told the assembled workers. "We have very little problem in this country at this moment — five. And those people are all recuperating successfully. But we're working very closely with China and other countries, and we think it's going to have a very good ending for it. That I can assure you."

The next day the Trump administration said it would suspend entry into the United States by any foreign nationals who had traveled to China in the past 14 days, excluding the immediate family members of U.S. citizens or permanent residents. By then, more than 200 people had died, and nearly 9,800 had

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been infected worldwide.

Weeks later — on Feb. 25 — his top economic adviser, Larry Kudlow, sought to ease volatile markets by assuring investors that the administration had the virus “contained” and “it was pretty close to airtight.” Kudlow added that coronavirus may be a “human tragedy” but predicted it wouldn’t be an “economic tragedy.” At one point, when the stock market was plunging, he even mentioned the prospect of “buying the dip.”

The optimism was jarring. As Kudlow was attempting to reassure markets, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned of an incoming “disruption to everyday life.” The spread of the coronavirus in the U.S., agency officials warned, was “not so much of a question of if” but rather “a question of when.”

Even as Democratic criticism of his approach mounted, the president — backed by aides and allies — turned to lashing out that his enemies were trying to use the catastrophe to score political points. By late February, after confirmed infections in the U.S. had accelerated, Trump accused political opponents and the media of pushing a “new hoax.”

“Now the Democrats are politicizing the coronavirus. You know that, right?” Trump lamented during a campaign rally in South Carolina days after the CDC warning. “Coronavirus, they’re politicizing it.”

Trump, throughout the crisis, has also seemed out of tune with aides and public health experts offering him guidance.

At a White House news briefing Sunday evening, Trump claimed that his administration had “tremendous control” in containing the virus, even as the infection rate is surging in the U.S. Minutes later — and after Trump had left the news conference — Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government’s top infectious disease specialist, told reporters, “The worst is yet ahead for us.”

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, said that Trump’s efforts to downplay the health crisis was particularly galling because public health officials had already warned that the virus was going to be explosive.

“The trustworthiness of a president in a time of national crisis is his most important asset,” Jamieson said. “And when he says things that are proven to be untrue, or problematic from a public health standpoint, that erodes his credibility and the capacity of the country to prepare adequately.”

Days later, White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham echoed the president’s frustration on Fox News. “I just want to stress to politicians and the media to stop using this as a tool to politicize things and to scare people,” Grisham said on “Fox & Friends.”

But it’s not only Democrats who have been frustrated by the president’s messaging throughout the crisis.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said Trump should “step back” and let a public health official do the talking.

“I think that the messaging at the federal level has been inconsistent, and when you are dealing with a novel virus like this, it’s very important that health professionals be out front and that there be a consistent message,” Collins said.

The White House effort to blame Democrats and the media for putting too bright of a spotlight on the health crisis was further amplified by some commentators on Fox News and its related operations.

Fox Nation host Tomi Lahren sought to minimize the crisis by raising the California homelessness epidemic. “Call me crazy, but I am far more concerned with stepping on a used heroin needle than I am getting the coronavirus, but maybe that’s just me,” she said.

Fox Business host Trish Regan said the president’s opponents were trying to “create mass hysteria to encourage a market sell-off” to undercut his reelection effort. Conservative talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh suggested that the president is the target of “virus terrorism.”

Not all Fox News personalities bought into the conspiracy peddling. Last week, Fox News anchor Martha MacCallum expressed exasperation when Seema Verma, Trump’s Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services administrator, repeatedly ignored her question about whether American hospitals had enough ventilators and intensive care units to deal with patients who may be stricken.

Fox News host Tucker Carlson, without uttering the president’s name, questioned the wisdom of base-

less optimism, and he offered Trump some advice.

"In a crisis, it's more important than ever to be calm," Carlson said. "But staying calm is not the same as remaining complacent. It does not mean assuring people that everything will be fine. We don't know that. Instead, it's better to tell the truth. That is always the surest sign of strength."

By Saturday, the president had abruptly changed course, tweeting "SOCIAL DISTANCING!" to his more than 70 million Twitter followers.

Associated Press writer David Sharp in Portland, Maine, contributed to this report.

Trump calls on Americans to cease hoarding food, supplies

By HOPE YEN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is calling on people to stop hoarding groceries and other supplies as one of the nation's most senior public health officials urged Americans to act with more urgency to protect themselves and others against the coronavirus. Dr. Anthony Fauci said he would like to see aggressive measures such as a 14-day national shutdown.

"You don't have to buy so much," Trump said at a news conference. "Take it easy. Just relax."

Trump assured Americans, after speaking with leading grocery chain executives, that grocers would remain open and that the supply chain remained healthy. Speaking at the same White House news conference, Vice President Mike Pence urged Americans to buy only the groceries they need for the week ahead.

The comments from the president came Sunday after the government's top infectious disease expert said he would like to see Americans to hunker down even more to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Still, Fauci said travel restrictions within the United States, such as to and from hard-hit Washington state and California, probably would not be needed anytime soon.

Officials in Washington were preparing for what was expected to be a long-haul effort to try to stem the virus that has upended life around the globe.

"The worst is yet ahead for us," Fauci said. "It is how we respond to that challenge that is going to determine what the ultimate endpoint is going to be."

Trump, on the other hand, offered an optimistic outlook even as officials said the infection rate in the U.S. was surging. The president acknowledged that the virus was "very contagious" but asserted that his administration had "tremendous control" over the spread of the disease.

Trump said expressed pleasure that the Federal Reserve announced Sunday it was taking emergency action to slash its benchmark interest rate to near zero. The move intended to help the economy withstand the coronavirus came a day after Trump once again threatened to fire or demote Fed Chairman Jerome Powell.

"It's really great for our country," Trump said of the central bank's actions.

Earlier Sunday, Trump held a call with more than two dozen grocery store and supply chain executives to discuss their response to the coronavirus outbreak. Retailers have reported shoppers flocking to stores to stock up on food and other essentials. Consumers have expressed frustration that some items — such as hand sanitizer and toilet paper — are becoming more difficult to find.

It wasn't just supply shortages that had Americans frustrated — calls are mounting for better access to coronavirus tests.

The Trump administration said millions of new coronavirus tests would be made available in the coming weeks, including tests that speed processing of samples, but it was encouraging Americans to exercise restraint in seeking to get tested.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House coordinator for responding to the pandemic, said those most vulnerable to the respiratory disease and the healthcare providers treating them should go first.

"We ask you to prioritize them and prioritize them in the lines," she said.

Birx cautioned there will be a "spike" in positive results as more people gain access to tests.

Pence said that he and the president would brief the nation's governors on Monday "specifically about

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our expanding testing to the American people.”

Chad Wolf, the acting secretary of Homeland Security, acknowledged that many travelers were facing “unacceptable” long lines as they waited to be screened at U.S. airports this weekend. He said average wait time for screening was down to 30 minutes at most airports, but the problem had not been fixed for those arriving at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport.

Pence said the federal government on Monday will release updated guidance concerning restaurants, bars and other establishments. California and Illinois are among jurisdictions that have ordered restaurants and bars to close to help slow the spread of the virus.

Asked whether restaurants and bars around the nation should close for the time being, Fauci said he wanted to wait for the guidance to come but allowed, “That could be.”

Expanded protocols were also on the way to protect the president and his staff. Starting Monday, those who enter the White House complex will have their temperatures taken.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Congress had started work on a new aid package after the one just approved by the House early Saturday, which provided direct relief to Americans with sick pay and other resources and was pending in Senate.

“We have already begun work to develop a third emergency response package,” Pelosi wrote in a letter to colleagues.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said late Sunday the next package should have even more resources for Americans, the health care industry and “significant steps to secure our nation’s economy.”

With the U.S. Capitol among the many iconic landmarks closed to tours, Pelosi also urged lawmakers to have most of their Washington staff telework from home, as health officials urge social distancing. House lawmakers are away on weeklong recess and many have already curtailed office visits at their local offices, as well.

Fauci, the public face of the administration’s messaging during a round of morning TV interviews, said the country should do as much as “we possibly could,” even if officials were criticized for overreacting. He said he raised the issue of measures such as a shutdown with the Trump administration, and said officials were open to his ideas.

“I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing,” said Fauci, who heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The worldwide outbreak has sickened more than 156,000 people and left more than 5,800 dead. The death toll in the United States is more than 50, while infections neared 3,000 across 49 states and the District of Columbia.

The vast majority of people recover. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three weeks to six weeks to recover.

Trump in recent days has imposed sweeping travel restrictions for much of Europe. On Saturday, he added the United Kingdom and Ireland to a list of countries that would face travel restrictions over the next 30 days. The State Department on Sunday said it would allow U.S. personnel to leave their diplomatic or consular posts worldwide if they or family members were medically determined to be at a higher risk of falling very ill if exposed to the virus.

Trump also has pledged broadened U.S. testing for the virus as major employers such as Apple Inc. have sent workers home to telework and several states and big cities, including Los Angeles and Boston, shuttered down schools for a week or more.

Trump has suggested that restrictions on travel within the U.S. to areas hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic could be next. But Fauci on Sunday played down that or having major national lockdowns on the level now seen in European countries such as Italy and Spain.

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Associated Press writers Zeke Miller, Jill Colvin, Darlene Superville and Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

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CDC's latest guidance could mean no sports for much longer

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

The already-delayed professional sports seasons in North America could be on hiatus for significantly longer than first planned after federal officials said Sunday that they recommend all in-person events involving 50 people or more be called off for the next eight weeks.

That's twice as long as the 30-day shutdowns that the NBA, NHL and Major League Soccer decided to put into place last week in response to the global coronavirus pandemic that has already made a deep impact on the U.S. financial markets and has been blamed for at least 64 deaths in this country.

Major League Baseball also was going with what essentially was a 30-day shutdown after canceling the rest of spring training and pushing back the start of regular season play for two weeks; opening day was to have been March 26.

But new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Sunday night seem to suggest that sports in this country could for all intents and purposes be gone until May, if not later.

"CDC, in accordance with its guidance for large events and mass gatherings, recommends that for the next 8 weeks, organizers ... cancel or postpone in-person events that consist of 50 people or more throughout the United States," it said. "Events of any size should only be continued if they can be carried out with adherence to guidelines for protecting vulnerable populations, hand hygiene, and social distancing."

The eight-week window easily exceeds what would have been the remainder of the NBA and NHL regular seasons, plus would cover about the first 25% of the MLB season — or roughly 40 games per team. It would also cast serious doubt on the ability to hold other major U.S. sporting events as planned, such as the Kentucky Derby in early May.

The NBA was already bracing to play games without fans in arenas, something that would have started late last week had a player -- Rudy Gobert of the Utah Jazz -- not tested positive for the virus, COVID-19. Utah teammate Donovan Mitchell and Detroit's Christian Wood have tested positive since, but Gobert's diagnosis was enough for the league to say that it was suspending play.

"I've been feeling a little better every single day," Gobert said in a video posted Sunday. He added, "I wish I would have took this thing more seriously."

Later Sunday, a person with knowledge of the matter said the NBA has sent teams a memo saying players can leave their home markets during the shutdown if they so choose — yet another clear sign that the game's hiatus is not ending anytime soon. But if those players do leave for another market, they must do so after coordinating plans with their teams and medical advisers.

The memo also told teams formal practices will remain off indefinitely, individual workouts at team facilities may continue and detailed other safeguards teams should be taking at this point, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the memo had not been released publicly.

The NBA has already been asking teams to share availability for their arenas through the end of July, a sign that the league is prepared to extend the season at least that long if necessary — and those moves came a couple of days before the CDC made its latest recommendation. The NBA regular season was to have ended April 15 and the NBA Finals were to have started June 4, with the season done on or before June 21.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

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The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover. In mainland China, where the virus first exploded, more than 80,000 people have been diagnosed and more than 58,000 have so far recovered.

It's not just the team sports that have been shut down: Pro tennis and golf have basically been called off for the next several weeks, with such marquee events as Indian Wells and the Miami Open in tennis and The Players Championship and Masters in golf either canceled or postponed. The NCAA men's Division I college basketball tournament — March Madness — was to release its bracket Sunday and start the now-canceled 68-team tournament Tuesday. The women's Division I tournament was to have started this week.

They've all been called off, as have all other winter- and spring-sport seasons at all levels of the NCAA. Most high school state associations have also had to cancel seasons and championships as well. Some minor-league hockey leagues have canceled seasons, and it seems increasingly unlikely that the G League -- the NBA's minor league -- will resume play this season. Even a polo match in South Florida on Sunday was played without fans or reporters present, with organizers saying they needed to take ultimate precautions.

Some NBA players were spending Sunday at home playing video games; Miami's Goran Dragic posted a video of himself outside his house kicking a soccer ball around. Others, like Golden State's Stephen Curry, were urging their fans to continue taking the pandemic seriously.

"We all have to take responsibility for ourselves and do whatever it takes to #stopthespread," Curry told his 14.1 million followers on Twitter. "There's a sense of urgency to flatten the curve and give ourselves and the healthcare system the best chance to get through this pandemic. Share this message and let's protect each other!"

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Party's over: 4 states close bars, restaurants over virus

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

On Saturday night, revelers in many parts of the country ignored warnings against attending large gatherings to prevent the spread of coronavirus. On Sunday, it became clear that in many places, the party is over.

Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, Washington state and New York City are among the places that ordered bars to close and restaurants to stop dine-in service. Takeout and delivery will still be allowed.

In New Orleans and Chicago, people clad in green for St. Patrick's Day packed bars and spilled onto crowded sidewalks Saturday, even after the cities canceled their parades.

"I'm not about to put my life on hold because this is going around," Kyle Thomas told the Chicago Sun-Times. Thomas, a nurse from Colorado, said he had flown to Chicago to celebrate St. Patrick's Day with friends and thought people might be "overreacting."

In New Orleans, Syd Knight, 86, celebrated despite the public health warnings and the higher risk she faced because of her age.

"The Lord will take care of us all," Knight told The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate.

Oklahoma's governor tweeted a picture of himself and his children at a crowded metro restaurant Saturday night.

In the since-deleted tweet, Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt wrote: "Eating with my kids and all my fellow Oklahomans at the @CollectiveOKC. It's packed tonight!"

"The governor will continue to take his family out to dinner and to the grocery store without living in fear, and encourages Oklahomans to do the same," Charlie Hannema, a spokesman for the governor, said in an email.

Health officials have advised people to distance themselves from each other socially. Some states have banned gatherings with more than a certain number of people. Those warnings have become more urgent as the disease spread in the U.S., where about 3,500 people have become infected and more than

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60 have died.

The vast majority of people who contract the new virus recover within weeks. It causes only mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but can lead to more severe illness, including pneumonia for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems.

"The time for persuasion and public appeals is over," Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said. "This is not a joke. No one is immune to this."

The Democratic governor ordered all bars and restaurants in his state to close from Monday night until March 30. He said he had tried earlier last week to appeal to everyone's good judgment to stay home, to avoid bars, and not congregate in crowds.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a statement saying he will limit the city's 27,000 restaurants, bars and cafes to food takeout and delivery beginning Tuesday. Nightclubs, movie theaters, small theater houses, and concert venues will have to close.

Washington, the state hardest hit by the virus with more than 40 dead, will see its bars, restaurants, entertainment and recreation facilities all temporarily closed except for food takeout and delivery.

"These are very difficult decisions, but hours count here and very strong measures are necessary to slow the spread of the disease," Inslee said.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker also ordered all bars and dine-in restaurants to close for three weeks. The Republican asked residents "to take a deep breath and understand the rationale behind this guidance."

All bars and restaurants in Ohio are closed until further notice. Republican Gov. Mike DeWine said the "very drastic action" was prompted by concerns from around the state about crowded bars. "If we don't take these actions now, it'll be too late," he said.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom called for all bars, wineries, nightclubs and brewpubs to close in the nation's most populous state. The Democrat said the new orders are guidelines that "we have the capacity to enforce if necessary."

In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti issued an executive order Sunday to close bars, nightclubs, entertainment venues and gyms until at least March 31. Restaurants will be closed to the public but Garcetti will allow them to do takeout and delivery. Grocery stores will remain open.

Officials in New Jersey are considering a statewide curfew to help prevent the spread of the virus, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said Sunday.

"A friend of mine walked into a bar/restaurant last night in Asbury Park and they were packed," Murphy, a Democrat, said on WBSL-FM 107.5. "And people are on top of each other. And that's probably, sadly, at least for the near term, scenarios that we're not going to be able to abide by much longer because, inevitably, somebody is going to infect somebody else in a situation like that."

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell said it was "unacceptable" that people were ignoring a ban issued by Gov. John Bel Edwards on gatherings of more than 250 people. The violators were "actively increasing the danger to their neighbors and their loved ones," Cantrell said.

The hashtag "StayTheFHome" was trending on Twitter on Sunday. Several countries in Europe have closed bars.

Advising people to completely avoid restaurants "might be overkill right now," the nation's top infectious disease expert, Anthony Fauci, said on CBS' "Face the Nation," but he added that he wouldn't go to one himself because he didn't want to be in a "crowded place" and risk having to self-quarantine.

Republican Rep. Devin Nunes had a different message on Fox News Channel's Sunday Morning Futures, encouraging people to go to local restaurants and pubs.

"There's a lot of concerns with the economy here because people are scared to go out, but I will just say one of the things you can do — if you're healthy, you and your family it's a great time to just go out, go to a local restaurant, likely you can get in easily," he said. "Let's not hurt the working people in this country that are relying on wages and tips to keep their small business going."

This version has been corrected to show that the name of the show Nunes appeared on was Fox News

Channel's Sunday Morning Futures.

Thanawala reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Sophia Tareen and Herb McCann in Chicago, Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City and Larry Neumeister in New York City contributed to this report.

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US moves nearer to shutdown amid coronavirus fears

By TERRY SPENCER and TERESA CRAWFORD Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Officials across the country curtailed many elements of American life to fight the coronavirus outbreak on Sunday, with health officials recommending that groups of 50 or more don't get together and a government expert saying a 14-day national shutdown may be needed.

Governors and mayors closed restaurants, bars, and schools as the nation sank deeper into chaos. Travelers returning home from abroad were stuck in line for hours at major airports for screenings, crammed into just the kind of crowded spaces that public health officials have urged people to avoid.

In a sign of impending economic gloom, the Federal Reserve slashed its benchmark interest rate to near zero. President Donald Trump sought to calm a jittery nation by declaring the government has "tremendous control" over the situation and urging people to stop the panic buying of grocery staples that has depleted store shelves nationwide. Gun stores started seeing a similar run on weapons and ammunition as the panic intensified.

As Americans struggled with changing their daily habits, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a dramatic recommendation: Because large events can fuel the spread of the disease, it said gatherings of 50 people or more should be canceled or postponed throughout the country for the next eight weeks. It added that, at any event, people should take proper precautions, including handwashing and keeping one's distance.

But in a sign of the difficulty of striking the right balance, the CDC statement also said the recommendation does not apply to "the day to day operation of organizations such as schools, institutes of higher learning, or businesses."

Even before the warning, parts of the country already look like ghost towns, and others are about to follow as theme parks closed, beaches shooed away spring breakers and states and large cities ordered bars and restaurants shuttered.

"The time for persuasion and public appeals is over," Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said. "This is not a joke. No one is immune to this."

New York City said eateries could only accept takeout and delivery orders. Mayor Bill de Blasio also ordered nightclubs, movie theaters and other entertainment venues closed.

"These places are part of the heart and soul of our city. They are part of what it means to be a New Yorker," he said in a statement Sunday night. "But our city is facing an unprecedented threat, and we must respond with a wartime mentality."

His decision came after Dr. Anthony Fauci, the federal government's top infectious disease expert, said he would like to see a 14-day national shutdown imposed to prevent the virus's spread.

"I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing," said Fauci, a member of the White House task force on combating the spread of coronavirus. He heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health.

There is no indication Trump is considering such a move.

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The worldwide outbreak has sickened nearly 170,000 people and left more than 6,500 dead, with thousands of new cases confirmed each day. The death toll in the United States climbed to 64, while infections passed 3,700.

Meanwhile, state and local officials rained harsh criticism on Trump and his administration over long lines of returning international passengers at some U.S. airports.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot lambasted the administration for allowing about 3,000 Americans returning from Europe to be stuck for hours inside the customs area at O'Hare International Airport on Saturday, violating "social distancing" recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The passengers, many of them rushing home over fears they would be stuck in Europe, were screened for coronavirus symptoms before they were allowed to leave the airport.

Long lines also formed Saturday in Boston, Dallas and others of the 13 airports accepting return flights from Europe.

"People were forced into conditions that are against CDC guidance and are totally unacceptable," Lightfoot said.

Elizabeth Pulvermacher, a University of Wisconsin student, arrived Saturday at O'Hare from Madrid, where she had been studying, and spent hours in line. The customs process made her feel "unsafe," she said.

"The whole idea is getting rid of the spread of coronavirus, but there were hundreds and hundreds of people in very close proximity," Pulvermacher said.

Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director of Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University, said he was "appalled" by what he saw Saturday at nearby O'Hare.

"If they weren't exposed to COVID-19 before, they probably are now. From a public health perspective, this is malpractice," Murphy said in a statement Sunday. "The lack of preparation and concern is unfathomable."

But the situation improved markedly Sunday. Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said waits were down to 30 minutes after processes were adjusted to better handle the influx and extra personnel were sent to the selected airports.

Bailey Miles, a 20-year-old sophomore at Taylor University in Indiana, arrived also from Madrid fearing the worst, but she got through customs and a health screening in about an hour. She said officials seemed to have learned their lesson from Saturday, when some of her friends returned.

"The employees were really helpful, had positive attitudes and had a lot of grace," she said. She said a woman even passed out snacks.

At Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, Amanda Kay said she was asked to keep her distance from other passengers when she arrived from Paris at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey.

"They wanted 50 people at a time. So the first 50 people got off, and they asked us to keep a large distance between ourselves," she said.

Going forward, Wolf said he could not rule out a halt to air travel within the U.S. Fauci said earlier Sunday on television that halting domestic travel had been discussed, though not seriously.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover.

And that may have given some people false hope, causing them to venture into crowds that Fauci and others would prefer they avoid. Even if someone doesn't become visibly ill, they can still carry the disease and spread it to others.

Not all government officials were concerned. Oklahoma's Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt tweeted a picture of himself and his children at a crowded metro restaurant Saturday night. Republican Rep. Devin Nunes had a similar message on Fox News Channel's Sunday Morning Futures, encouraging people to go to local restaurants and pubs despite the warnings of health officials.

In New Orleans and Chicago, people clad in green for St. Patrick's Day packed bars and spilled onto

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crowded sidewalks on Saturday even after the cities canceled their parades.

New York City announced its public school district, the nation's largest, will be closed starting Monday, joining most of the rest of the country. De Blasio had originally balked, but under pressure from Gov. Andrew Cuomo and others he said Sunday, "I became convinced over the course of today that there is no other choice."

Starbucks said Sunday it is closing seating in its cafes and patio areas nationwide, but customers can still order takeaway.

In Florida, Walt Disney World and Universal-Orlando closed Sunday night for the rest of the month, joining their already closed California siblings. Farther south, Miami Beach and Fort Lauderdale closed their beaches, where thousands of college spring breakers flocked. The cities also ordered restaurants and bars closed by 10 p.m. and to keep crowds below 250.

"We cannot become a petri dish for a very dangerous virus," Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber said. "Spring break is over. The party is over."

Spencer reported from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Associated Press journalists Mallika Sen, Vanessa Alvarez, Seth Wenig, Lisa Marie Pane, Christopher Weber, Eugene Johnson and John Seewer contributed.

This story has been updated to correct that the name of the show Nunes appeared on was Fox News Channel's Sunday Morning Futures, not Fox News Sunday.

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New York City schools to close Monday to fight coronavirus

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City will close the nation's largest public school system Monday, sending over 1.1 million children home in hopes of curbing the spread of coronavirus, the city's mayor announced Sunday.

A somber Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the decision to close schools through at least April 20 — and possibly for the school year — as similar closures occurred in communities and entire states nationwide and pressure mounted from New York residents, City Council members and others.

"I have no words for how horrible it is, but it has become necessary," de Blasio said. "As of now, school is canceled for tomorrow."

Hours later, he also took aim at the city's nightlife, saying he would sign an order Monday limiting the city's 27,000 restaurants and bars to takeout and delivery only. The order, which would take effect Tuesday at 9 a.m., would also shut down all nightclubs, movie theaters and concert venues.

The Democrat took the pair of actions on a day that New York City's death toll from the virus rose to five and the number of infected residents multiplied.

De Blasio had, for days, said that closing schools was a last resort.

Just Saturday, the Democratic mayor said keeping schools running was critical. He worried that health care workers and first responders would have to stay home to care for children, and that hundreds of thousands of poor students could go hungry without their free or reduced-price school meals.

He also expressed doubt that a temporary closure of just a few weeks would be effective in slowing the spread of the virus.

But the shutdown had started to seem inevitable Sunday as de Blasio lost key support to keep schools open and Gov. Andrew Cuomo called for all downstate schools to be closed.

County officials have said schools will shut as well on Long Island, in Erie County, including Buffalo, and

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in Westchester County.

The decision, late on a Sunday, put parents in a position of trying to arrange alternative childcare arrangements with little notice.

The school system, officials said, would attempt to quickly launch a "remote learning" program a week from Monday, with teachers being trained on the methods beginning Tuesday.

"They have been working on a wartime footing to prepare it," de Blasio said of administrators. He also announced that the city will open centers for the children of health care and emergency workers.

The shutdown affects the city's nearly 1,900 public schools. Many private schools already have closed. Multiple states had already announced they were closing schools. So have cities like Los Angeles, Houston, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington, D.C.

The school closure is part of a strategy of trying to slow the spread of the virus through social distancing — having people stay away from each other, and especially avoid large groups. Cuomo had previously ordered an end to gatherings of 500 people or more, darkening Broadway theaters, sports arenas and concert halls. Most major museums in the city have been closing down.

"We've never been through anything like this," de Blasio said. "Everyone is confused. Everyone is in pain."

He said the city would get through it through everyone "looking out for each other."

Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza called it "a very sobering day for all of us" and said the decision was made after a situation that's been evolving and been monitored "day by day, hour by hour and in some cases, minute by minute."

Earlier, George Gresham, president of the health care workers union SIEU 1199, had called on de Blasio to close city schools, a reversal for the union, which had previously warned that hospitals could face a manpower crisis if health care workers had to stay home with their children.

Gresham said Sunday he was confident a plan could provide childcare for health care workers.

United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew called the decision to close schools "a critical step to reduce the spread of the virus and to help preserve the health of our students, their families and our staff."

This story has been updated to correct that Westchester County schools will close by Wednesday, not Monday, as a news release from the governor's office said.

Associated Press Writer Marina Villeneuve reported from Albany. Associated Press Writer Jennifer Peltz contributed to this report.

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Daily life near a standstill as nations try to halt pandemic

By **FRANCES D'EMILIO** and **JOSEPH WILSON** Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Meeting with friends, dining out, worshiping and other daily routines have nearly halted as nations take drastic steps to try to stop the coronavirus pandemic.

Religious leaders gave sermons to empty pews or to the faithful watching online Sunday after public worship was curtailed in many places. The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City was being closed indefinitely, and the Vatican closed off next month's Holy Week services to the public. Still, the 83-year-old Pope Francis ventured out of the Vatican to visit two churches in Rome to pray for the sick.

In the United States, health officials recommended a limit to groups of 50 or more people and a government expert said a 14-day national shutdown may be needed. Americans returning from abroad encountered chaotic airport health screenings and closed-down communities.

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In a sign of how much the pandemic has grown, China now accounts for less than half of the world's 168,000 cases, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

The country where the virus was first detected in December had long been the epicenter of the COVID-19 illness, but a shutdown of public gatherings and a quarantine of the hardest-hit central region has steadied its caseload as the virus spreads rapidly elsewhere. Most of the world's 77,000 recovered patients are in China.

Though China still has the most infections, a dozen other countries have more than 1,000 cases, mostly in Europe.

On the first day of Spain's quarantine, long lines formed for food as police patrolled. Soldiers and police sealed off the Philippines' densely populated capital, Manila, from most domestic travelers. Austria planned to limit movement, and Lebanon was put on lockdown, closing down Beirut's famed seaside corniche.

Ireland ordered all pubs and bars to close for two weeks — including on Tuesday, St. Patrick's Day — and urged people not even to hold house parties. Two pub industry groups had warned of the "real difficulty" in keeping people apart in the country's famous watering holes.

Italy welcomed a Chinese medical team to help it cope with its patient workload as health officials warn of what will come as the virus hits elsewhere.

"It's not a wave. It's a tsunami," said Dr. Roberto Rona, who's in charge of intensive care at the Monza hospital.

Italy on Sunday reported its biggest day-to-day increase in infections — 3,590 more cases in a 24-hour period — for a total of almost 24,747. And 368 more deaths brought its toll to 1,809, more than a quarter of the global death toll.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and those with mild illness recover in about two weeks. But severe illness including pneumonia can occur, especially in the elderly and people with existing health problems, and recovery could take six weeks in such cases.

The needs to stop the virus from spreading to the most vulnerable people and to not overwhelm health care systems with sick patients are pushing the urgent calls for people to avoid public crowds or just stay home.

People should go out "only alone or with the people who live in their apartment," said Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, whose country has 800 infections.

That was echoed by one of America's top infectious disease experts.

"I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing," Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health told NBC's "Meet the Press."

Governors in California, Illinois and Ohio told all bars and restaurants to close or reduce their number of customers. New York City will shutter the nation's largest public school system as early as Tuesday, sending over 1.1 million children home.

With fears increasing that the pandemic will depress U.S. economic growth, the Federal Reserve took emergency action by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and deciding to buy \$700 billion in Treasury and mortgage bonds.

Travelers returning to the U.S. after the Trump administration imposed a wide-ranging ban on people entering from Europe faced hourslong waits for medical screenings. Images on social media showed packed arrival halls and winding lines.

"This is unacceptable, counterproductive and exactly the opposite of what we need to do to prevent #COVID19," Illinois Sen. Tammy Duckworth tweeted.

Italy banned passengers from taking ferries to Sardinia and halted overnight train trips, which many in the north had used to reach homes and families in the south.

Even as authorities pleaded for people to stay home, Pope Francis visited St. Mary Major Basilica, near Rome's central train station, to pray for the sick, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said.

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He then walked to another church with a crucifix that in 1522 was carried in a procession during a plague afflicting Rome. In his prayer, Francis has "invoked the end of the pandemia that has stricken Italy and the world, implored healing for the many sick, recalled the many victims of these days" and asked for consolation for their family and friends.

During his 90-minute foray, the pontiff and his security detail were nearly the only people around.

The Vatican will all Holy Week ceremonies to the public starting with Palm Sunday on April 5. Holy Week services usually draw tens of thousands to Rome but Italian tourism has vanished.

Spain was under lockdown amid a two-week state of emergency.

"From now, we enter into a new phase," said Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose wife tested positive. "We won't hesitate in doing what we need must to beat the virus. We are putting health first."

In Barcelona, there were long lines to buy bread. Police patrolled parks and told people who were not walking their dogs to go home. The Las Ramblas promenade was eerily empty.

Spain's Health Ministry said the country has recorded 288 deaths, up from 136 on Saturday. The number of infections rose to 7,753 from 5,700.

The Czech Republic will start a lockdown Monday, and Netherlands ordered all schools, day-care centers, restaurants and bars to close until April 6. The new restrictions cover Amsterdam's famed marijuana-selling "coffee shops" and sex clubs.

Elsewhere, Morocco suspended all international flights, and Turkey set aside quarantine beds for more than 10,000 people returning from Islam's holy sites in Saudi Arabia.

Even as social life largely halted, some attempts at keeping up public life persisted.

France went ahead Sunday with nationwide elections to choose mayors and other local leaders. A 1-meter (yard) gap between people was mandated, as well as soap or sanitizing gel and disinfectant wipes for voting machines.

The German state of Bavaria also held municipal elections, with poll workers wearing gloves. Germany will partially close its borders with France, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg and Denmark on Monday, and Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said people will no longer be allowed to cross those borders without a valid reason, such as for work.

Britain, which has not yet restricted everyday activities, said it plans to set out emergency powers this week, including potentially requiring people over 70 to self-isolate for up to four months and banning mass gatherings.

"We will do the right thing at the right time," Health Secretary Matt Hancock told the BBC.

Puerto Rico ordered nearly all businesses to close for next two weeks and set a nighttime curfew following confirmation of a fifth case.

With the virus having reached 25 of Africa's 54 countries, sweeping restrictions were announced. Kenya is banning travelers from countries with infections and closing all schools for three weeks.

Senegal and Mauritania also are closing schools. Senegal also banned all public gatherings for a month, stopping cruise ships from docking and suspending Muslim and Christian pilgrimages.

Dalia Samhouri, a regional official with the World Health Organization, said both Iran and Egypt, two of the most populous countries in the Mideast, were likely underreporting cases because infected people can still show no visible symptoms. Iran says it has nearly 14,000 virus cases and 724 deaths, while Egypt has reported 110 cases, including two fatalities.

Testing for the illness has also varied from country to country and community to community. The U.S. was prioritizing medical workers and senior citizens with symptoms, in order to avoid paralyzing the health care system.

"It's important the tests are available for the people who are most in need and our health care workers and first responders that are helping and supporting them," Vice President Mike Pence told reporters at the White House.

Wilson reported from Barcelona, Spain. Associated Press writers Geir Moulson in Berlin, Iain Sullivan in Madrid, Sylvie Corbet in Paris, Yanan Wang in Beijing, Andrew Taylor in Washington, and Jim Gomez in

Manila contributed to this report.

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How national security surveillance nabs more than spies

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The case against Nassif Sami Daher and Kamel Mohammad Rammal, two Michigan men accused of food stamp fraud, hardly seemed exceptional. But the tool that agents used to investigate them was extraordinary: a secretive surveillance process intended to identify potential spies and terrorists.

It meant that the men, unlike most criminal defendants, were never shown the evidence authorities used to begin investigating them or the information that the Justice Department presented to obtain the original warrant.

The case is among recent Justice Department prosecutions that relied on the same surveillance powers, known by the acronym FISA, that law enforcement officials acknowledge were misused in the Russia investigation. Those errors have prompted a reckoning inside the FBI and debate in Congress about new privacy safeguards. The attention given to FISA has also cast a spotlight on cases such as the Michigan one, where surveillance tools used to investigate foreign intelligence threats end up leading to prosecutions for commonplace, domestic crimes.

The department says it can't turn a blind eye to crimes it uncovers when scrutinizing someone for national security purposes, even if those offenses weren't the initial basis of the investigation. In recent years, inquiries that began with FISA warrants have yielded charges including child pornography and bank and wire fraud.

Current and former officials say just because a FISA warrant produces charges other than national security ones doesn't mean the target is no longer considered a national security threat. Sometimes, particularly when disrupting a terrorism plot, prosecutors may charge other crimes they find evidence of for fear of tipping the target's conspirators to the investigation's actual purpose.

But critics say building routine cases on evidence derived from FISA warrants undermines constitutional protections against unreasonable searches. And if the original surveillance application is riddled with errors or omissions, they say, any resulting prosecution is tainted. Though some judges have raised concerns, no court has prohibited the practice. The Supreme Court has never directly confronted the specific issue.

Patrick Toomey, senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union national security project, noted that the Fourth Amendment requires the government to describe the type of criminal evidence it's seeking before conducting a search.

"Our view is that the types of broad searches for foreign intelligence information flips the Fourth Amendment on its head when the government repurposes those searches for domestic criminal prosecutions," Toomey said.

That's what happened with Daher and Rammal. They were charged in August 2018 with defrauding the food stamp program in a scheme that investigators say was based at a Detroit service station.

The next month, prosecutors told them they intended to use information collected under a warrant approved by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, which authorizes law enforcement to eavesdrop on people it has probable cause to believe are agents of a foreign power.

That meant that while Daher and Rammal could see government evidence about the fraud allegations, they were denied details about the reasons for the national security surveillance.

Though the Justice Department has refused to disclose the application it submitted to the court, its filings make clear the case was part of a broader terrorism-related inquiry. Prosecutors produced a statement

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from Attorney General William Barr saying the FISA materials held classified information about counterterrorism investigations and that disclosing them would harm national security.

Rammal, who was raised in Lebanon, has since pleaded guilty to fraud. Daher has fought unsuccessfully to see the FISA information and is awaiting trial. His lawyers contend Daher was targeted in a post-Sept. 11 "mob mentality." Neither man faced terrorist-related charges.

"Sami is a nerd with a big ego and imagination, but, he is not a terrorist or a National Security threat," Daher's lawyers wrote.

The Justice Department says the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act explicitly permits law enforcement to use evidence from FISA warrants for domestic criminal prosecutions and that it makes obvious sense to do so.

"Congress intended that you not ignore evidence of another crime while you're doing foreign intelligence surveillance, and FISA itself reflects this," Assistant Attorney General John Demers, the department's top national security official, said in a statement. "It's nonsensical to ignore evidence of a crime that we've lawfully gathered."

Nonetheless, defense lawyers see the department as straying beyond FISA's original intent.

Critics have long complained about the one-sided nature of the process. Targets of the surveillance, for instance, are consistently denied copies of FISA applications, making it hard for them to know the accuracy of the information given to the court, to learn why precisely prosecutors considered them a national security concern and to contest the legitimacy of the search.

In the Russia case, details of the FISA warrant used on ex-Trump campaign adviser Carter Page became known only because of the highly partisan congressional fight over special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation. Later, the Justice Department inspector general found the FBI omitted from its applications key information that should have been presented to the court.

The FBI has since announced steps aimed at ensuring that its wiretap applications are more accurate. The House passed legislation Wednesday containing new privacy protections. The Senate left for the week without approving it, allowing certain FISA provisions to temporarily expire.

Most FISA warrants don't result in criminal prosecution. Page, for instance, has denied wrongdoing and was never charged. Those that do generally involve national security crimes.

But other investigations with a classified or national security focus have ended instead with more routine criminal charges.

In California, a small business owner named Abdallah Osseily was charged by national security prosecutors in 2019 with lying on bank documents and on his naturalization petition.

Prosecutors produced evidence confirming he'd been eavesdropped on, but defense lawyers say the recordings didn't come from conventional criminal wiretaps, leading them to believe they were from a FISA warrant. The Justice Department has refused to confirm if that's the case but says the prosecution isn't based on evidence from a FISA warrant. Defense lawyers have nonetheless fought to see the original surveillance application.

"He's not given the opportunity to clear his name or to otherwise challenge the government's accusations that he represents a national security threat," said his lawyer, Bilal Essayli.

Last August, federal authorities notified a think tank fellow and ex-State Department employee that they intended to use evidence from a FISA warrant in his mortgage fraud case.

The man, David Tawei An, was being investigated for his ties to Taiwanese officials when FBI agents encountered what they said was evidence he had submitted a false loan application. An ultimately pleaded guilty to fraud.

One prominent case concerns a former Boeing manager, Keith Gartenlaub, who was targeted with a FISA warrant because agents suspected him of having helped China acquire information on a C-17 military transport plane.

Agents using that warrant to search his computer files said they found images of child pornography. Prosecutors charged him with that but not with spying for China, something he adamantly denies.

He was convicted on the child pornography counts and recently released after nearly two years in prison,

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though he says the images weren't his and were on an old computer multiple people who came in and out of his California beach house had access to.

"FISA has become a way to circumvent due process in the legal system," Gartenlaub said. "Anybody in my situation cannot defend themselves because you can't see anything."

A San Francisco-based federal appeals court upheld his conviction. But it also said a prosecution for "completely unrelated crimes discovered as a result of rummaging" through a computer "comes perilously close to the exact abuses against which the Fourth Amendment was designed to protect."

The ACLU sees an opening to narrow the government's powers, saying courts are only now starting to grapple with the fairness of national security searches being used in ordinary prosecutions.

"These searches," Toomey said in an email, "upend bedrock constitutional protections."

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Fed takes emergency steps to slash rates and ease bank rules

By **CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve took massive emergency action Sunday to try to help the economy withstand the coronavirus by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and saying it would buy \$700 billion in Treasury and mortgage bonds.

The Fed's surprise announcement signaled its rising concern that the viral outbreak will depress economic growth in coming months, likely causing a recession, and that it's poised to do whatever it can to counter the risks. It cut its key rate by a full percentage point to a range between zero and 0.25%.

The central bank said it will keep its rate there until it is "confident that the economy has weathered recent events."

The Fed will buy at least \$500 billion of Treasury securities and at least \$200 billion of mortgage-backed securities. This amounts to an effort to ease market disruptions that have made it harder for banks and large investors to sell Treasuries as well as to keep longer-term borrowing rates down.

All told, the Fed's aggressive actions are intended to keep financial markets functioning and lending flowing to businesses and consumers. Otherwise, as revenue dries up for countless small businesses that have suddenly lost customers, these employers could be forced to lay off workers or even seek bankruptcy protection in some cases.

"This is a break-the-glass moment" for the Fed, said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. "They are throwing everything they've got at this. My sense is they must be nervous about the credit system not functioning properly. They are trying to shore up confidence."

By slashing its benchmark short-term rate and pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into the financial system, the Fed's moves Sunday recalled the emergency action it took at the height of the financial crisis. Starting in 2008, the Fed cut its key rate to near zero and kept it there for seven years. The central bank has now returned that rate — which influences many consumer and business loans — to its record-low level.

The new bond purchases will be similar to the several rounds of "quantitative easing," or QE, that the Fed conducted during and after the Great Recession to bolster the financial system and the economy. Chairman Jerome Powell, in a conference call with reporters, said the Fed's purchases are intended to ensure that credit markets function properly.

Shoring up the Treasury bond market and other sources of credit, Powell added, is vital to the health of the economy.

Powell warned that the economy would likely shrink in the April-June quarter because of the widespread shutdowns from the coronavirus and a broad pullback in consumer spending. He noted that the necessary behavioral changes being made across the country to stem the outbreak — an avoidance of travel, shopping and mass gatherings — are inherently harmful to the economy, which he said had been in solid shape before the virus hit.

"Ultimately, the virus will run its course and the U.S. economy will resume a normal level of activity,"

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Powell said, though he didn't speculate on when the rebound might occur.

"The virus is having a profound effect on the people of the United States and across the world," Powell said. The primary response will need to come from health care providers, he stressed, as many experts have.

Still, he added that "economic policymakers must do what we can to ease hardship caused by disruptions to the economy, and support a swift return to normal once they've passed."

Powell acknowledged a concern sounded by many economists in recent weeks: That the Fed, the European Central Bank and other leading central banks have only a limited ability to ease the economic damage caused by the virus. The chairman said that Congress and the White House would also have to use tax and spending policies to boost the economy.

"We don't have the tools to reach individuals and particularly small businesses," he said on the conference call. "But this is a multi-faceted problem, and it requires answers from different parts of the government and society."

A statement from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York noted that the central bank's new Treasury purchases will begin with \$40 billion on Monday, while the mortgage bond purchases will total roughly \$80 billion over the next month.

"We're going to go in strong, starting tomorrow, Powell said, "and ... do what we need to do to restore market function."

The Fed is also joining in a coordinated global action, with the the Bank of Canada, the Bank of England, the Bank of Japan, the European Central Bank and the Swiss National Bank, to provide cheap dollar credit to banks. This move is intended to ensure that foreign banks continue to have access to dollars that they lend to overseas companies.

Powell said the Fed acted Sunday after having decided to meet this weekend in lieu of the meeting its policy committee had been scheduled to hold Tuesday and Wednesday this week. He also said the central bank decided not to issue its usual quarterly projections for the economy and interest rates this week because the virus is altering the economic picture too quickly to make such projections useful.

U.S. stock futures began falling after the Fed's announcement. Futures for the S&P 500 index were down about 4.5%. Gold prices rose 3.5%.

Sunday's action drew rare praise from President Donald Trump, who had attacked the Fed as recently as Saturday, as he has frequently, for not acting quickly or aggressively enough.

"It make me very happy," Trump said as he opened a White House briefing on the coronavirus. "I think that people and the markets should be very thrilled."

One dissenting Fed member, Loretta Mester, president of the Cleveland Federal Reserve, voted Sunday against the full-point rate cut, favoring a half-point cut instead. She did support the Fed's other actions to boost credit markets.

As more businesses across the country see their revenue dwindle as consumers stay home, many of them will seek short-term loans to maintain their payrolls. The Fed said it has dropped its normal requirement that banks hold cash equal to 10% of its customers' deposits, thereby allowing banks to lend that money instead. It also said banks can use additional cash buffers that were imposed after the 2008 financial crisis for lending.

"It confirms that the Fed sees the economy going down ... very sharply" toward recession, said Adam Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said.

Yet with the virus' spread causing a broad shutdown of economic activity in the United States, the Fed faces a hugely daunting task. Its tools — intended to ease borrowing rates, facilitate lending and boost confidence — are not ideally suited to offset a fear-driven shutdown in spending and traveling.

"This isn't going to be the magic bullet that saves everything," said Timothy Duy, an economist at the University of Oregon who follows the Fed, but sends a signal to Congress that the economy needs emergency stimulus.

Duy predicted that the Fed will follow up with further actions, including possibly changing its inflation

target to allow for more stimulus and providing more support for commercial paper — the short-term notes that companies issue to meet expenses.

"I don't think they're done yet," Duy said.

Earlier Sunday, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said that both the central bank and the federal government have tools at their disposal to support the economy.

Mnuchin also said he did not think the economy is yet in recession. Many leading economists, though, have said they believe a recession has either already arrived or will soon. JPMorgan Chase predicts the economy will shrink at a 2% annual rate in the current quarter and 3% in the April-June quarter.

Two weeks ago, in a surprise move, the Fed sought to offset the disease's drags on the economy by cutting its short-term rate by a half-percentage point — its first cut between policy meetings since the financial crisis.

AP Economics Writers Paul Wiseman and Martin Crutsinger in Washington and David McHugh in Frankfurt, Germany, contributed to this report.

Government official: Coronavirus vaccine trial starts Monday

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first participant in a clinical trial for a vaccine to protect against the new coronavirus will receive an experimental dose on Monday, according to a government official.

The National Institutes of Health is funding the trial, which is taking place at the Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute in Seattle. The official who disclosed plans for the first participant spoke on condition of anonymity because the move has not been publicly announced.

Public health officials say it will take a year to 18 months to fully validate any potential vaccine.

Testing will begin with 45 young, healthy volunteers with different doses of shots co-developed by NIH and Moderna Inc. There's no chance participants could get infected from the shots, because they don't contain the virus itself. The goal is purely to check that the vaccines show no worrisome side effects, setting the stage for larger tests.

Dozens of research groups around the world are racing to create a vaccine as COVID-19 cases continue to grow. Importantly, they're pursuing different types of vaccines — shots developed from new technologies that not only are faster to produce than traditional inoculations but might prove more potent. Some researchers even aim for temporary vaccines, such as shots that might guard people's health a month or two at a time while longer-lasting protection is developed.

Also in the works: Inovio Pharmaceuticals aims to begin safety tests of its vaccine candidate next month in a few dozen volunteers at the University of Pennsylvania and a testing center in Kansas City, Missouri, followed by a similar study in China and South Korea.

Even if initial safety tests go well, "you're talking about a year to a year and a half" before any vaccine could be ready for widespread use, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

That still would be a record-setting pace. But manufacturers know the wait — required because it takes additional studies of thousands of people to tell if a vaccine truly protects and does no harm — is hard for a frightened public.

President Donald Trump has been pushing for swift action on a vaccine, saying in recent days that the work is "moving along very quickly" and he hopes to see a vaccine "relatively soon."

Today, there are no proven treatments. In China, scientists have been testing a combination of HIV drugs against the new coronavirus, as well as an experimental drug named remdesivir that was in development to fight Ebola. In the U.S., the University of Nebraska Medical Center also began testing remdesivir in some Americans who were found to have COVID-19 after being evacuated from a cruise ship in Japan.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe

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illness, including pneumonia. The worldwide outbreak has sickened more than 156,000 people and left more than 5,800 dead. The death toll in the United States is more than 50, while infections neared 3,000 across 49 states and the District of Columbia.

The vast majority of people recover. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three weeks to six weeks to recover.

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NFL players approve labor deal, including 17-game season

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

By a close vote, with some 500 union members not participating, NFL players approved a new labor agreement with the league. It features a 17-game regular season, higher salaries, increased roster sizes and larger pensions for current and former players.

The deal, which runs through the 2030 season, was accepted by the 32 team owners last month. The NFL Players Association's membership spent the last week voting on the 439-page document after its executive board narrowly rejected it by a 6-5 vote, and the player representatives voted 17-14 in favor, with one abstention.

Clearly, there was some strong player opposition to this collective bargaining agreement, though. Many stars, including Aaron Rodgers, Russell Wilson, J.J. Watt and Todd Gurley, spoke out against it. The total vote, among the nearly 2,500 union members who participated, was 1,019-959. Ratification required a simple majority — results were announced Sunday — and there could be lasting resentment among union members, given how close the vote was.

"Can't believe we agreed to that lol," Colts tight end Eric Ebron tweeted. "We can only play this game for so long and y'all didn't want everything we could get out of it? ... 2030 y'all do better."

Ravens cornerback Marlon Humphrey expressed displeasure about the turnout for voting.

"Around 500 players didn't even vote on the new CBA ...," he tweeted. "It's good and bad to this deal. I could see why anyone would vote either way. I just think it's amazing guys don't even care."

Almost immediately, players were urging unity, particularly in the face of the criticism from within their ranks about approving the deal.

"The democratic process has played itself out," tweeted Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins, one of the most influential voices in the union. "We must be committed to unifying our current and former members. While I don't agree with the decision because of its negative impacts on some current and former players, I do respect our process and will push forward accordingly."

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, not surprisingly, praised the players' acceptance of the new CBA.

"We are pleased that the players have voted to ratify the proposed new CBA, which will provide substantial benefits to all current and retired players, increase jobs, ensure continued progress on player safety, and give our fans more and better football," Goodell said in a statement. "We appreciate the tireless efforts of the members of the Management Council Executive Committee and the NFLPA leadership, both of whom devoted nearly a year to detailed, good faith negotiations to reach this comprehensive, transformative agreement."

After discussions with the union during the day, the NFL sent a memo to all teams Sunday night that the league will open the 2020 NFL business season on Wednesday, as scheduled, with free agency and trades. A delay had been considered a possibility given league restrictions on travel as a safeguard against the new coronavirus.

There was no immediate word on timing and potential format changes for the draft, scheduled for Las Vegas from April 23-25, something that was also expected to be discussed by the NFL and NFLPA.

A 17-game schedule won't happen before the 2021 season. The mechanics for an uneven number of

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games — neutral sites or which teams get nine home games — will be worked out in the interim.

Extending the season was a nonissue with the players in 2011, when the current 10-year deal was finalized after a 4 1/2 month lockout. It has upset many of them as it will become a reality in another season or so.

Jaguars receiver Chris Conley posted his objections to a variety of items.

"Players voted for a 17-game season," he said on Instagram. "No extra bye week. A disproportionate pay increase that will be less than promised because of the growth of the leagues revenue. No resolved player restrictions or tags. Added mandatory fines for hold outs that take an accrued season from veteran players. On top of that this CBA cut benefits for some players in shaky medical condition. The worst part is that 500 people didn't vote. We look like a weak union to the owners and for this reason they will continue to try to low ball and take advantage of players rights."

Earlier, NFLPA Executive Director DeMaurice Smith explained the ins and outs of negotiating the new deal in a lengthy "open letter" tweet after the voting had concluded Saturday night.

"The current proposal contains increases across almost every category of wages, hours, working conditions and benefits for former and current players," he said. "Like any contested negotiation ... the proposal also reflects trades with the counterparty which have to be carefully weighed and assessed across the entirety of the deal. Please be confident that I hear — loudly and clearly — those of you who have passionately expressed their perspective that these gains are not enough when weighed against, for example, adding another game. That position reflects how some members have chosen to weigh what aspect of the deal is important to them."

"The fact is, however, that there are literally hundreds of issues in any collective bargaining agreement that affect thousands of circumstances and impact thousands of current and former players which we must consider carefully."

The gains the players make in the new agreement in sharing "a bigger portion of the growing pie," according to outgoing NFLPA President Eric Winston, swayed the vote.

Among those gains:

—An increase from the 47% of league revenues given to the players, with that percentage dependent on the length of the season.

—A reduction of the preseason, initially from four games to three. More time off during training camps.

—Upgraded pensions, with the addition of groups of previous players not included in past agreements.

—Two more roster spots per team's practice squad, with players having more freedom to move up to the regular roster and back. Two more will be added later in the agreement.

—Narrowing the testing period for players for marijuana use, plus lowered discipline for using it; and a reduction in on-field fines.

Adding two playoff teams was not part of the bargaining process, but the owners were able to do so without union approval. That will occur this season, with only the top team in each conference getting a wild-card bye.

With labor peace for the rest of the decade, the NFL now will turn to negotiating new deals with its broadcast partners. Results of that, including digital media, should, as Winston mentioned, substantially grow the financial pie.

AP Pro Football Writers Dennis Waszak Jr. and Dave Campbell, and AP Sports Writers Tim Booth, Mark Long and Steve Megargee contributed to this report.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Hospitals fear any surge of virus cases, supply shortages

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) — Government and hospital leaders are increasingly sounding the alarm about the health care system in the U.S. and its readiness to absorb waves of patients in the worst-case scenario involving the new coronavirus outbreak.

Authorities nationwide already are taking major steps to expand capacity with each passing day, building tents and outfitting unused spaces to house patients. They also are urging people to postpone elective surgeries, dental work and even veterinarian care. New York's governor called for using military bases or college dorms as makeshift care centers.

Among the biggest concerns is whether there will be enough beds, equipment and staff to handle several large outbreaks simultaneously in multiple cities.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the National Institutes of Health's infectious diseases chief, said it's critical that steps be taken now to prevent the virus from spreading quickly.

"The job is to put a full-court press on not allowing the worst-case scenario to occur," said Fauci, who appeared Sunday on several network news shows.

While he does not expect massive outbreaks in the U.S. like those in Italy, he said there is the possibility if it reaches that point that an overwhelming influx of patients could lead to a lack of supplies, including ventilators.

"And that's when you're going to have to make some very tough decisions," Fauci said.

In Washington state, which leads the nation in the number of positive COVID-19 cases with more than 600 illnesses and 40 deaths, the increase in people visiting clinics with respiratory symptoms is straining the state's supply of personal protective gear worn by health care workers.

The federal government has sent the state tens of thousands of respirators, gowns, gloves and other protective gear for health care providers. But those shipments aren't enough, said Clark Halvorson, Assistant Secretary of Health for Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response.

The disease has infected over 162,000 people worldwide, and more than 6,000 people have died so far.

Most people who have tested positive for the virus experience only mild or moderate symptoms. Yet there's a greater danger and longer recovery period for older adults and people with existing health problems.

The nation's hospitals collectively have about a million beds, with 100,000 for critical care patients, but often those beds for the sickest patients are mostly filled, Scott Gottlieb, a former FDA commissioner, told CBS' "Face the Nation."

"If we do have multiple epidemics in multiple large U.S. cities, the system will become overwhelmed," he said.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has suggested mobilizing the Army Corps of Engineers to turn facilities such as military bases or college dorms into temporary medical centers.

"States cannot build more hospitals, acquire ventilators or modify facilities quickly enough," Cuomo wrote in an opinion piece published Sunday in The New York Times.

Officials in the Seattle area have been setting up temporary housing — and even bought a motel and leased another — to add space for patients who might be homeless or whose living conditions might not allow for self-isolation, such as students in college dorms. King County also is setting up modular housing and is using the arrivals hall at a county-owned airport as a shelter to reduce overcrowding — and meet social-distancing requirements — in existing homeless shelters.

Hospital executives say they're always planning for disasters and have been concentrating on coronavirus preparations for the past two months.

"If you go past our emergency department now, you'll see tents erected in the parking lot that allow us to increase emergency department capacity," Johnese Spisso, president of UCLA Health, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

The system's network of clinics throughout Los Angeles and Southern California have additional capacity and doctor's are encouraging telemedicine, he said.

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Dr. Peter Slavin, the president of Massachusetts General Hospital, said the next two weeks will be critical as the medical community expects a dramatic increase in the number of cases.

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine recommended on Saturday that elective surgeries be postponed, including dental and veterinary procedures, so that health care workers won't be stretched thin and surgical masks can be saved for health care workers dealing with the virus.

ProMedica, which operates 13 hospitals in Ohio and Michigan, is ready to call in help from staffing agencies if needed and is looking at ways to provide child care for employees whose children are off school, said Deana Sievert, chief nursing. Doctors also have voluntarily canceled their vacations.

The community "can flatten off the curve of this," by avoiding large events, staying at home, washing their hands and practicing social distancing to help U.S. hospitals avoid an onslaught of cases, said Dr. Penny Wheeler, CEO of Minneapolis-based Allina Health, which has 12 hospitals and more than 90 clinics in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Allina also has been canceling conferences, meetings and anything else that does not directly impact patient care.

Associated Press writers Martha Bellisle and Gene Johnson in Seattle and Jeff Baenen in Minneapolis contributed to this report

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Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>.

Spanish King renounces inheritance from father amid scandal

MADRID (AP) — Spain's King Felipe VI has renounced any future personal inheritance he could receive from his father, King Emerit Juan Carlos I, over the alleged financial irregularities involving the former monarch, the country's royal house announced Sunday.

The royal house said in a statement that in addition to renouncing his inheritance, Felipe is stripping Juan Carlos of his annual stipend. In 2018, the former monarch received 194,232 euros (\$216,000).

The decision comes amid an ongoing investigation by Swiss prosecutors into an offshore account allegedly operated for Juan Carlos. The account allegedly received 88 million euros (\$100 million) from Saudi Arabia's late King Abdullah in 2008, which prosecutors believe could be kickback payments, according to the Swiss newspaper Tribune de Geneve.

On Saturday, the British newspaper The Telegraph reported that Felipe was named as a beneficiary of an offshore fund that controls the Swiss account with an alleged 65 million euro gift (\$72 million) from Saudi Arabia given to his father when he was on the throne.

Juan Carlos, 82, became king in November 1975 and reigned until his abdication in June 2014.

Felipe, 52, denied any knowledge of the fund in Sunday's statement.

The name of the Swiss paper is Tribune de Geneve, not de Geneva.

Virus voting: France holds local elections despite fears

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French voters went to the polls Sunday to choose mayors and other local leaders but the second round of the vote was put into question amid concerns over low turnout and the rapid spread of the new coronavirus across the country.

Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said the turnout for Sunday's vote, which should be known over-

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night, will clearly be lower than usual as many people didn't go to polling stations over fears that would fuel the spread of the virus that has upended travel plans, closed schools and rattled financial markets.

Several political leaders from the right and the left called for the second round to be postponed. Sunday's vote came just as a drastic new rules took effect shutting down all of France's restaurants, museums and most stores to stem the spreading coronavirus that emerged in China late last year.

French health authorities on Sunday reported 5,423 confirmed cases of COVID-19 —an additional 900 compared to the day before— including 127 people who have died.

Prime Minister Edouard Philippe praised the organization of the local vote and those "citizens who have chosen to go to the polls and have therefore shown their attachment to municipal democracy."

But Philippe said he will gather a scientific committee and talk with the leaders of France's political parties in order to decide whether to organize the second round of voting, which is currently scheduled for March 22.

Philippe, who is running for mayor in his hometown of Le Havre, appeared to be leading in the first round, according to estimates from polling institutes based on partial results, which also put Paris's mayor, Socialist Anne Hidalgo, ahead.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen called said Sunday the second round "obviously won't take place." A candidate with her National Rally party, Steeve Briois, was elected Sunday with an absolute majority of the votes in Le Pen's fiefdom, the northern town of Henin-Beaumont.

A key figure in the far-right party, Louis Aliot, appeared largely ahead in the southern town of Perpignan, according to estimations by poll institutes.

French President Emmanuel Macron decided not to delay Sunday's election amid concerns that would be undemocratic. But the virus hurt Sunday's turnout, which was only 38% by 5 p.m., compared to 54% at that time in 2014.

"I believe it is important that that democratic moment take place," Macron said after voting in his hometown of Le Touquet in northern France.

Macron said he keeps hydro-alcoholic gel in his pocket and added that he hasn't been tested for the virus because he has no symptoms.

Those who showed up to the poll stations described a feeling of duty, despite the challenges.

"It's not ideal, but it's important we go vote. Life in this city and in society shouldn't stop," said Laure Marie Diers, a manager in Paris.

The government ordered unprecedented sanitary measures at polling stations.

Organizers were told to impose a one-meter (about three-foot) gap between people in lines, and to provide soap or hydro-alcoholic gel and disinfectant wipes for voting machines. Voters were told to bring their own pens to sign the register.

But Associated Press reporters observed an uneven application of the rules in different polling stations.

Some had marked off the floor with tape to indicate one-meter spacing; others had no indication and voters bunched up irregularly. Some voters washed their hands before and after casting a ballot, others didn't bother. Staffers reassured voters that they were disinfecting voting booths every hour.

Sunday's elections are the first round of a two-round vote for leadership of all 35,000 French communes. Voters were choosing among lists of candidates running for mayor and town council seats. If no list gets the absolute majority in the first round, all lists that receive more than 10% of votes qualify for the second round.

While most voters cast ballots based on local issues, the elections are an important gauge of public sentiment before France's 2022 presidential election.

Sunday's voting is expected to be a tough challenge for Macron's 3-year-old centrist party, which is competing for the first time in municipal elections and still lacks local roots across France. His government is also unpopular after months of protests from the yellow vest movement economic movement against perceived social injustice, and several weeks of strikes against the government's planned pension overhaul.

The conservative Republicans party, the Greens party, the far-right National Rally and the struggling Socialists are also vying for key mayoral seats and to strengthen their nationwide bases.

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The main battleground is Paris, whose mayor is an influential figure in French politics and will oversee the 2024 Summer Olympics.

Definitive results from the first round were expected late Sunday.

David Keyton and Angela Charlton in Paris, Robert Edme in Saint-Pee-sur-Nivelle, and Jean-Francois Badias in Strasbourg, contributed to this report.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

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Worshippers go online, those at services keep a distance

By JEFF AMY, ELANA SCHOR, and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Pastors across the United States delivered sermons to empty pews Sunday as houses of worship adjusted to the reality of the coronavirus pandemic, with the Vatican indicating that the holiest week on its calendar will look vastly different next month.

While many religious institutions around the country took to the internet to stream their services this week — including one megachurch that President Donald Trump tweeted he was tuning in to — some tried to take extra precautions while maintaining a semblance of their Sunday routine amid mounting public anxiety over the outbreak.

Trump, who had declared Sunday a special national day of prayer, said he would watch a livestreamed service by Jentezen Franklin, a Georgia-based pastor and long-standing evangelical ally of the president. The annual National Day of Prayer is May 7.

During his sermon, Franklin urged prayers for China and Iran, areas hit particularly hard by the virus. Franklin also sought to acknowledge the fatal toll that coronavirus is already exacting worldwide while encouraging worshippers not to “let the fear flu get you” by falling prey to panic.

More than 5,800 people worldwide have died in the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, with U.S. deaths topping 60. The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

Trump, who tested negative for the coronavirus according to a statement from his personal physician, tweeted that Franklin's service was “great and beautiful.”

Franklin held his Sunday services exclusively online, as public health experts urge the cancellation of big gatherings of all kinds to curtail the spread of coronavirus, but others did not.

A hardy few came to mostly empty churches as pastors faced hard decisions about continuing to hold services, and how to maintain the bonds of a congregation when large gatherings could transmit the coronavirus.

At St. Philip African Methodist Episcopal Church in Atlanta, about 100 people dotted a sanctuary built for thousands. The Rev. William Watley told members that he would follow official directives on whether to have church after Sunday. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp asked faith groups to consider calling off in-person services last week, a concern underlined by the fact that some of Georgia's 99 confirmed cases were spread at a church in Cartersville, northwest of Atlanta, where dozens of people were exposed.

Watley told people attending the 11 a.m. service that more than 500 people had viewed an earlier one online, even pointing out how people could submit their offering online.

“Our goal is not to frighten anyone, but reduce public gatherings where there is an increased risk of exposure,” Watley told congregants.

There were notes of defiance. Watley, warming to his text from II Chronicles about how the people of

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Judah won a battle thanks to prayer and faith, preached that he wasn't about to shut his church's doors. "Some of the younger preachers said, 'You going to have church?' When you think about some of the mess that all of us have been through, the possibility of coronavirus. ... It's going to take a more than this to stop us from serving and trusting God. His steadfast love endures!" Watley preached.

Although he quickly added: "You do your part. You wash your hands like you got sense."

Archie James, a member of the church board at St. Philip, said more people were at church Sunday than he had expected.

"We want to squash this thing and get it over with," said James, a Conyers resident.

Vanessa Parson, another St. Philip member, said the church can help ease fears: "Just keep people believing in the Lord, believing they're going to be safe, that they don't have to be afraid."

The sanctuary was mostly empty at Cross Lanes United Methodist Church in Cross Lanes, West Virginia, the only state without a confirmed case. Senior pastor, the Rev. Krysta Rexrode Wolfe, said people should "give thanks that good news still abounds" and use their unique talents during the coronavirus scare, including offering to share stockpiles of groceries or household supplies with disadvantaged neighbors, reconnecting with family or assisting schools that are seeking extra help.

At St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Glen Allen, Virginia, just outside Richmond, about 150 parishioners attended the 9:15 a.m. Mass, a service that usually draws 600 to 700 people.

Deacon Andrew Ferguson urged parishioners to "honor that distance," the recommendation to stay at least 6 feet away from each other.

Brook Schurman, a private school teacher, said he wasn't disappointed by the Mass, but noticed how different it felt with the smaller crowd.

"It is a little sad that people — not just here, but throughout the county and state — are pulling back, isolating more," he said. "It's what's recommended, but the fear behind it is sad."

Across the United States, religious leaders have taken unprecedented steps to shield their congregations from the coronavirus. Measures have included canceling services and banning large funerals and weddings. A number of Roman Catholic bishops canceled all public worship services for at least two weeks. Other steps, including sharing of the sign of peace with gestures rather than physical contact, have been in place several weeks.

Comparably strong measures are being taken by leaders of their faiths, ranging from rabbis in New Jersey to Episcopal and Methodist bishops in North Carolina. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints halted all worship services and church activities for its 16 million members worldwide. Episcopal churches in the Washington, D.C., area, including the Washington National Cathedral, suspended services.

Brenthaven Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Brentwood, Tennessee broadcast services on Facebook Live with only a small number of congregation members, staff and the pastor, Kip Rush, at the church.

Initially the discussion was about communion but as members talked it was clear there other concerns. "We also thought about the whole idea that if we can begin to social distance and slow the growth down then maybe we can slow the progression down," Rush said. He added that while the congregation is small and could have spread out, he did not want to chance it. "We have some church members, especially older members, who are very faithful, and if one of them had gotten sick, the guilt and the reasoning behind that, we would not have been able to deal with it."

The coronavirus forced international religious institutions to alter their behavior as well.

In Italy, where the public is severely restricted from leaving their homes, the Vatican announced that Holy Week liturgical celebrations will not be open to the public. Some churches in Italy are being allowed to stay open for individual prayer, but all public Masses are forbidden during lockdown to discourage crowding.

Although Easter, April 12, wasn't specified in the Vatican statements, it appeared likely that restrictions on large gatherings might well continue in Italy. The Italian government has said it would decide whether measures, now in effect through April 3, would need an extension or tightening.

Later Sunday, Pope Francis left the Vatican to visit St. Mary Major Basilica near Rome's central train station. Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said Francis went there to pray to the Virgin Mary for the sick.

Spain followed Italy into lockdown mode with churches there adopting measures akin to those begun

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in Italy a few weeks ago.

The Orthodox Church of Cyprus joined others and called on believers to refrain from attending services for three weeks. Despite an earlier decision not to discourage the faithful from coming to churches, it said in a statement that "it cannot remain indifferent" in light of the virus' rapid spread and growing number of deaths.

—
Amy reported from Atlanta, Schor from New York and Lavoie from Glen Allen, Virginia. Associated Press writers Frances D'Emilio in Rome, Menelaos Hadjicostis in Nicosia, Cyprus, John Raby in Cross Lanes, West Virginia and Mark Humphrey in Brentwood, Tennessee contributed.

What's Happening: Europe's cafes and bars shut amid outbreak

Life across Europe is coming to a standstill as governments order border closures, worship services are canceled and bars and cafes are shuttered. Chaos erupted at some airports in the U.S. as citizens raced to come home as travel restrictions from Europe are imposed. The new coronavirus has infected more than 156,000 people and killed more than 5,800. The disease for most people causes only mild or moderate symptoms but for some, especially the elderly or people with underlying health conditions, it can cause more severe illness.

Some of the latest developments Sunday:

CHAOS AT SOME U.S. AIRPORTS

Large crowds descended on some of the 13 airports where travelers from Europe were required to pass through for required medical screenings. The crowds formed even as public health officials called for "social distancing" to stem the spread of COVID-19. American citizens, green card holders and some others are allowed to return to the U.S. amid new European travel restrictions. The lines led Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker to tweet at President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, noting that the customs process is under federal jurisdiction and demanding they take action to address the crowds. Acting Secretary Chad Wolf says the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is trying to add additional screening capacity and work with airlines to expedite the process.

GERMANY TO PARTIALLY SHUT BORDERS

Germany will partially close its borders with France, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg and Denmark as it steps up efforts to stem the spread of the new coronavirus. Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said that new checks will take effect at 8 a.m. Monday. He said that people who commute across the border to work will still be able to cross, as will goods, but travelers without a valid reason to travel will no longer be allowed to enter and leave Germany. He added that German citizens in the neighboring countries will be allowed back in.

HARD-HIT ITALY CONTINUES TO RACK UP INFECTIONS, DEATHS

The number Italy's cases of COVID-19 infection surged higher again, with 3,590 more cases in a 24-hour period, nearly 100 more than the increase as the day before. Italy's Civil Protection chief Angelo Borrelli announced the latest number of cases on Sunday, totaling nearly 25,000 in the country. Deaths also jumped ahead, with 368 additional fatal cases registered, bringing the overall death toll to 1,809. Pope Frances ventured out of the Vatican to visit two churches in Rome to pray for the sick, a spokesman said. Some churches in Italy are being allowed to stay open for individual prayer, but all public Masses are forbidden during Italy's lockdown to discourage crowding.

MOVIE TICKET SALES PLUNGE

Ticket sales have plunged to their lowest levels in at least 20 years at North American movie theaters amid the coronavirus pandemic. According to studio estimates Sunday, receipts totaled about \$56 million in U.S. and Canada theaters. Data firm Comscore says that weekend box office revenue hasn't been so low since September 2000. Pixar's "Onward" remained the top film by earning \$10.5 million in its second weekend. The Christian romance "I Still Believe" brought in \$9.5 million. "Bloodshot," with Vin Diesel, grossed an estimated \$9.3 million. Those totals are notably below expectations. Most of Europe's cinemas have shuttered in recent days, along with closures in China, India, Lebanon and Kuwait. Those closures

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have already slashed international grosses.

CAFES IN PARIS, PUBS IN IRELAND ARE SHUTTERED

French government ordered all restaurants and cafes closed to better contain the spreading coronavirus. On Sunday, stacks of chairs filled cafe fronts instead of customers. Cafes and eateries have been an essential part of the fabric of social life in France since 17th-century Paris. In Ireland, all pubs and bars were ordered to shut down for 2 weeks.

AMSTERDAM SHUTS ITS WEED-SELLING COFFEE SHOPS

The Netherlands has ordered Amsterdam's famed weed-selling coffee shops to close, along with all other restaurants and bars. Queues quickly formed outside coffee shops in the Dutch capital and elsewhere as customers — some facing three weeks of no school or work — decided to buy some pot while they still could. The closures are set to last until at least April 6.

COUNTRY MUSIC AWARDS POSTPONED

The Academy of Country Music Awards is the latest entertainment event to be shelved because of the spreading coronavirus epidemic. The awards show had been scheduled for April 5 in Las Vegas, to be televised live on CBS. The academy said it would be rescheduled for September, at a date and venue to be announced later.

KEN BURNS OFFERING BASEBALL DOCUMENTARY

Ken Burns is stepping up to the plate for deprived sports fans. The filmmaker said Sunday he's asked PBS to make his sprawling 1994 documentary "Baseball" available to stream for anyone who's missing games because the coronavirus has put the sport on hold. The series on the sport's history unfolded over nine two-hour episodes, or innings, when it was initially released.

FRENCH PERFUME COMPANIES TO MAKE MAKE SANITIZING GEL

French luxury conglomerate LVMH will use its facilities to produce large quantities of hydroalcoholic hand sanitizing gel to be provided for free to French authorities to help face the virus crisis. The group that owns Dior, Guerlain and Givenchy said all the production sites of its perfumes and cosmetics in France will take part in the effort "as long as necessary."

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Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Netanyahu rival Gantz chosen to form new Israeli government

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli opposition leader Benny Gantz will be given the first opportunity to form a new government after an inconclusive national election this month, the country's president said Sunday, raising questions about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political future.

The decision by President Reuven Rivlin was announced by his office after he consulted with leaders of all of the parties elected to parliament. He will formally designate Gantz with the task on Monday and give him a month to cobble together a governing coalition.

The political wrangling comes at a sensitive time. Netanyahu has been leading the country as it confronts a growing coronavirus threat, with over 200 cases diagnosed and the number quickly rising. Netanyahu also faces serious legal troubles as he prepares to go on trial to face corruption charges.

Netanyahu's Likud emerged as the largest party in the March 2 election, Israel's third in under a year. But with his smaller religious and nationalist allies, he received the support of only 58 lawmakers during Sunday's consultations, leaving his right-wing bloc three seats short of the required majority in parliament.

Gantz's Blue and White received the support of parties representing 61 seats, a slim majority. However, those parties are also divided, and it is not clear whether Gantz will succeed in putting together a coal-

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tion. One lawmaker refused to endorse either side.

Given the likelihood of continued deadlock, Rivlin late Sunday summoned both Netanyahu and Gantz to an emergency meeting, where the men pledged to explore a unity government.

In a joint statement, both parties thanked Rivlin and said their leaders "agreed for the respective negotiation teams to meet soon."

Rivlin had earlier called for a power-sharing unity government to lead the country through its many crises. Israel has gone through three inconclusive elections in the past year, leaving it with a caretaker government as it confronts a host of challenges, including the coronavirus battle. If the two rivals cannot reach a unity deal, the country could find itself in a fourth consecutive election campaign.

"Anyone who has watched the news in recent days understands that this is a time of trial, and that these are not regular consultations," Rivlin said earlier Sunday. "We must now deal with forming a government as soon as possible ... at this complex time."

Rivlin's duties are largely ceremonial. But he is responsible for designating the candidate he thinks has the best chance of forming a government by securing a parliamentary majority.

That usually goes to the leader of the largest party, in this case Netanyahu. But after a slim majority endorsed Gantz on Sunday, Rivlin appeared to have little choice.

Gantz will face a difficult task securing a governing coalition.

The parties that endorsed him have little in common beyond their shared antipathy toward Netanyahu, who has led the country for the past 11 years. They include the predominantly Arab Joint List and the ultra-nationalist Yisrael Beitenu.

Yisrael Beitenu's leader, Avigdor Lieberman, and two members of Gantz's own Blue and White party have said they would oppose a government that relies on support from the Joint List. Lieberman told the president that he supports Gantz, but also called for the formation of an "emergency" unity government to deal with the coronavirus threat.

Netanyahu, in his caretaker role, has invited Gantz to join him in an emergency government. Gantz has left the door open to such an arrangement, but also dismissed the offers as insincere.

Although Gantz's chances of forming a new government appear slim, receiving the "mandate" from Rivlin could strengthen his position in unity talks with Netanyahu, said Yochanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute.

During the transition period, Blue and White is expected to name one of its members as speaker of the parliament and to pass legislation that would prevent an indicted politician from forming a new government. That legislation would impede Netanyahu's chances of victory if the country is forced into a fourth election and push him toward compromise.

"Both sides will say that they support unity. You only have one minor question: Who goes first and for how long and so on," said Plesner.

Netanyahu formally extended an offer Sunday to Gantz to join a government aimed at halting the spread of the virus, suggesting two frameworks, including one that would see an alternating leadership between them over the course of four years.

Gantz's centrist Blue and White party seems to consider the outreach yet another ruse after what has been an extremely acrimonious campaign that included unfounded smears against Gantz.

Over the past week, the coronavirus scare has overshadowed Israel's precarious political standoff, which comes as Netanyahu prepares to go on trial for corruption charges.

Netanyahu got an important reprieve Sunday when the Jerusalem court handling the case postponed his trial for two months because of restrictions connected to the coronavirus pandemic.

He was scheduled to appear in court Tuesday to face charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in connection to a series of scandals. But following the emergency health measures the government enacted restricting public gatherings, the court said it was pushing back the hearing until May 24.

Netanyahu is accused of receiving expensive gifts from wealthy friends and offering to exchange favors with powerful media moguls. The long-ruling Israeli leader denies any wrongdoing.

Much of the country was at a standstill Sunday, with schools, malls and places of entertainment shut

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down. Employees were encouraged to work from home and strict restrictions have been placed on personal interactions.

The virus has spread to more than 100 countries, infected more than 150,000 people worldwide and killed more than 5,700. In Israel, over 200 people have been infected.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

Pope goes on Roman walkabout, prays for end to pandemic

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis left the Vatican to make a surprise visit Sunday to two churches in Rome to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic — a move that came even as Italian health authorities insisted people stay home as much as possible to limit contagion in the heart of Europe's outbreak.

Francis who recently had a cold, headed first to a Rome basilica, St. Mary Major, where he often stops to give thanks after returning from trips abroad. There he prayed before an icon of the Virgin Mary dedicated to the "salvation of the Roman people."

"With his prayer, the Holy Father has invoked the end of the pandemic that is striking Italy and the world, implored for healing for the many sick, recalled the so many victims of these days and asked that their family members and friends find consolation and comfort," Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said in a statement.

After that, the 83-year-old pope left the basilica, near Rome's central train station, and headed toward central Piazza Venezia, strolling along a brief stretch of Via del Corso, a noted shopping street for Romans. He then ducked into a church that most tourists pass by, St. Marcel on the Corso.

The church keeps a "miraculous crucifix that in 1522 was carried in procession through the neighborhoods of the city so that the Great Plague of Rome ended," Bruni said.

Some 90 minutes after he left Vatican City, Francis was back.

In ordinary times, the Via del Corso would be thronged with Sunday strollers and window-shoppers, but very few Romans are on the streets these days. A national lock-down allows people to go out to work, to purchase essentials like food or medicine or to take care of those in need.

A sole cyclist was pedaling down the street when Francis, in his white robes and with a security detail walking behind, approached the St. Marcel church.

The pope's prayerful foray across town came just hours after the Holy See announced that the Vatican's Holy Week ceremonies will go ahead without the public Italy tries to contain its coronavirus outbreak.

Bruni said "as far as Holy Week liturgical celebrations are concerned, I can specify that all are confirmed."

But Bruni added: "As things stand, understudy are the ways they would be carried out and who would participate while respecting the security measures put in place to avoid spread of the coronavirus." He added that in any case, faithful will be able to follow the ceremonies on TV, radio and through online media.

Vatican media added "until April 12 the General Audiences and the Angelus presided over by the Holy Father will be available only in live streaming on the official Vatican News website."

Easter Sunday is April 12 this year, when normally tens of thousands of faithful would fill St. Peter's Square for an outdoor papal Mass, listen to the pope's speech and receive his blessing, delivered from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

Although Easter itself wasn't specified in the Vatican statements, it appeared likely restrictions on large gatherings might well continue in Italy. The Italian government has said it would decide whether measures, now in effect through April 3, would need extending or tightening.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday on April 5, with tradition calling for an outdoor Mass in the square also on that day, when faithful clutch palm fronds and olive branches.

COVID-19 for most people causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some, like the elderly and the fragile, it can cause more severe illness.

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At 83 with one lung partially compromised, Francis is both. After he was seen sniffing and coughing and sounded congested a couple of weeks ago, the Vatican said he had a cold.

Italy's virus cases surged again Sunday, with 3,590 more in a 24-hour period for a total of 24,747 cases. Deaths also jumped, with 368 more, bringing the country's overall death toll to 1,809. The additional infections reported Sunday represented the biggest day-to-day increase so far in Italy.

With St. Peter's Square closed to the public, and one case of infection reported by the Vatican recently, Francis on Sunday delivered his traditional weekly commentary and blessing from the Apostolic Library instead of from a window overlooking the vast square.

Francis praised Catholic priests for "creativity" in tending to their flocks, especially in the region of Lombardy, northern Italy, where thousands of people have been hospitalized or are in quarantine. He said their efforts demonstrated there are "a thousand ways to be near" to the faithful, if not physically.

Some churches in Italy are being allowed to stay open for individual prayer, but all public Masses are forbidden during Italy's lockdown to discourage crowding.

Luca Bruno in Giussano, Italy, Geir Moulson in Berlin, and Iain Sullivan in Madrid, contributed to this report.

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March Sadness: No brackets and no knowing what might've been

By **EDDIE PELLIS** AP National Writer

For all those who dreamed the impossible — making it a whole month without getting a single game wrong in the bracket — this is your year.

Everything else about the NCAA Tournament that won't happen this season — from Selection Sunday, to the jaw-dropping bracket busters and buzzer beaters, to the Sweet 16 to the Final Four? Call it March Sadness.

Before fears about the coronavirus scrubbed sports for the foreseeable future, Sunday was supposed to be the Big Reveal — the day when Americans gathered around a TV for an hour to watch ... drumroll ... a college basketball schedule being released.

It's so much better than it sounds.

It was supposed to be the day to imagine the possibilities: all the tantalizing matchups, the upsets-in-the-makings, the favorites, and, of course, the underdogs — so many underdogs — that would pop up on the 68 lines to set the table for America over the next three weeks.

It was supposed to be the day to kick off a rite of spring, and a rite of passage — a three-week college hoops spectacular that allows people to set aside their differences and replace them with other ones. It was an event designed every bit as much for the hard-core basketball fan as for the clueless neophyte who can't tell a pick-and-roll from a personal foul. It was for anyone with ten bucks to blow in an office pool, or who really liked picking teams that wear red, or was quite sure a Blue Devil would vanquish a Red Raider if the actual team mascots went to war.

It was ... something we're going to miss this year in our coronavirus-infected country — a year in which we really could use an escape, but will be stuck watching reruns of "Blue Bloods" instead of games between blue bloods.

It was supposed to be a year for Kansas to walk in as the No. 1 overall seed and have two stories told at the same time. The Jayhawks could be staring at serious sanctions from the NCAA, which has targeted them with the dreaded "lack of institutional control" for a series of alleged recruiting violations. They were also being led by Udoka Azubuike, the big man who left Nigeria when he was a kid for a better opportunity

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to play basketball. He was hoping to be reunited with his mom at the Final Four in Atlanta.

Would the Jayhawks have made it to Atlanta? Who was ready to step in if they didn't?

A top candidate for Most Inspirational would've come from Dayton. The struggling Ohio city was shattered by a mass shooting last summer. Trey Landers, a senior guard at the 11,000-student Catholic school, was among those who escaped from a bar as a gunman approached with an assault-style weapon. "Our team is helping pull the city together a little bit. ... It's bigger than us," Landers said recently. The Flyers, at 29-2 and ranked third in The Associated Press poll, were headed for a No. 1 seed.

Rutgers also was on the verge of making history. One of the most downtrodden sports programs in America was projected to make the tournament for the first time since 1991. "We would have won some games, too," coach Steve Pikiell said. Now, all the Scarlet Knights can do is wait 'til next year.

Michigan State would've been in the mix, as always. Its star player, Cassius Winston, would've been the emotional center of any deep run by the Spartans. His brother, Zachary, stepped in front of a moving train and was killed instantly last November. "I lost a piece of my heart, but you guys you keep me going," Winston told Spartans fans shortly after his brother's death.

The Pac-12's best player, Payton Pritchard of Oregon, was trying to bookend his trip to the Final Four as a freshman with another as a senior. Speaking of the Ducks, was there any more dominating player in the country than Sabrina Ionescu? She had 26 career triple-doubles and finished her career with more than 2,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 1,000 assists. But as is the case with the men, the party will end for the women before they get their chance to shine on the big stage.

This season's tournament, like all before them, would've been filled with dozens of legends in the making and diamonds in the rough — with teams that overcame adversity to get this far and superfans who inspired the country every bit as much as their team.

Might one have come from Belmont? The Ohio Valley Conference champions won a thriller of a conference title game with a last-second bucket off a backdoor cut on a play called "Liberty."

Or, how about Liberty? The Flames had punched their ticket by winning the Atlantic Sun tournament last Sunday, before the cancellations began en masse. They'll have to settle for a 30-4 record and the thoughts about what might have been in what would have been the program's first back-to-back trips to the show.

Ah, what might have been. New Mexico State was an inch away from the tying layup in the first round last year, but a selfless Aggie passed on the layup and kicked it out to a teammate for an open 3. That player got fouled and made only one free throw. Advancing instead was Auburn — and the momentum from that win pushed the Tigers all the way to the Final Four. Both teams were a good bet to make it back to the show this year.

But there will be no betting. And there will be no bulldogs, either. The Butler Bulldogs — remember them? — were a shoo-in for the bracket, but the availability of their mascot, Blue III, has been a source of controversy since the NCAA banned him from entering arenas a few years ago. Blue's handler, Michael Kaltenmark, was hanging up the leash either way after this season.

It's ending sooner than he — or anyone — expected.

"Extremely, extremely disappointed," said Mark Few, the coach of Gonzaga, which also was poised to be a No. 1 seed.

He's hardly the first coach to see his team's dreams crushed in March. But there wasn't a player, coach or fan in America who thought the season would end before the fun even began.

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Not exactly gloating, stockpiling 'preppers' have a moment

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) — Curt La Haise has put up with plenty of razzing from friends over the years who have called him paranoid for stockpiling an eight-month supply of food in his basement and having enough fuel to power his generator for almost an entire winter.

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They're not laughing anymore amid panic buying that has cleared store shelves across the U.S. and growing fears that the new coronavirus will force many Americans to self-quarantine for weeks in their homes.

"Now my friends are like, 'What should I do, what should I get?'" said La Haise, who operates a firearms and safety training business near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. "Prepping doesn't look so bad now."

For those in the often-mocked "prepper" community, this is quickly becoming their "I told you so" moment. But many are resisting saying that, even if it's in the back of their minds. What they hope is that they'll finally be taken seriously and that more people will follow their lead.

"We're not laughing. We're not saying, 'I told you so,' when people are out there fighting over toilet paper and hand sanitizers," said Paul Buescher, of Northfield Center Township, Ohio.

Buescher is one of 32 members of a group in northeastern Ohio that shares a farm packed with enough canned and dehydrated food and water to last for years. He said he is now getting calls all day long asking for advice.

Survival supply stores can't keep up with the demand for food kits and medical supplies.

"Every single business that has to do with emergency preparedness is overloaded," said John Ramey, founder of a Colorado-based prepper website called The Prepared.

Most preppers say they are about self-reliance and common sense and are quick to distance themselves from the "doomsday preppers" who are depicted on television shows awaiting the day most of the world's population is wiped off the map.

"The vast majority of this is 'beans and Band-Aids,' not 'bullets and bunkers,'" Ramey said.

Jim Cobb, a disaster readiness consultant and editor-in-chief of Prepper Survival Guide magazine, said he has seen a few fellow preppers gloating on social media about people who are crowding stores in search of disinfectants.

"I hate the thought of alienating any of them because they think we're a bunch of elitist goofballs," he said. "We're trying to take advantage of the opportunity that for once they're not laughing and pointing fingers at us."

While most people who have tested positive for the virus experience only mild or moderate symptoms, there's a greater danger and longer recovery period for older adults and people with existing health problems.

Experts say it's most important to practice safe hygiene: Wash hands frequently, cover sneezes and coughs, and stay home if fever or other symptoms arise.

As for the preppers, they have their own recommendations for anyone who is unsure of what to do next:

- Be ready to stay at home for at least two weeks. Have plenty of food and water. Don't forget about your pets and medicines. That includes over-the-counter products for fevers and coughs.

- Yes, toilet paper is important, but so are hand sanitizers, disinfectants, sanitation wipes, eye protection and gloves.

- Get your finances in order. Make sure you can pay your bills and have cash on hand.

- Maybe most important, relax and don't panic. And pay attention to the news and what's happening around you.

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Dream of a lifetime: Transgender man yearns to join military

By DAVID CRARY and KEITH SRAKOCIC Associated Press

LISBON, Ohio (AP) — Nic Talbott keeps himself busy, working as a substitute teacher, studying for a master's degree, helping with chores at his grandmother's farm. He also finds time, almost daily, for rigorous workouts — to ensure he is in shape in case his dream job, serving in the U.S. military, becomes available.

For now, that door is closed to him by the Trump administration for one reason: He's transgender.

Talbott, 26, was elated in 2016 when the Pentagon — with a green light from then-President Barack

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Obama — announced that transgender people already serving in the military would be allowed to do so openly. President Donald Trump, six months after replacing Obama, announced with a tweet in July 2017 that he would reverse that policy and bar transgender individuals from serving in any capacity in the military.

Four lawsuits were filed in federal courts challenging Trump's policy, including one in which Talbott is a plaintiff. The suits are pending, but the Supreme Court last year ruled that the ban could go into effect while the litigation continued. The ban was formally implemented on April 12, 2019.

Some transgender people who hoped to enlist have moved on to other pursuits, but Talbott refuses to give up on a career aspiration that dates to his childhood.

"At this point, I am not looking at other options," he said. "I know this is what I'm supposed to be doing, and I know there are thousands of other transgender people like me. We shouldn't have to settle for a Plan B."

Talbott graduated in 2015 from Kent State University, about an hour's drive from his hometown of Lisbon in eastern Ohio. He is now pursuing a master's at Kent State in criminology, with a concentration in global security.

Before the ban, Talbott was participating in an Army ROTC program. He says he'd be open to serving in either the Army or the Air Force, ideally as a military police officer or in a military intelligence unit.

He has a gym membership and also does online workouts at home, with a goal of exceeding minimum physical standards for whatever military option might open up for him.

Jesse Liggitt, a friend of Talbott's since they were little, now works alongside him on the staff at Southern Local High School.

"He's one of the strongest people I know," Liggitt said. "He's an extremely hard worker, always striving to do something better."

Talbott lives at his grandmother's hilltop farm in Lisbon, in an outbuilding near the main farmhouse. He flies a large American flag from his front porch's fence.

In his living quarters, there's equipment for his workouts, and a bulletin board on the wall covered with photographs, including a couple of him in his ROTC uniform.

His family is close-knit. On Friday he, his mother and his sister feted his grandmother, Rhonda Dineen, with cake and coffee ice cream on her 73rd birthday.

At one point, the discussion turned to Talbott's future. If somehow his wish came true, and he were deployed far away in the military a year from now, the family said they'd be at peace with his missing Dineen's next birthday.

Attorney Jennifer Levi, who is handling Talbott's lawsuit on behalf of Boston-based GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders, says she and her legal allies are trying to gain access to any documents and other information on which the Trump administration based its decision to reinstate the ban.

Once that discovery process is complete, the four lawsuits could go to trial in federal district courts — perhaps as soon as this fall, Levi said.

"We recognize the challenges, knowing what the federal judiciary looks like these days," she said. "But we think our case is incredibly strong. I don't see anything the government has, other than a baseless attack on transgender people."

All four service chiefs told Congress in 2018 that they had seen no discipline, morale or readiness problems with transgender troops serving openly in the military.

Their testimony contrasted with a 2018 Pentagon report, endorsed by the White House, that said that transgender people "could impair unit readiness; undermine unit cohesion, as well as good order and discipline, by blurring the clear lines that demarcate male and female standards and policies where they exist; and lead to disproportionate costs."

The Trump administration's policy bars people who have undergone gender transition, such as Talbott, from enlisting. It also requires people already in the military to serve as their biological gender unless they began a gender transition under the less restrictive Obama administration rules.

The maximum age for enlisting is 35 for the Army and 39 for the Air Force, so the clock won't run out

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on Talbott any time soon. But he finds the current impasse frustrating.

"I'm 26 now," he says. "I'd be going in at the same level as people who are 18, 19, 20."

Crary reported from New York.

How it spreads, infects: Coronavirus impact comes into focus

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

The medical impact of the new coronavirus is coming into sharper focus as it continues its spread in what is now officially recognized as a pandemic.

Its true fatality rate isn't yet known, but it seems 10 times higher than the flu, which kills hundreds of thousands around the world each year, the United States' top infectious disease expert told lawmakers last week.

Most people have had mild to moderate illness and recovered, but the virus is more serious for those who are older or have other health problems.

That's a huge number, said Dr. Tom Frieden, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who now heads a global health organization. In the U.S., 60% of adults have at least one underlying health condition and 42% have two or more.

"There's still a lot that we don't know" about the virus and disease it causes, COVID-19, he said.

HOW IT SPREADS

Most spread is from droplets produced when an infected person coughs, which are inhaled by people nearby. Transmission from touching contaminated surfaces hasn't been shown yet, though recent tests by U.S. scientists suggest it's possible -- one reason they recommend washing your hands and not touching your face.

The virus can live in the air for several hours, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. Cleaning surfaces with solutions containing diluted bleach should kill it.

"While we are still learning about the biology of this virus, it does not appear that there is a major risk of spread through sweat," said Julie Fischer, a Georgetown University microbiologist. The biggest concern about going to the gym is infected people coughing on others, or contaminating shared surfaces or equipment, she said. Consider avoiding large classes and peak hours and don't go if you're coughing or feverish, she suggests.

The risk of virus transmission from food servers is the same risk as transmission from other infected people, but "one of the concerns in that food servers, like others facing stark choices about insurance and paychecks, may be pressured to work even if they are sick," she said.

HOW FAST DOES IT SPREAD?

Each infected person spreads to two or three others on average, researchers estimate. It spreads more easily than flu but less than measles, tuberculosis or some other respiratory diseases. It is not known if it spreads less easily among children, but fewer of them have been diagnosed with the disease. A study of 1,099 patients in China found that 0.9% of the cases were younger than 15.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Most people get fever and cough, sometimes fatigue or shortness of breath, and recover after about two weeks. About 15% develop severe disease, including pneumonia, Chinese scientists reported from 45,000 cases there. Symptoms usually start slowly and often worsen as the illness goes on.

In a report last week on the first 12 patients in the U.S., seven were hospitalized; most had underlying health problems and got worse during the second week of illness.

In China, slightly more males have been diagnosed with COVID-19 than females, which might be because roughly half of Chinese men smoke but only 5% of females do, Frieden said.

Children seem to get less sick -- a report on 10 in China found that fevers tended to be milder and they lacked clear signs of pneumonia.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

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Some cruise ship passengers described symptoms similar to the common cold or flu.

"It's been a 2 on a scale of 10," said Carl Goldman, who was hospitalized in Omaha, Nebraska, after flying home.

However, a Chinese postgraduate student described going to the hospital twice after her symptoms worsened, and feeling "a heavy head while walking, unable to breathe, and nauseous."

WHAT'S THE TEST LIKE?

The CDC recommends at least two swabs -- nose and throat. Samples are sent to labs that look for bits of viral genetic material, which takes roughly 4 to 6 hours. Altogether, it can take several days to ship a sample and get results back.

It's been taking two to three days, and "we are working really hard to see if we can shorten that time" by developing an in-house test, Dr. Aimee Moulin of the University of California, Davis said Thursday in a conference call held by the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Some areas have opened drive-thru sites for testing, which could reduce exposure to health workers and other patients or the public.

WHEN IS THE VIRUS MOST CONTAGIOUS?

The average time from exposure to developing symptoms is five to six days, but can be up to two weeks. Tests have found high amounts of virus in the throats and noses of people a couple days before they show symptoms.

Signs of virus also have been found in stool weeks after patients recover, but that doesn't mean it's capable of causing illness, scientists warn.

"The virus can be degraded," said Robert Webster, a St. Jude Children's Research Center virus expert. "It's not necessarily infectious virus at all."

HOW DEADLY IS IT?

That won't be known until large studies are done to test big groups of people to see how many have been infected and with or without symptoms.

Scientists have estimated the fatality rate from less than 1% to as high as 4% among cases diagnosed so far, depending on location.

Flu kills about 0.1% of those it infects, so the new virus seems about 10 times more lethal, the National Institutes of Health's Dr. Anthony Fauci told Congress last week.

The death rate has been higher among people with other health problems -- more than 10% for those with heart disease, for example. In the U.S., 30 million have diabetes, more than 70 million are obese and nearly 80 million have high blood pressure.

CAN INFECTED PEOPLE WHO RECOVER GET IT AGAIN?

It's not known. A few reports from China say some people had COVID-19, recovered and then fell ill again. It's unclear if that's a relapse, a new infection, or a case where the person never fully recovered in the first place.

Scientists at the at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle say the 30,000-letter genetic code of the virus changes by one letter every 15 days. It's not known how many of these changes would be needed for the virus to seem different enough to the immune system of someone who had a previous version of it for it to cause a fresh infection.

Fauci told Congress on Thursday that it was unlikely that someone could get reinfected.

"We haven't formally proved it, but it is strongly likely that that's the case," he said. "Because if this acts like any other virus, once you recover, you won't get reinfected."

WILL IT GO AWAY IN THE SUMMER?

Flu fades each spring and the new virus may do the same, Fauci said last week in a podcast with a journal editor.

"I am hoping that as we get into the warmer weather we will see a decline that will give us a chance to get our preparedness up to speed," Fauci said.

But that, too, is far from certain. "We have to assume that the virus will continue to have the capacity

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to spread, and it's a false hope to say yes, it will just disappear in the summertime like influenza," said Dr. Michael Ryan, the World Health Organization's emergencies chief.

Flu viruses also mutate quickly, requiring new vaccines to be made each year. If the coronavirus follows suit, Frieden said, "It could become a virus that circulates around the world for many years to come."

Marilynn Marchione can be followed on Twitter: @MMarchioneAP

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Syrian war, rumbling into 10th year, still has global impact

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — In a world gripped by a pandemic, global unrest and a fast-moving news cycle, it can be difficult to remember that the war in Syria is still happening.

Even before the coronavirus outbreak took over daily lives around the globe, the conflict, which began in early 2011, had largely fallen off the world's collective radars — reduced to a never-ending fight involving an ever-more complex web of players and refugees that few remember once lived in a country they called home.

But as it enters its tenth year, the war — which gave rise to the Islamic State group and triggered the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century — has shown it is still creating new tragedies that can have an outsized impact on global politics.

Earlier this month, Turkish and Syrian troops were clashing in Syria's northwest. That brought NATO-member Turkey and Russia, which back opposing sides of the war, to the brink of direct confrontation, and produced an unprecedented wave of displaced people. Arguing that it faces a potential new influx of refugees from Syria, Turkey announced it would no longer stop its vast migrant and refugee population from illegally entering Greece, touching off a new crisis for the European Union.

More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million people have been driven from their homes, and a staggering 80% of the population live beneath the poverty line, according to the United Nations. Half the country lies in ruins. A political process does not exist. Contrary to what some may hope, the Syrian war is nowhere near its end-game.

CHAOS IN THE NORTH

A cease-fire brokered by the Turkish and Russian presidents in Moscow last week may have put the brakes on the Syrian government's devastating military campaign to retake the northwestern Idlib province. But the halt is not a long-term solution, and the war's final and most devastating chapter is yet to come.

In the three months before it was paused, the Syrian offensive triggered the largest single wave of displacement of the entire war. That may be dwarfed by the flight of humanity toward Turkey if Syrian President Bashar Assad resumes the assault to retake Idlib, home to some 3 million people. The area is the last remaining rebel-controlled area in Syria, and from Assad's perspective, the only place standing in the way of complete military victory.

"Even if Idlib is somehow retaken and an estimated 3 million people are accommodated in Turkey or elsewhere, it is unlikely that Damascus has the capacity or even the tools to rule over formerly opposition-controlled areas for long periods of time without trouble," said Danny Makki, a London-based Syrian journalist.

Similarly, a Turkey-Russia deal brokered in October ended a Turkish military campaign against U.S.-allied Syrian Kurdish fighters in the country's northeast. But the oil-rich region is still contested. There are hundreds of American troops there, ostensibly on a mission to protect Kurdish-controlled oil fields from remnants of the Islamic State group.

Both U.S. and Russian troops patrol the tense area separately, and thousands of Iranian-backed militias are stationed nearby.

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'A PERFECT STORM OF DEVASTATION'

Nearly a decade of fighting has transformed the Mideast country into a failed state providing free-for-all proxy battlefield where world powers can settle their scores.

Russia, Iran, Turkey and the U.S. all have boots on the ground in Syria. The Lebanese Hezbollah group and a slew of other Iranian-backed militias are fighting there. Israel bombs inside Syria frequently and at will. The war has pulled in so many international players that one Syrian joke says perhaps the Syrian people are the ones who need to leave the country, so as not to disturb those foreign powers fighting on their soil.

Assad, who has been able to keep his grip on the central government from Damascus throughout the war, continues to chip away at rebel-held territory with Russian help. The rebel hold has shrunk in size from more than half of the country at one point to a tiny strip in Idlib province by the Turkish border now.

But many areas recovered by the government are a wasteland of wrecked buildings. Few refugees have dared to return, and reconstruction efforts are on hold, pending a political resolution.

Meanwhile, the economic situation is deteriorating so fast that ordinary Syrians struggle keep up with prices that rise even over the course of a day. The currency is collapsing: it now takes 500 Syrian pounds to get a dollar, 20 times the pre-2011 amount. The economic squeeze has been worsened by neighboring Lebanon's acute financial crisis.

"It is a devastating dynamic, almost a perfect storm," David Beasley, head of the World Food Program, told The Associated Press in a recent interview. "You've got the war, the devastation of the war on the economy for the last eight, nine, 10 years. But now you compound the Lebanese economic collapse because the Syria and Lebanon economy are tied together, and this is really becoming a perfect storm of devastation," he said.

FULL CIRCLE?

Even if Assad were to recapture remaining rebel-controlled territory, ruling it is another issue. His government's policy of "reconciliation" in areas it already seized — effectively forced surrender of all opposition — has proven futile.

In Damascus, there has been a series of mysterious blasts targeting civilians and military personnel using explosive devices in the past three weeks.

In the southern province of Daraa, where the uprising against Assad began in March 2011, a reconciliation between the government and insurgents reached two years ago has crumbled with acts of violence reported almost on daily basis.

Ambushes, explosions and shootings left scores of fighters dead on both sides, and anti-government protests have re-erupted in some areas. Government forces responded with brute force earlier this year when tensions with insurgents turning into uprisings in several parts of Daraa, including the village of Sanamein.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitoring group, said 217 people have been killed in violence in Daraa over the past months, including 45 civilians, 113 soldiers and pro-government gunmen, and 37 rebels who signed deals with the state in 2018.

"The growing insurgency in Daraa and the poor economic situation in Damascus is evidence that the war will not abruptly end, and in fact the socio-political and military circumstances are present to indicate that this will rumble on for many years to come," Makki said.

Associated Press writer Bassem Mroue in Beirut contributed to this report.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 16, the 76th day of 2020. There are 290 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On March 16, 1926, rocket science pioneer Robert H. Goddard successfully tested the first liquid-fueled

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rocket at his Aunt Effie's farm in Auburn, Massachusetts.

On this date:

In 1521, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan and his crew reached the Philippines, where Magellan was killed during a battle with natives the following month.

In 1802, President Thomas Jefferson signed a measure authorizing the establishment of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York.

In 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "The Scarlet Letter" was first published.

In 1935, Adolf Hitler decided to break the military terms set by the Treaty of Versailles (vehr-SY') by ordering the rearming of Germany.

In 1945, during World War II, American forces declared they had secured Iwo Jima, although pockets of Japanese resistance remained.

In 1966, NASA launched Gemini 8 on a mission to rendezvous and dock with Agena, a target vehicle in orbit; although the docking was successful, the joined vehicles began spinning, forcing Gemini to disconnect and abort the flight.

In 1968, the My Lai (mee ly) massacre took place during the Vietnam War as U.S. Army soldiers hunting for Viet Cong fighters and sympathizers killed unarmed villagers in two hamlets of Son My (suhn mee) village; estimates of the death toll vary from 347 to 504. Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In 1987, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In 1991, a plane carrying seven members of country singer Reba McEntire's band and her tour manager crashed into Otay Mountain in southern California, killing all on board. U.S. skaters Kristi Yamaguchi, Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan swept the World Figure Skating Championships in Munich, Germany.

In 1994, figure skater Tonya Harding pleaded guilty in Portland, Oregon, to conspiracy to hinder prosecution for covering up an attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan, avoiding jail but drawing a \$100,000 fine.

In 2003, American activist Rachel Corrie, 23, was crushed to death by an Israeli military bulldozer while trying to block demolition of a Palestinian home in the Gaza Strip.

In 2004, China declared victory in its fight against bird flu, saying it had "stamped out" all its known cases.

Ten years ago: Attorney General Eric Holder told a House Appropriations subcommittee that Osama bin Laden would never face trial in the United States because he would not be captured alive. (The al-Qaida leader was shot dead by Navy SEALs in Pakistan in May 2011.) Lance Mackey won the 1,100-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race to become the first musher in the event's 38-year history to win four consecutive races.

Five years ago: Los Angeles prosecutors filed a first-degree murder charge against real estate heir Robert Durst in the killing of his friend, Susan Berman, who had acted as Durst's spokeswoman after his wife, Kathleen, disappeared in 1982. (Durst is now on trial in Los Angeles.)

One year ago: Relatives waited for authorities to release the remains of the 51 Muslim worshippers killed in massacres at two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch. Dick Dale, whose power-chord instrumentals on songs including "Miserlou" and "Let's Go Trippin'" earned him the title King of the Surf Guitar, died at the age of 83.

Today's Birthdays: Country singer Ray Walker (The Jordanares) is 86. Game show host Chuck Woolery is 79. Singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker is 78. Country singer Robin Williams is 73. Actor Erik Estrada is 71. Actor Victor Garber is 71. Country singer Ray Benson (Asleep at the Wheel) is 69. Bluegrass musician Tim O'Brien (Hot Rize; Earls of Leicester) is 66. Rock singer-musician Nancy Wilson (Heart) is 66. World Golf Hall of Famer Hollis Stacy is 66. Actor Clifton Powell is 64. Rapper-actor Flavor Flav is 61. Rock musician Jimmy DeGrasso is 57. Actor Jerome Flynn is 57. Folk singer Patty Griffin is 56. Movie director Gore Verbinski is 56. Country singer Tracy Bonham is 53. Actress Lauren Graham is 53. Actor Judah Friedlander (FREED'-lan-duhr) is 51. Actor Alan Tudyk (TOO'-dihk) is 49. Actor Tim Kang is 47. Rhythm-and-blues singer Blu Cantrell is 44. Actress Brooke Burns is 42. Actress Kimrie Lewis is 38. Actor Brett Davern is 37. Actress Alexandra Daddario is 34. Rhythm and blues singer Jhene Aiko is 32. Rock musician Wolfgang Van Halen is 29.

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Thought for Today: "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true." — From "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, American author (1804-1864).