

Groton Daily Independent

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The service of
Gary Heitmann
Thursday, Jan. 7th, 10:30 a.m.
Groton United
Methodist Church



GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

Upcoming Schedule

Tuesday, Jan. 5: Basketball doubleheader with Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m., Boys Varsity at 8 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 7: Wrestling triangular in Groton starting at 6 p.m. with Redfield and Webster.

Friday, Jan. 8: Girls Basketball at Sisseton with JV starting at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Saturday, Jan. 9: Quad Wrestling at Wolsey-Wessington High School starting at 10 a.m.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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The Minnesota Vikings finished the 2020 season with a 37-35 win against the Detroit Lions. Neither team had anything to gain with a win, but this game turned into a thriller that came down to the final minutes. The Vikings (7-9) held on for the win, and can finally close this season out and put it behind them.



By Jordan Wright

Kirk Cousins had a great game, completing 28 of 40 passes for 405 yards and three touchdowns. He was once again under pressure on most of his throws, but that was to be expected with left tackle Riley Reiff sitting this game out. Alexander Mattison was the lead back on Sunday, touching the ball 24 times for 145 yards and two touchdowns. Another backup player who wanted to put some good plays on tape before the offseason was Chad Beebe, who had one of the plays of the game right before halftime. With :11 seconds on the clock before half, Beebe caught a pass from Cousins and pinballed off two Lions defenders before showing breakaway speed on his way to a forty-yard touchdown, giving the Vikings a five point lead.

Harrison Smith hasn't been playing his best football lately, but on Sunday he led the team with nine tackles to go along with a pass breakup and a timely interception in the third quarter. Hercules Mata'afa was another player who stood out, tallying the Vikings' only sack to go along with a tackle for a loss and a QB hit. It hasn't been a good year for Mike Zimmer's defense, and this game was no different. The silver lining is that the Vikings have some young players who have a ton of potential, and when the other injured players return, the Vikings should be considerably better next season.

The player of the game was Justin Jefferson, who now has more receiving yards than any other rookie in NFL history. The young wide receiver has a very good chance to be named offensive rookie of the year, and he has already proven he's a special talent. Jefferson finishes the 2020 season with 1400 yards and seven touchdowns, and will surely be a focal point of the offense next season.

Looking ahead, we'll be keeping an eye on the playoffs, with a recap of each game that will ultimately lead us to the championship. We will also include any Vikings related news and notes, so make sure to check back next week. Skol!

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That's Life by Tony Bender

2020 in review

Hey kids, what a year it was. Well, 2020 is in the rear view mirror but before we breathe a sigh of relief, let's look back for a moment or two with the Official 2020 Super Brain Quiz.

1. The year 2020:
 - a. Sucked
 - b. Really sucked
 - c. Really, really sucked
 - d. Was enough to make a preacher cuss
2. Why does Donald Trump believe he won the 2020 presidential race?
 - a. He also believes in the Tooth Fairy.
 - b. People are saying...
 - c. After all, he was doing such a bang-up job.
 - d. Putin assured him it was in the bag.
3. According to some people, 1 in 586 North Dakotans have died of:
 - a. A liberal hoax
 - b. It's just a cold.
 - c. Hangnails
 - d. Not COVID 19
4. Why did President Trump pardon so many people involved in the Russia coverup?
 - a. It's not because they were guilty if that's what you're thinking.
 - b. Quid Pro Quo
 - c. Quid J-Lo
 - d. Quigley Down Under
5. Tom Brady breaks up with the New England Patriots because:
 - a. Irreconcilable differences
 - b. Bill Belichick kept giving him wedgies
 - c. Financial infidelity
 - d. All of the above

6. The White House went 417 days between press briefings because:

- a. No news is good news.
- b. Frankly, it's none of your business what we're doing in here.
- c. If I told you I'd have to kill you.
- d. Trying to cut back on the lies

7. Actress Lori Loughlin pled guilty to:

- a. Shot a man in Reno just to watch him die.
- b. Shot the sheriff and the deputy
- c. Doing 27 in a 25 in Aberdeen
- d. Pulled the "Do not remove under penalty of law" tag off her mattress

8. NASCAR announced that this would no longer be found at race tracks.

- a. Teeth
- b. The Stars and Bars
- c. The Jolly Roger
- d. The Grumpy Roger

9. In June, President Trump dubbed COVID 19:

- a. The Kung Fu Flu
- b. Just a cold.
- c. The 'Gina Virus
- d. Bob

10. In September a hurricane is named:

- a. Sally
- b. Mustang Sally
- c. Long Tall Sally
- d. Runaround Sue

Bonus: Also in September, Trump encourages people in North Carolina to vote:

- a. Once by mail and once in person
- b. One if by land and two if by sea
- c. Early and often
- d. Democratic on Nov. 4.

Answers: 1. d; 2. a; 3. a; 4. a; 5. b; 6. d; 7. c; 8. a; 9. d; 10. d; Bonus: b. Grading: 11-9 correct: Next time keep your eyes on your own paper! 6-8 correct: If this quiz were based on the electoral college, you'd be the winner. 3-5 correct: Were you even trying? 0-2 correct: Statistically, you would have done better throwing darts.

Social Factors Impact Wellbeing

Some health problems are much larger than the health care system and cannot be fixed by doctors, nurses, hospitals, and the rest of the traditional health care team.



By Debra Johnston, M.D ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

In our physician peer group sessions, my colleagues and I often share the agony we feel when

sending people out of the emergency room, knowing that the patient is going right back into the conditions that contributed to their crisis in the first place. Perhaps they could not afford their insulin or have no refrigerator in which to keep it cold. Perhaps they are going home with the person who hurt them. Perhaps they don't have a home to go to and are trying to care for their wound while living on the street. These situations are real, and they exist in rural areas, small towns, and big cities alike.

I often urge my patients to get more exercise, and we brainstorm ways to overcome the barriers they face. But options are limited for the person whose neighborhood has no sidewalks or isn't safe to stroll through. We talk about good nutrition, and most patients know it's best to eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. But what if the only store they can reach is the convenience store which doesn't stock healthy options?

Some of my patients come to me having researched their symptoms, and we talk about how to find reliable medical information on the internet. But what happens if they don't have access to the internet? Sometimes I print out educational material, but that has no value for the patient who cannot read.

Almost everyone has stress in their lives, but for some people the stress is unremitting and severe. They deal with poverty and the attendant evils of housing and food insecurity, with limited education that restricts their options. They lack reliable transportation which keeps them from school or work or regular healthcare. They suffer from chronic diseases, racism and other forms of discrimination while separated from the support of family and community.

Research reveals that these chronic stressors have significant adverse effects on the health of not only the individual, but their descendants as well. We have a label for these stressors. They are called "social determinants" and we are increasingly aware that they play an even bigger role in a person's wellbeing than all the things that health care providers do.

Protecting and promoting the health of our patients and our communities is a sacred mission, but we need to expand our perspective beyond medicine and surgery and helping one individual at a time. Health is larger than the health care system. We each have a role to play in recognizing and reducing the impact of social determinants for the wellbeing of our entire community.

Debra Johnston, M.D. 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.

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Lydia Meier, daughter of Nicholas Meier and Anna and Brett Schwan, was voted as Miss Congeniality at the South Dakota Snow Queen Contest held this past weekend in Aberdeen. Lydia is pictured with Nicholas on the left and Anna on the right. (Photo from Nicholas Meier Facebook Page)

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#315 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Tonight's numbers make me nervous because they're not great and it's Sunday, a holiday weekend Sunday at that. I would generally expect reporting to be depressed today, but if it is, we're in some trouble. Tomorrow should be the last day of this extended holiday period with difficult-to-interpret numbers; it is likely to be slow, as Mondays tend to be. I am hoping the reporting situation returns to normal by Tuesday so that we can assess more reliably just where we are.

That said, today's nothing to celebrate, either the daily numbers or the one-week and two-week ones. I am hoping this was the last major holiday on which I'll be reporting (ever) so that the rest of these Updates, right up to the very end, settle back into our standard week-to-week pattern. Week-on-week, things are considerably worse, even though the two-week numbers have improved. This is the first hint I've seen of a Christmas surge, and that is simply not good news. We are at 20,661,700 cases reported in the US so far in the pandemic. There were 221,800 new cases reported today for a 1.1% increase in total cases. We've been over 90,000 cases for a solid nine weeks and over 70,000 for ten weeks; when I consider that until a couple of months ago 80,000 was an unthinkable number and we've more than tripled that a couple of times, I realize how bad things are. We are seeing the greatest growth in California, which remains in deep trouble, and now the South is poised to join them there. I'll note that New York has joined the one-million-case club; this isn't as dire as it may seem given the still relatively low rate of increase there and their early head start, but it's not a happy milestone. Hospitalizations are not at record levels, but within 2000 of the record at 123,614, well above last week.

We're up to 49 states and territories in the red zone, two in orange, and three in yellow. One-week increase in total cases was 1,284,800 (7.2%) last week and is back up over a million and a half at 1,500,600 (7.8%) this week. Two-week increase was 2,796,300 (17.1%) last week and is down to 2,785,400 (15.6%) this week. When the two-week increase is down and the one-week increase is up, it means things got considerably worse in the last week, right on schedule about 10 days after the Christmas travel period. We can hold our breath for a couple more weeks in the hope that the health care system manages to hold up until the New Year's Eve surge has worked its way through and that people come to their senses until we can get vaccines into a whole lot more people. We added almost 6.4 million cases in December alone; that's an abysmal month: 30.9 percent of all cases for the entire pandemic were reported in December. I have us at a one-week daily average new-case number of 214,371.4, almost 31,000 more than last week.

I track 54 states and US territories, including the District of Columbia; and the number of these showing two-week rates of increase greater than 25% is still at five—and it's the same five. Here are the states and territories with the greatest rate of growth in cases over 14 days with their percentage increase in that time: Connecticut (38.00%), Maine (35.08% - decrease), California (28.86% - decrease), New Hampshire (27.11% - decrease), and West Virginia (25.87% - decrease). We're up to 19 states and territories with growth rates above the US growth rate, which is a small increase after three weeks of decline. I suspect the growing problem in the South is going to make itself felt by next week.

There were 1508 deaths reported today, a 0.4% increase to 351,680. Average daily deaths have increased to the highest number of the pandemic; at 2201.3 last week, they're up to 2640.4 this week. This is the seventh consecutive week since spring we've reported over 10,000 deaths. States with the most per capita deaths over the past week are Kansas, Wyoming, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Arkansas. Only three states on this list this week were on it last week.

Since the news has been relatively slow over this holiday weekend and we seem to be seeing a great many bogus claims about this pandemic again lately—seems to come in waves—I figured tonight's a good time to debunk another one. This one purports to demonstrate that the total number of deaths in the US wasn't really any higher in 2020 than it was in prior years; therefore, these Covid-19 deaths figures are invented or inflated, just wrong. It clearly came from someone with an ax to grind, and it started like this. (I am presenting this precisely as written.) "So you are obviously into statistics, let.e share the following(maybe you will include them in your next report)." I thought it was astute of this person to notice my fondness for

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statistics, but not so astute in sourcing information. I did not include these "statistics" in my next report for reasons which will become evident momentarily (although it should be noted that tonight I am about to share them in a "report" after all, so apparently wishes really do come true if you wait long enough).

Here are those "statistics" (again, as written): "In 2011 there were 2.5 million deaths in the US that held from 2012 until 2019 when it reached. 2.9 million deaths up to Dec 1, 2020 recorded deaths 2.5 million so where is the uptick? Another statistic, of those effected with Covid-19, 99% survive. In 2019, 29% of those who got the flu shot died."

Now you will be surprised to learn I don't think this person actually looked up the annual deaths statistics published by the CDC; in fact, I'm quite sure they came from a meme circulating on social media. I believe this because I've seen this meme before and this person doesn't seem to have the sort of Internet following that would lead multiple people to share from his/her particular account. Also, the numbers aren't exactly accurate. Something new here: someone circulating bullshit numbers about this virus on social media. Who saw that coming?

So, here are the CDC's mortality data from 2011-2018:

2011 – 2,515,458
2012 – 2,534,279
2013 – 2,596,993
2014 – 2,626,418
2015 – 2,712,630
2016 – 2,744,248
2017 – 2,813,503
2018 – 2,839,205

So the deaths don't sit there on 2.5 million through those years; they increase year by year consistent with increases in population, which is pretty typical. Now, that 2019 figure of 2.9 million is something else again; I'm not sure where it came from; it's not an official CDC figure. These typically take up to 18 months to finalize, and the CDC has not yet released final 2019 data. The same would be true for the 2.5 million figure for 2020 above, which is consistent with what appeared in the Internet meme I saw too—same reason.

What we do have is a CDC report dated November 16 listing 2,457,350 deaths from all causes and which is, I suspect, the source for that 2.5 million figure (file:///C:/Users/dr_ms/Downloads/cdc_97230_DS1%20(1).pdf— your computer will ask you if this is from a trusted source; it's the CDC, so yes, it's trustworthy); but here, the devil really is in the details. Turns out that report doesn't purport to offer a total figure for deaths in 2020. This is because it (a) doesn't include deaths from the early weeks of the year, (b) does not contain verified and finalized figures (see note above about the lag in the process), and (c) is incomplete because death certificate reports are delayed by as much as eight weeks or more in reaching the CDC, which means a great many deaths from fall and going back into late summer before the fall surge are not yet included. That would mean this 2.5 million figure is completely bogus to use as an argument that deaths had not increased in 2020.

We also have a CDC analysis of death figures between January 26 and October 3 which estimated there had been 299,028 excess deaths in 2020 by early October. Excess deaths are deaths over the expected number based on the previous five years' trends. (We've discussed excess deaths many times before. If you need a refresher or weren't with us back then, you can check out my Update #79 posted on May 12 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3587274557955591>, #101 posted June 3 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3649991181683928>, and #136 posted on July 8 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3753580371325008>. In them you will find expanded explanations of the concept, examples, and numbers from various points in the pandemic.) Here's a link to a graphical representation of that CDC analysis: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/LWq2f/6/>.

Additionally, we have a report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association analyzing excess deaths between March and July which found US deaths had increased 20% from expected during that time. Here's a link to that paper: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2771761>.

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The last thing I have is a set of reports from the CDC with preliminary death counts on the year. It appears there are data here through the end of the year although clearly these are going to be seriously incomplete this early in 2021: Death certificates from 2020 will come in for weeks and weeks yet. Here's the link: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/excess_deaths.htm. If you scroll to the bottom of this page, you will see a graphical representation of deaths plotted along with expected deaths for January 1, 2017 through January 1, 2021. The excess deaths breakpoint is graphed throughout, and time periods with excess deaths are marked. It's pretty stark. I recommend you copy the graph and save it for these stupid arguments. The quick take on this latest set of reports is that significantly more people died in the US last year than expected since the pandemic hit in the spring, more than enough to account for the reported Covid-19 death toll. Now not all of these excess deaths have been linked to Covid-19; some may have been from Covid-19, but the diagnoses were missed or misattributed. And some of them are likely non-Covid-19 deaths, but linked to the pandemic—people who died from diabetes, Alzheimer's, high blood pressure, heart disease, and other causes because they'd lost their insurance and couldn't afford to see their physicians, because they were too scared of exposure to keep their appointments, because the economic downturn left them unable to afford their medications, and such.

Bottom line: No, deaths in 2020 are not less than or even equal to those in 2019. They are well above 2019 and prior years, far enough above to accommodate the deaths attributed to Covid-19. If there is a nefarious plot to attribute hundreds of thousands of deaths from other causes to Covid-19 and all those deaths are from some other cause, then we have to conclude there is something else going around the country killing those hundreds of thousands of people and we have zero clue what that something is—a laughable assumption, one which would require quite a lot of evidence in support, evidence which is never forthcoming. It is reasonable to expect people to tell you where they're getting their numbers. (Spoiler: Internet memes are not reliable sources for vital statistics.)

As for the rest of this, first that 99 percent of Covid-19 victims survive. Of course, at this point, no one really knows what this percentage is, but 99 percent is probably not wildly wrong. Most good estimates these days are placing that number between 99 and 99.5 percent. Not sure what that has to do with the argument, but I suspect it's something like, "If only one percent of patients die, this isn't really that big a deal." Which you can try to sell to grieving families and friends of some 350,000 dead people—and good luck with that. Let me know how it goes.

And finally the ludicrous assertion that 29 percent of influenza vaccine recipients in 2019 died. Nope. This is what we in the business call made-up numbers. I am trying to imagine the world in which almost one-third of a vaccine's recipients are dead within a year and the vaccine's still on the market. Can't do it. Someone makes this sort of fantastical statement to me, I'm demanding a source. For the record, I did. The person hasn't gotten back to me yet. I'll let you know if I hear something, but don't hold your breath.

When someone brings in a load of rubbish and leaves it in front of us, we really need to take out the trash. This sort of misinformation is not harmless; it does real damage in the world. We need to respond to it when we see it; in doing so, we usually won't move the person who posted it, but we may help others to sort out fact from fiction.

Miriam Looker, 95, lives in a nursing home in Ohio. She's accustomed to working with fabrics: During World War II, she was a parachute tester for the Air Force, and she's also been quilting for years. As a result, when early in the pandemic her son who is a doctor asked her to make masks for his patients to wear when they came into the clinic, that was a pretty easy ask for an old hand at the sewing machine. She began sewing masks, at least 10 a day; she's made over 1700 so far. She'd have made more except that she got sick with Covid-19 herself and had to take an entire month off as she battled fatigue and other symptoms. The good news is she's back at work. She couldn't retire when there was still work to be done, and she looks pretty good to continue until this thing is over. There's a case of doing what you can where you can, an example for the rest of us. The world's full of good examples if we look.

Be well. We'll talk again.

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Jan. 3 COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota: Community Spread for week of Dec. 28:

Moderate: Brule, Clark, Corson, Jackson and Lyman downgraded from Substantial to Moderate.

Minimal: Buffalo, Jerauld, Mellette, Sanborn and Ziebach downgraded from Moderate to Minimal; Jones upgraded from None to Minimal.

Positive: +703 (100,532 total) Positivity Rate: 11.1%

Total Tests: 6311 (773,868 total)

Total Persons Tested: 2009 (375,955 total)

Hospitalized: +30 (5732 total) 262 currently hospitalized (-10)

Avera St. Luke's: 8 (0) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 4 (+0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 8 (+2) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (-0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (-0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +12 (1513 total)

Females: 7, Males: 5

Age Groups: 60s=1, 70s=3, 80+=8

Counties: Beadle-2, Brown-2, Charles Mix-1, Douglas-1, Hutchinson-1, Miner-1, Minnehaha-4.

Recovered: +436 (93,031 total)

Active Cases: +255 (5988)

Percent Recovered: 92.5%

Vaccinations: 26870

Beadle (37) +6 positive, +2 recovered (74 active cases)

Brookings (30) +36 positive, +7 recovered (248 active cases)

Brown (63): +40 positive, +18 recovered (282 active cases)

Clark (2): +0 positive, +4 recovered (15 active cases)

Clay (12): +11 positive, +6 recovered (93 active cases)

Codington (70): +19 positive, +16 recovered (244 active cases)

Davison (53): +10 positive, +10 recovered (102 active cases)

Day (20): +1 positive, +5 recovered (34 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +9 positive, +4 recovered (64 active cases)

Faulk (12): +0 positive, +1 recovered (3 active cases)

Grant (35): +3 positive, +1 recovered (28 active cases)

Hanson (3): +3 positive, +0 recovered (19 active cases)

Hughes (27): +7 positive, +13 recovered (110 active cases)

Lawrence (28): +17 positive, +17 recovered (116 active cases)

Lincoln (66): +81 positive, +42 recovered (463 active cases)

Marshall (4): +0 positive, +1 recovered (18 active cases)

McCook (22): +5 positive, +2 recovered (37 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +3 recovery (8 active case)

Minnehaha (271): +207 positive, +87 recovered (1482 active cases)

Pennington (134): +85 positive, +61 recovered (825 active cases)

Potter (3): +2 positive, +2 recovered (10 active cases)

Roberts (32): +6 positive, +9 recovered (95 active cases)

Spink (24): +3 positive, +1 recovered (41 active cases)

Walworth (14): +8 positive, +4 recovered (43 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Jan. 3

- 4.5% rolling 14-day positivity
- 161 new positives
- 1527 susceptible test encounters
- 98 currently hospitalized (+8)
- 1852 active cases (-147)
- 1310 total deaths (0)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	414	386	782	8	Substantial	25.00%
Beadle	2519	2408	5230	37	Substantial	7.95%
Bennett	355	342	1092	8	Moderate	3.45%
Bon Homme	1477	1417	1883	23	Substantial	25.40%
Brookings	3035	2757	10100	30	Substantial	6.39%
Brown	4498	4153	11137	63	Substantial	20.86%
Brule	637	611	1694	7	Moderate	6.25%
Buffalo	411	396	853	10	Minimal	14.29%
Butte	896	839	2835	18	Substantial	15.38%
Campbell	115	107	210	4	Minimal	0.00%
Charles Mix	1127	1062	3546	12	Substantial	14.55%
Clark	317	300	858	2	Moderate	6.38%
Clay	1645	1540	4541	12	Substantial	11.88%
Codington	3491	3177	8524	70	Substantial	15.29%
Corson	454	426	897	11	Moderate	13.04%
Custer	683	651	2412	9	Substantial	18.60%
Davison	2736	2581	5750	53	Substantial	14.34%
Day	541	487	1553	20	Substantial	23.44%
Deuel	417	384	1001	7	Substantial	12.50%
Dewey	1304	1188	3501	12	Substantial	34.09%
Douglas	385	351	826	8	Substantial	32.00%
Edmunds	385	317	883	4	Substantial	20.45%
Fall River	458	425	2294	12	Substantial	17.65%
Faulk	313	298	603	12	Moderate	0.00%
Grant	829	766	1943	35	Substantial	4.11%
Gregory	484	447	1095	26	Substantial	9.09%
Haakon	234	200	473	8	Substantial	29.17%
Hamlin	609	542	1528	36	Substantial	15.49%
Hand	312	298	704	2	Moderate	0.00%
Hanson	315	293	610	3	Moderate	17.39%
Harding	89	85	156	1	Minimal	14.29%
Hughes	2034	1897	5666	27	Substantial	3.05%
Hutchinson	703	654	2048	17	Substantial	17.54%

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Hyde	132	130	368	1	Minimal	0.00%
Jackson	262	245	857	8	Moderate	18.18%
Jerauld	263	235	500	15	Minimal	0.00%
Jones	68	64	187	0	Minimal	14.29%
Kingsbury	543	493	1432	13	Substantial	31.25%
Lake	1040	956	2785	16	Substantial	19.28%
Lawrence	2594	2450	7590	28	Substantial	20.68%
Lincoln	6904	6375	17590	66	Substantial	15.60%
Lyman	527	496	1706	9	Moderate	6.45%
Marshall	262	240	1010	4	Substantial	20.59%
McCook	688	629	1416	22	Substantial	22.03%
McPherson	183	174	508	1	Moderate	2.86%
Meade	2288	2113	6725	24	Substantial	15.24%
Mellette	220	210	658	2	Minimal	0.00%
Miner	227	201	501	7	Moderate	31.25%
Minnehaha	25315	23562	68316	271	Substantial	12.16%
Moody	542	495	1595	14	Substantial	15.15%
Oglala Lakota	1937	1792	6211	35	Substantial	17.71%
Pennington	11432	10473	34033	134	Substantial	21.66%
Perkins	289	248	680	11	Substantial	32.43%
Potter	305	292	719	3	Moderate	9.30%
Roberts	1000	873	3760	32	Substantial	24.54%
Sanborn	306	296	616	3	Minimal	5.88%
Spink	710	645	1872	24	Substantial	5.52%
Stanley	280	262	783	2	Substantial	0.00%
Sully	113	103	251	3	Minimal	28.57%
Todd	1169	1116	3825	19	Substantial	20.90%
Tripp	631	594	1330	12	Substantial	16.67%
Turner	975	878	2394	49	Substantial	14.93%
Union	1638	1476	5449	30	Substantial	17.10%
Walworth	636	579	1626	14	Substantial	16.67%
Yankton	2530	2293	8272	26	Substantial	24.28%
Ziebach	301	258	704	8	Moderate	9.09%
Unassigned	0	0	1926	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3762	0
10-19 years	11090	0
20-29 years	18282	4
30-39 years	16637	13
40-49 years	14439	27
50-59 years	14268	78
60-69 years	11421	188
70-79 years	6024	327
80+ years	4609	876

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	52542	732
Male	47990	781

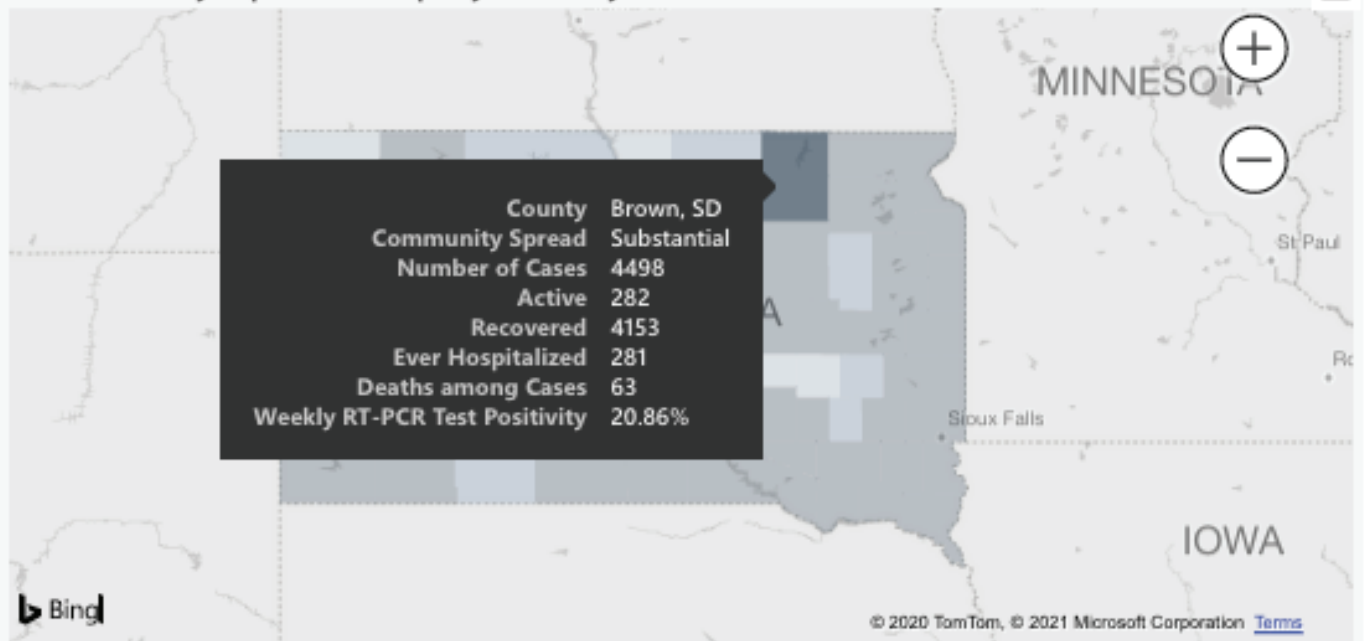
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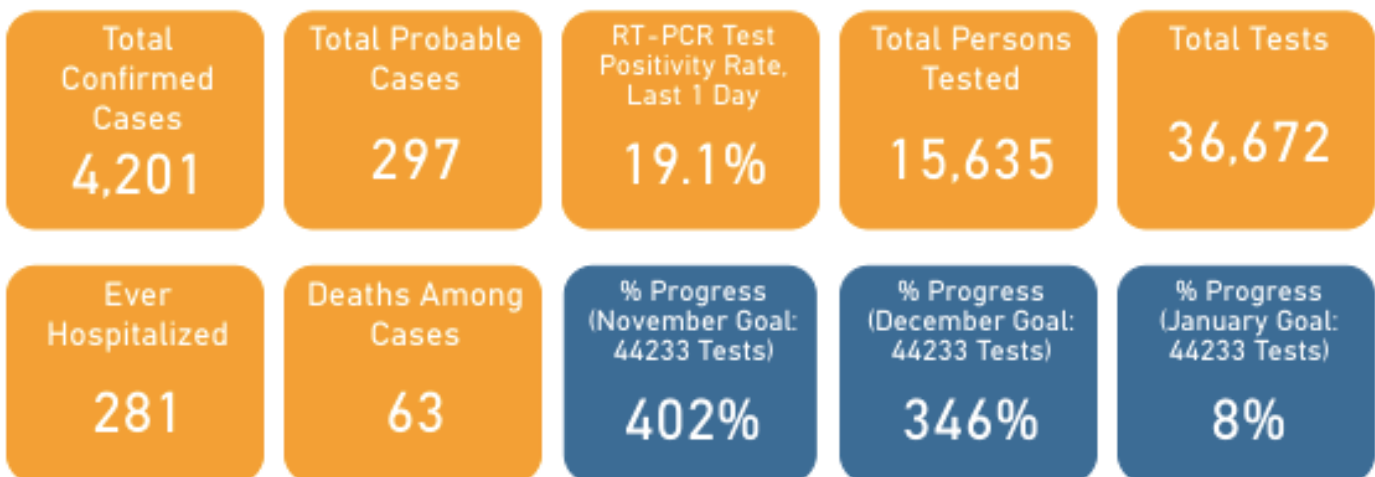
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



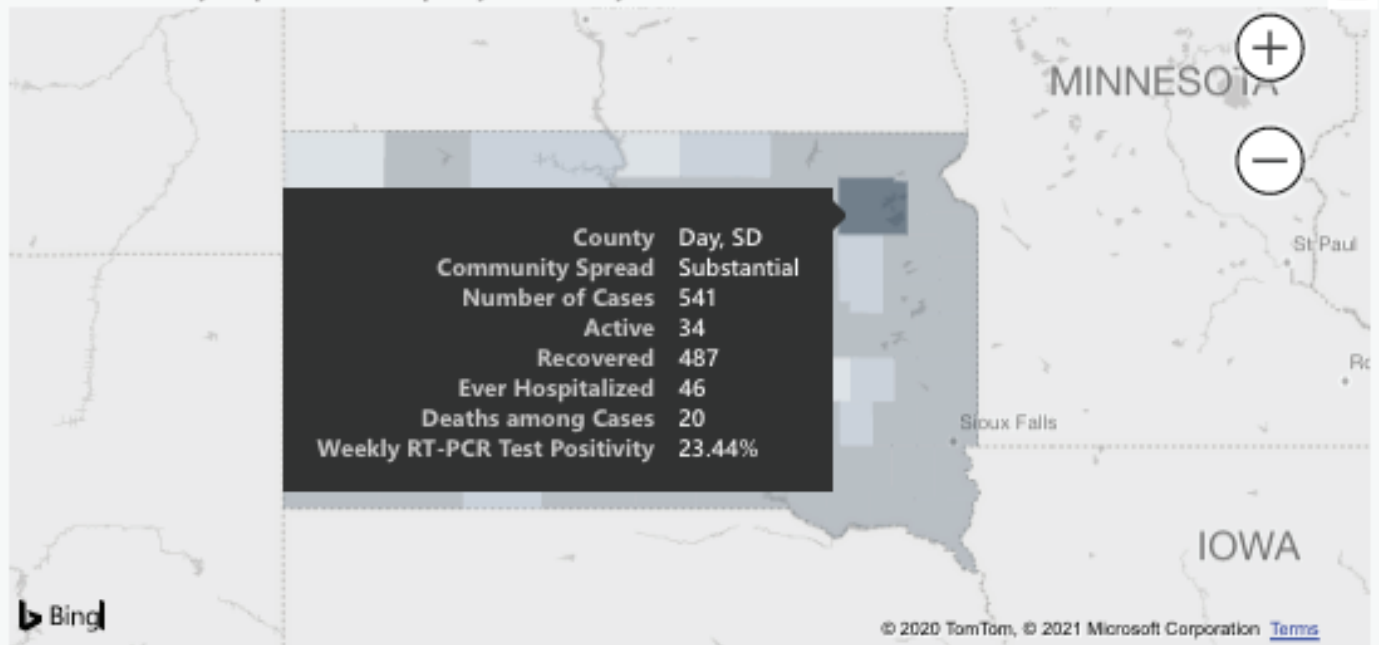
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Day County

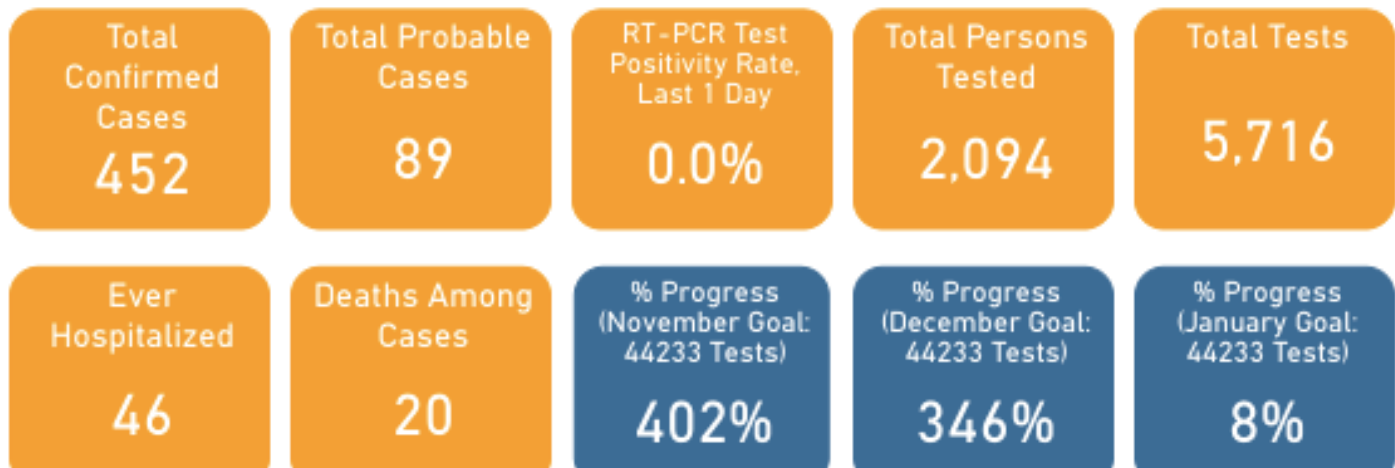


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

26,870

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

26,870

Manufacturer	Number of Doses
Moderna	14,150
Pfizer	12,720

Doses	Number of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	14,150
Pfizer - 1 dose	12,720

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	Total # Persons
Aurora	46	46	46
Beadle	611	611	611
Bennett*	31	31	31
Bon Homme*	218	218	218
Brookings	839	839	839
Brown	1334	1,334	1,334
Brule*	104	104	104
Buffalo*	3	3	3
Butte	27	27	27
Campbell	126	126	126
Charles Mix*	235	235	235
Clark	70	70	70
Clay	338	338	338
Codington*	956	956	956
Corson*	8	8	8
Custer*	99	99	99
Davison	824	824	824
Day*	170	170	170
Deuel	92	92	92
Dewey*	51	51	51
Douglas*	102	102	102
Edmunds	99	99	99
Fall River*	85	85	85
Faulk	21	21	21
Grant*	209	209	209
Gregory*	172	172	172
Haakon*	47	47	47

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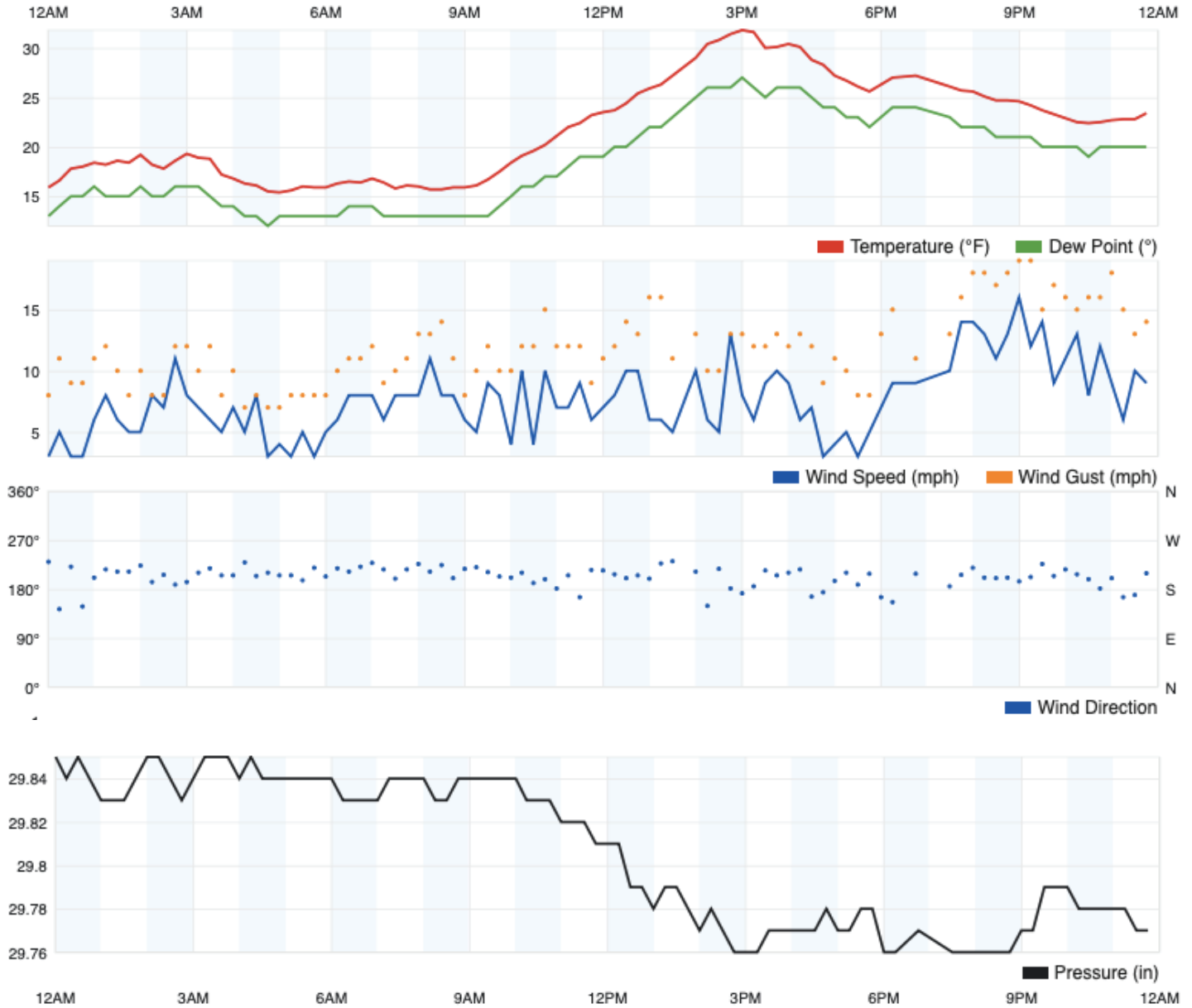
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Hamlin	144	144	144
Hand	108	108	108
Hanson	51	51	51
Harding	0	0	0
Hughes*	608	608	608
Hutchinson*	460	460	460
Hyde*	11	11	11
Jackson*	28	28	28
Jerauld	66	66	66
Jones*	25	25	25
Kingsbury	186	186	186
Lake	316	316	316
Lawrence	172	172	172
Lincoln	3317	3,317	3,317
Lyman*	39	39	39
Marshall*	116	116	116
McCook	190	190	190
McPherson	19	19	19
Meade*	213	213	213
Mellette*	2	2	2
Miner	69	69	69
Minnehaha	8573	8,573	8,573
Moody*	135	135	135
Oglala Lakota*	7	7	7
Pennington*	1787	1,787	1,787
Perkins*	20	20	20
Potter	72	72	72
Roberts*	120	120	120
Sanborn	79	79	79
Spink	245	245	245
Stanley*	83	83	83
Sully	20	20	20
Todd*	6	6	6
Tripp*	109	109	109
Turner	378	378	378
Union	125	125	125
Walworth*	195	195	195
Yankton	1031	1,031	1,031
Ziebach*	7	7	7
Other	821	821	821

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

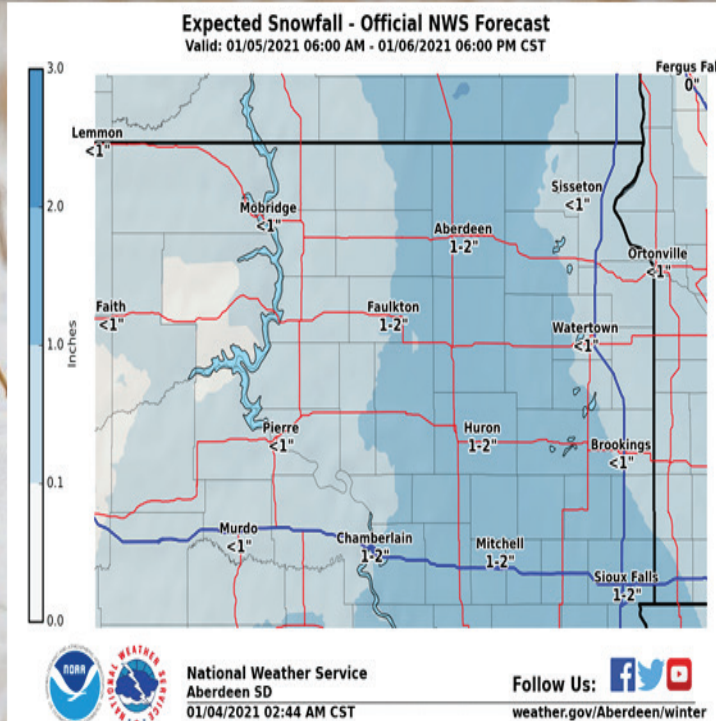


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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday
				
Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Rain/Snow	Chance Snow	Chance Snow
High: 41 °F	Low: 12 °F	High: 36 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 32 °F

Light Snow Possible Tuesday Afternoon Into Wednesday



A low pressure system will pass through the region Tuesday/Wednesday. Very light rain or snow is possible Tuesday afternoon before precipitation turns mostly to snow during the evening and overnight hours. Snow will intensify during the overnight hours and an area of 1-2" of snow is possible. Presently, the James River Valley has the best chances of seeing snow in excess of one inch.

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Today in Weather History

January 4, 1986: Snowfall amounts of 1 to 3 inches along with winds gusting to around 40 mph produced ground blizzard conditions in western South Dakota. Visibility was near zero in many locations with blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads. Some roads were closed in western South Dakota. Several accidents occurred with many cars ending up in the ditch.

January 4, 2005: Heavy snow of up to 10 inches fell across much of Lyman and Jones counties from the 4th until mid-morning of the 5th.

1641: According to historical records, Mount Parker, a stratovolcano on Mindanao Island in the Philippines, erupted on this day. The eruption caused the formation of a crater lake called Lake Maughan.

1917: A tornado with estimated F3 damage cut a 15-mile path and struck a school at Vireton in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, killing 16 people. It ranks as the 4th worst school tornado disaster in U.S. history.

2018: NOAA's GOES-East satellite caught a dramatic view of the Bombogenesis 'Bomb Cyclone' moving up the East Coast on the morning of January 4, 2018. The powerful nor'easter is battering coastal areas with heavy snow and strong winds, from Florida to Maine. Notice the long line of clouds stretching over a thousand miles south of the storm. The storm is drawing moisture all the way from deep in the Caribbean.

1888 - Sacramento, CA, received 3.5 inches of snow, an all-time record for that location. The heaviest snow in recent history was two inches on February 5th in 1976. (4th-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1971 - A blizzard raged from Kansas to Wisconsin, claiming 27 lives in Iowa. Winds reached 50 mph, and the storm produced up to 20 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1982 - Milwaukee, WI, was shut down completely as a storm buried the city under 16 inches of snow in 24 hours. It was the worst storm in thirty-five years. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm moving off the Pacific Ocean spread wintery weather across the southwestern U.S., with heavy snow extending from southern California to western Wyoming. Up to 15 inches of snow blanketed the mountains of southern California, and rainfall totals in California ranged up to 2.20 inches in the Chino area. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Frigid arctic air invading the central and eastern U.S. left Florida about the only safe refuge from the cold and snow. A storm in the western U.S. soaked Bodega Bay in central California with 3.12 inches of rain. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Up to a foot of snow blanketed the mountains of West Virginia, and strong winds in the northeastern U.S. produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in Maine. Mount Washington NH reported wind gusts to 136 mph along with a temperature of 30 below zero! (National Weather Summary)

1990 - A winter storm moving out of the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow across Nebraska and Iowa into Wisconsin. Snowfall totals in Nebraska ranged up to 7 inches at Auburn and Tecumseh. Totals in Iowa ranged up to 11 inches at Carlisle. In Iowa, most of the snow fell between midnight and 4 AM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994 - A major winter storm blanketed much of the northeastern U.S. with heavy snow. More than two feet was reported in northwestern Pennsylvania, with 33 inches at Waynesburg. There were ten heart attacks, and 185 injuries, related to the heavy snow in northwest Pennsylvania. Whiteout conditions were reported in Vermont and northeastern New York State. A wind gusts to 75 mph was clocked at Shaftsbury VT. In the Adirondacks of eastern New York State, the town of Tupper reported five inches of snow between 1 PM and 2 PM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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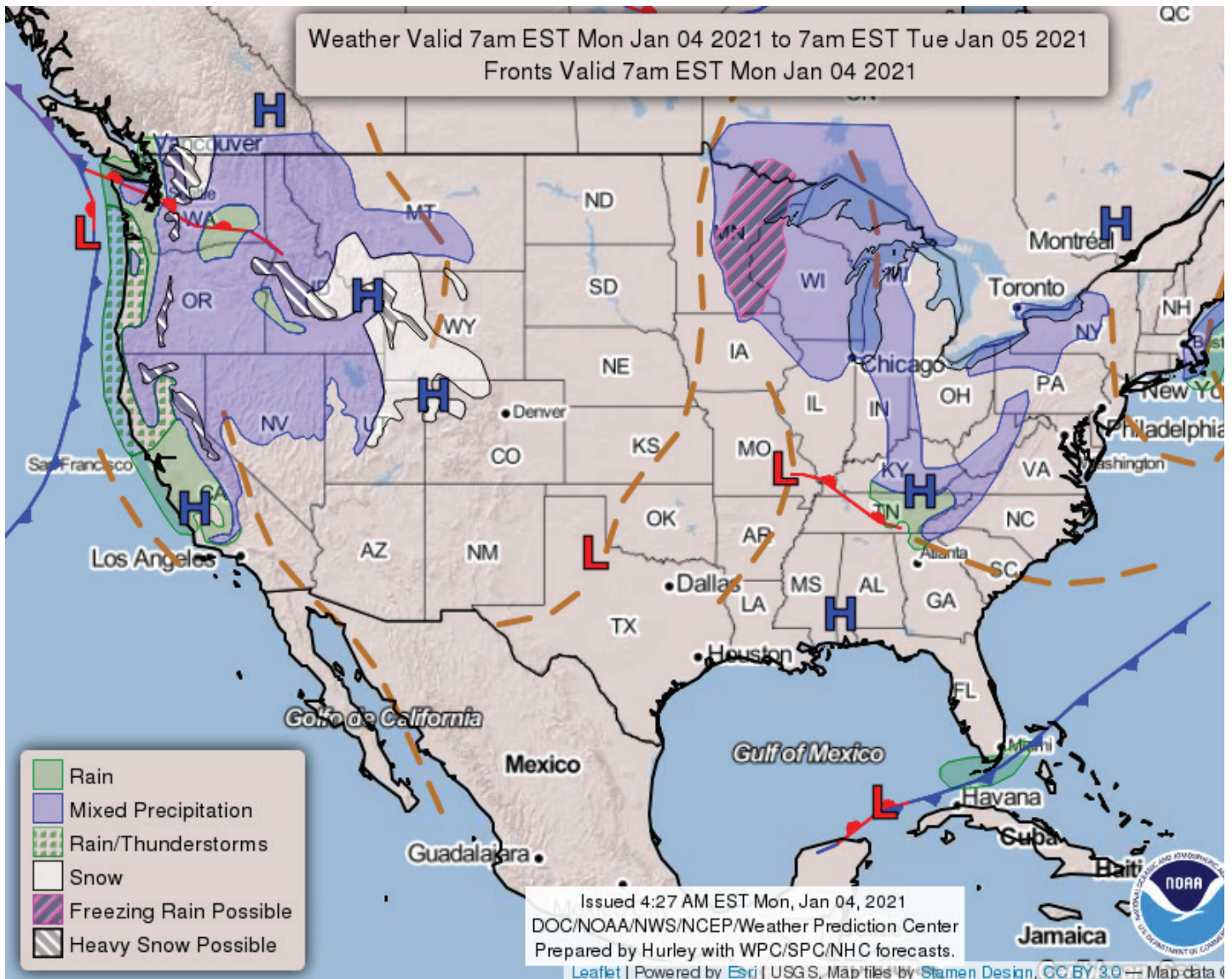
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 32 °F at 2:59 PM
Low Temp: 15 °F at 4:48 AM
Wind: 18 mph at 7:55 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 54° in 2012
Record Low: -34 in 1912
Average High: 22°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.06
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.06
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:05 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.



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SELAH!

The word Selah appears seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in the book of Habakkuk. Its specific meaning is not known but it implies that the reader, or the one listening to one who is reading the psalm, should pause or rest or stop and think of "this" or "that" – or whatever the writer was addressing. It is illuminating and inspiring when we actually apply it.

David was driven from his palace and people by his rebellious son, Absalom. When he saw his army and his advisors turn against him and follow his son, he wrote the third Psalm.

In desperation and despair, he wrote, "O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me. Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" He felt abandoned, betrayed.

Then he paused, thought for a moment, and said "Selah!" Which must have meant, "Wait a minute, David, and think of this." Think of what, we might ask. Being betrayed? Being pursued? Being driven from family and friends? Being driven from your throne?

Of course not. If he is not to think of those things, then, what is he to think of?

And then he answers his own question: "You, Oh Lord, are a shield around me, You are my glory, and the one who lifts my head high!"

David ran away from his son, Absalom. But in so doing he ran into the arms of the Almighty God. He found his protection from persecution and his source of salvation. There is no one like the Lord! He is our comfort in times of conflict and our protector when others pursue us.

Prayer: May we realize, O Lord, Your eternal power and presence over anything that could or would hurt or harm us. Give us courage to trust in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But you, O Lord, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high. Psalm 3:3

News from the Associated Press

Pandemic moves national track meet to new Yankton facility

By JEREMY HOECK Yankton Press and Dakotan

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — Randy Fischer can't hide his excitement.

The head track & field coach at Mount Marty University has waited a long time — he is in his 14th season — for his program to have its own facility.

Since the school unveiled the new Ruth Donohoe First Dakota Fieldhouse last fall, Fischer and his colleagues at Mount Marty were not shy about their goals for the new building.

They wanted to hopefully someday bring in a major track meet.

That goal will be accomplished in year one.

In a joint announcement last month, the NAIA, Great Plains Athletic Conference (GPAC) and Mount Marty revealed that the 2021 NAIA Indoor Track & Field Championships will be moved from Brookings to Yankton, on March 3-6.

"We're really blessed. It's been an amazing venture," Fischer said. "The facility turned out to be as good as it could be. We're just excited to be able to host such an event. It'll be a game-changer for Mount Marty."

Originally, the national meet was scheduled to be held at the Sanford Jackrabbit Athletic Complex in Brookings, but that facility was no longer able to host the event due to COVID-19 restrictions.

That began a series of discussions that ultimately led to Mount Marty expressing interest in bringing the meet to Yankton, according to GPAC commissioner Corey Westra.

Seven months after the \$15 million, 100,000-square foot fieldhouse opened, it will host a national meet.

"We've made some really large investments in academic facilities, athletic facilities and housing facilities in the last couple of years, and these type of events are what we designed these facilities for," MMU athletic director Chris Kassin said. "It's a wonderful opportunity."

Dakota State University (Madison) will remain as the host school for the event, which will now be a four-day meet — it has previously been a three-day event — to limit the number of participants and other people inside the fieldhouse.

"We are extremely happy that we could come up with an alternative when we lost the facility at South Dakota State," said Dakota State athletic director Jeff Dittman.

Westra said he was provided a tour of the new fieldhouse by Fischer during this fall's GPAC cross country championships held in Yankton.

"My initial reaction was, 'Wow, what a beautiful facility,'" Westra said. "It is big. It doesn't look that big on the outside, but when you get in there, there is a lot of space."

The amount of space, specifically on the ends of the track, will come in handy when officials will want to spread athletes out for safety reasons, Westra added.

Ultimately, officials wanted to provide student-athletes with an opportunity to compete during the pandemic.

"It's a tough year for everyone, and I think this will really lift some spirits," said Courtney Fegter, the NAIA championship sport manager for indoor track & field.

There will also be a significant economic boost to the city of Yankton and the surrounding communities, according to Westra.

According to the NAIA, last year's national indoor meet in Brookings produced \$1.9 million to the local economy, and brought in 1,415 athletes from 31 states to Brookings. There was also an average stay of four nights with approximately 650 hotel rooms used per day.

Yankton will now have the opportunity to bring those visitors to town.

"Yankton has a rich track tradition," Westra said. "Many great meets have been contested there."

Mount Marty has twice hosted the GPAC outdoor track & field meet since the opening of Williams Field, mostly recently in 2019 — the last outdoor meet in the conference.

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"Yankton will do a great job of hosting this and so will the community of Yankton," Westra added.

While the rest of the country will see Mount Marty's new fieldhouse for the first time, the impact of the new facility is already being felt by the current Lancer athletes, according to Fischer. And it will have a continued impact on future recruits, he added.

"It'll be huge, especially when you have a national meet," Fischer said. "Our recruitment should improve quite a bit. We've never had something like this to recruit to and train on.

"All of those things will be huge for our program."

Umude scores 27 to lead South Dakota over Denver 79-57

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Stanley Umude had 27 points and 11 rebounds as South Dakota routed Denver 79-57 on Sunday.

A.J. Plitzuweit had 19 points for South Dakota (4-6, 3-2 Summit League). Tasos Kamateros added eight rebounds.

Sam Hines Jr. had 14 points for the Pioneers (1-8, 0-2), who have now lost eight games in a row.

Jase Townsend, who led the Pioneers in scoring entering the matchup with 19 points per game, scored only eight points on 2-of-11 shooting.

The Coyotes improve to 2-0 against the Pioneers on the season. South Dakota defeated Denver 93-54 on Saturday.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Milwaukee flight makes emergency landing in South Dakota

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Authorities say a SkyWest flight from Milwaukee to Denver made an emergency landing in South Dakota Saturday after the flight crew reported a cracked windshield. No injuries were reported.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the twin-engine aircraft was diverted to Joe Foss Field in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and landed without incident at 10:45 a.m. Saturday.

No other details were available. The FAA is investigating the incident, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

South Dakota tops 100,000 in cumulative COVID-19 cases

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials confirmed Sunday that the state has gone over the 100,000 mark in the number of COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic.

The update showed 703 new cases that included two days of data because of the New Year's holiday. The number of total positive tests stands at 100,532.

The COVID Tracking Project said there were nearly 623 new cases per 100,000 people in South Dakota over the past two weeks, which ranks 34th in the country for new cases per capita. One in every 308 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week.

Officials confirmed 12 deaths in Sunday's report, for a total of 1,513 fatalities. The death count is the 38th highest in the country overall and the sixth highest per capita at about 170 deaths per 100,000 people, Johns Hopkins University researchers said.

The state has administered 26,870 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, Sunday's report showed.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems,

it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

Trump, on tape, presses Ga. official to 'find' him votes

By JEFF AMY, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state to "find" enough votes to overturn Joe Biden's win in the state's presidential election, repeatedly citing disproven claims of fraud and raising the prospect of a "criminal offense" if officials did not change the vote count, according to a recording of the conversation.

The phone call with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Saturday was the latest step in an unprecedented effort by a sitting president to press a state official to reverse the outcome of a free and fair election that he lost. The president, who has refused to accept his loss to Democratic president-elect Biden, repeatedly argued that Raffensperger could change the certified results.

"All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

Georgia counted its votes three times before certifying Biden's win by a 11,779 margin, Raffensperger noted. "President Trump, we've had several lawsuits, and we've had to respond in court to the lawsuits and the contentions," he said on the call. We don't agree that you have won."

Audio snippets of the conversation were first posted online by The Washington Post. The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP plans to post the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

Trump's renewed intervention and the persistent and unfounded claims of fraud come nearly two weeks before he leaves office and two days before twin runoff elections in Georgia that will determine political control of the U.S. Senate.

The president used the hourlong conversation to tick through a list of claims about the election in Georgia, including that hundreds of thousands of ballots mysteriously appeared in Fulton County, which includes Atlanta. Officials have said there is no evidence of that happening.

The Georgia officials on the call are heard repeatedly pushing back against the president's assertions, telling him that he's relying on debunked theories and, in one case, selectively edited video.

"It was pretty obvious pretty early on that we'd debunked every one of those theories early on," Raffensperger told ABC's "Good Morning America" on Monday, "but President Trump continues to believe them."

At another point in the conversation, Trump appeared to threaten Raffensperger and Ryan Germany, the secretary of state's legal counsel, by suggesting both could be criminally liable if they failed to find that thousands of ballots in Fulton County had been illegally destroyed. There is no evidence to support Trump's claim.

"That's a criminal offense," Trump says. "And you can't let that happen."

Others on the call included Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, and attorneys assisting Trump, including Washington lawyer Cleta Mitchell.

Democrats and a few Republicans condemned Trump's actions, while at least one Democrat urged a criminal investigation. Legal experts said Trump's behavior raised questions about possible election law violations.

Biden senior adviser Bob Bauer called the recording "irrefutable proof" of Trump threatening an official in his own party to "rescind a state's lawful, certified vote count and fabricate another in its place."

"It captures the whole, disgraceful story about Donald Trump's assault on American democracy," Bauer said.

Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Democrat in that chamber, said Trump's conduct "merits nothing less than a criminal investigation."

Trump confirmed in a tweet Sunday that he had spoken with Raffensperger. The White House referred questions to Trump's reelection campaign, which did not respond Sunday to an emailed request for com-

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ment. Raffensperger's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Trump has repeatedly attacked how Raffensperger conducted Georgia's elections, claiming without evidence that the state's 16 electoral votes were wrongly given to Biden.

"He has no clue!" Trump tweeted of Raffensperger, saying the state official "was unwilling, or unable" to answer questions.

Raffensperger's Twitter response: "Respectfully, President Trump: What you're saying is not true. The truth will come out."

Various election officials across the country and Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have said there was no widespread fraud in the election. Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, have also vouched for the integrity of their state elections. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, which has three Trump-nominated justices.

In Georgia, the ballots were counted three times. One was a mandatory hand count and one was requested by Trump.

Still, Trump has publicly disparaged the election, raising concerns among Republicans that GOP voters may be discouraged from participating in Tuesday's runoffs pitting Sen. Kelly Loeffler against Democrat Raphael Warnock and Republican David Perdue against Democrat Jon Ossoff.

Rebecca Green, who helps direct the election law program at William and Mary Law School, said that while it is appropriate for a candidate to question the outcome of an election, the processes for doing so for the presidential election have run their course. States have certified their votes.

Green said Trump had raised "lots of questions" about whether he violated any election laws.

Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond, said Trump has shown "reprehensible and, possibly illegal, conduct."

Trump noted on the call that he intended to repeat his claims about fraud at a rally Monday night in Dalton, a heavily Republican area in north Georgia.

"The people of Georgia are angry, the people of the country are angry," he says on the recording.

Biden is also due to campaign in Georgia on Monday, and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris stumped in Garden City, Georgia, on Sunday, slamming Trump for the call.

"It was a bald, bald-faced, bold abuse of power by the president of the United States," she said.

Loeffler and Perdue have largely backed Trump in his attempts to overturn election results. But on Sunday, Loeffler said she hadn't decided whether to join Republican colleagues in challenging the legitimacy of Biden's victory over Trump when Congress meets Wednesday to affirm Biden's 306-232 vote win in the Electoral College.

Perdue, who was quarantining after being exposed to a staff member with the coronavirus, said he supports the challenge, although he will not be a sitting senator when the vote happens because his term has expired. Still, he told Fox News Channel he was encouraging his colleagues to object, saying it's "something that the American people demand right now."

His rival, Ossoff, speaking at the Garden City rally, attacked Perdue and Loeffler for failing to stand up for Georgia's voters, specifically saying that the state's Black voters were being targeted.

He said: "When the president of the United States calls up Georgia's election officials and tries to intimidate them to change the result of the election, to disenfranchise Georgia voters, to disenfranchise Black voters in Georgia who delivered this state for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, that is a direct attack on our democracy."

Amy and Brumback reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writer Russ Bynum in Garden City, Georgia and Zeke Miller in Washington, contributed to this report.

Iran starts 20% uranium enrichment, seizes tanker in strait

By JON GAMBRELL and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran on Monday began enriching uranium up to 20% at an underground facility and seized a South Korean-flagged oil tanker in the crucial Strait of Hormuz, further escalating tensions in the Middle East between Tehran and the West.

The announcement of enrichment at Fordo came as fears arose that Tehran had seized MT Hankuk Chemi. Iran later acknowledged the seizure, alleging "oil pollution" sparked the move. However, hours earlier, Tehran had said a South Korean diplomat was due to travel there to negotiate over billions of dollars in its assets now frozen in Seoul.

The dual incidents come amid heightened tensions between Iran and the United States in the waning days of President Donald Trump's term in office, which saw the U.S. leader unilaterally withdraw from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers and set off months of escalating incidents between the two countries.

Iranian state television quoted spokesman Ali Rabiei as saying that President Hassan Rouhani had given the order for the move at the Fordo facility.

Iran's decision to begin enriching to 20% a decade ago nearly brought an Israeli strike targeting its nuclear facilities, tensions that only abated with the 2015 atomic deal. A resumption of 20% enrichment could see that brinkmanship return as that level of purity is only a technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

From Israel, which has its own undeclared nuclear weapons program, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu criticized Iran's enrichment decision, saying it "cannot be explained in any way other than the continuation of realizing its goal to develop a military nuclear program."

"Israel will not allow Iran to create a nuclear weapon," he added.

Tehran has long maintained its nuclear program is peaceful. The U.S. State Department says that as late as last year, it "continued to assess that Iran is not currently engaged in key activities associated with the design and development of a nuclear weapon."

Trump withdrew the U.S. unilaterally from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018. In the time since, there have been a series of escalating incidents between the two countries.

Iran's decision comes after its parliament passed a bill, later approved by a constitutional watchdog, aimed at hiking enrichment to pressure Europe into providing sanctions relief. It also serves as pressure ahead of the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who has said he is willing to re-enter the nuclear deal.

Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency last week that it planned to take the step. The IAEA said Monday that "agency inspectors have been monitoring activities" at Fordo and that its director-general Rafael Mariano Grossi planned to issue a report to member-nations of the U.N. organization later in the day.

Meanwhile, satellite data from MarineTraffic.com showed the MT Hankuk Chemi off Bandar Abbas on Monday afternoon, with no explanation as to the change in the vessel's path. It had been traveling from Jubail, Saudi Arabia, to Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. The ship had been carrying an unknown chemical shipment, according to data-analysis firm Refinitiv.

Calls to South Korea's Foreign Ministry and the ship's listed owner, DM Shipping Co. Ltd. of Busan, South Korea, were not immediately answered after business hours Monday. Iran did not acknowledge the vessel's location.

The United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, an information exchange overseen by the British royal navy in the region, acknowledged an "interaction" between a merchant vessel and Iranian authorities in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all the world's oil passes.

As a result, the UKMTO said the merchant vessel made an "alteration of course" north into Iran's territorial waters.

Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, said authorities there were aware and monitoring the situation.

Ambrey, a British security firm, reported the incident as an apparent seizure. Dryad Global, another maritime security firm, said the ship's crew was 23 sailors from Indonesia and Myanmar.

Iran's announcement coincides with the anniversary of the U.S. drone strike killing Revolutionary Guard

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Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad last year. That attack later saw Iran retaliate by launching a ballistic missile strike, injuring dozens of U.S. troops in Iraq. Tehran also accidentally shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet that night, killing all 176 people on board.

As the anniversary approached, the U.S. has sent B-52 bombers flying over the region and sent a nuclear-powered submarine into the Persian Gulf.

On Thursday, sailors discovered a limpet mine on a tanker in the Persian Gulf off Iraq near the Iranian border as it prepared to transfer fuel to another tanker owned by a company traded on the New York Stock Exchange. No one has claimed responsibility for the mining, though it comes after a series of similar attacks in 2019 near the Strait of Hormuz that the U.S. Navy blamed on Iran. Tehran denied being involved.

In November, an Iranian scientist who founded the country's military nuclear program two decades earlier was killed in an attack Tehran blames on Israel.

Associated Press writers Tia Goldenberg in Tel Aviv, Israel, and Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul contributed to this report.

UK judge refuses extradition of WikiLeaks founder Assange

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A British judge on Monday rejected the United States' request to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to face espionage charges, saying he was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser rejected allegations that Assange is being prosecuted for political reasons or would not receive a fair trial in the United States. But she said his precarious mental health would likely deteriorate further under the conditions of "near total isolation" he would face in U.S. prison.

"I find that the mental condition of Mr. Assange is such that it would be oppressive to extradite him to the United States of America," the judge said.

She said Assange was "a depressed and sometimes despairing man" who had the "intellect and determination" to circumvent any suicide prevention measures taken by American prison authorities.

The U.S. government said it would appeal the decision. Assange's lawyers said they would ask for his release from a London prison where he has been held for more than a year-and-a-half at a bail hearing on Wednesday.

Assange, who sat in the dock at London's Central Criminal Court for the ruling, wiped his brow as the decision was announced. His partner Stella Moris, with whom he has two young sons, wept.

Assange's American lawyer, Barry Pollack, said the legal team was "enormously gratified by the U.K. court's decision denying extradition."

"The effort by the United States to prosecute Julian Assange and seek his extradition was ill-advised from the start," he said. "We hope that after consideration of the U.K. court's ruling, the United States will decide not to pursue the case further."

The ruling marks a dramatic moment in Assange's years-long legal battles in Britain — though likely not its final chapter.

U.S. prosecutors have indicted Assange on 17 espionage charges and one charge of computer misuse over WikiLeaks' publication of leaked military and diplomatic documents a decade ago. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 175 years in prison.

Lawyers for the 49-year-old Australian argue that he was acting as a journalist and is entitled to First Amendment protections of freedom of speech for publishing leaked documents that exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The judge, however, said Assange's actions, if proven, would "amount to offenses in this jurisdiction that would not be protected by his right to freedom of speech."

The defense also argued during a three-week hearing in the fall that extradition threatens Assange's human rights because he risks "a grossly disproportionate sentence" and detention in "draconian and

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inhumane conditions” that would exacerbate his severe depression and other mental health problems.

The judge agreed that U.S. prison conditions would be oppressive. She accepted evidence from expert witnesses that Assange had a depressive disorder and an autism spectrum disorder.

“I accept that oppression as a bar to extradition requires a high threshold. ... However, I am satisfied that, in these harsh conditions, Mr. Assange’s mental health would deteriorate causing him to commit suicide with the ‘single minded determination’ of his autism spectrum disorder,” the judge said in her ruling.

Lawyers for the U.S. government deny that Assange is being prosecuted merely for publishing the leaked documents, saying the case “is in large part based upon his unlawful involvement” in the theft of the diplomatic cables and military files by U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning.

The prosecution of Assange has been condemned by journalists and human rights groups, who say it undermines free speech around the world.

They welcomed the judge’s decision, even though it was not made on free-speech grounds.

“This is a huge relief to anyone who cares about the rights of journalists,” The Freedom of the Press Foundation tweeted:

“The extradition request was not decided on press freedom grounds; rather, the judge essentially ruled the U.S. prison system was too repressive to extradite. However, the result will protect journalists everywhere.”

Assange’s legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, to avoid being sent to Sweden, Assange sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he was beyond the reach of U.K. and Swedish authorities — but also effectively a prisoner, unable to leave the tiny diplomatic mission in London’s tony Knightsbridge area.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested him for jumping bail in 2012.

Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed, but Assange remains in London’s high-security Belmarsh Prison, brought to court in a prison van throughout his extradition hearing.

The Latest: France criticized for slow vaccine rollout

By The Associated Press undefined

PARIS — France’s cautious approach to its virus vaccine rollout appears to have backfired, leaving just a few hundred people vaccinated after the first week and rekindling anger over the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

President Emmanuel Macron is holding a special meeting with top government officials Monday afternoon to address the vaccine strategy and other virus developments.

In France, a country of 67 million people, just 516 people were vaccinated in the first six days while Germany’s first-week total surpassed 200,000 and Italy’s was over 100,000. Millions, meanwhile, have been vaccinated in the U.S. and China.

The slow vaccine rollout is being blamed on mismanagement and staffing shortages during end-of-year vacations – as well as a complex consent policy designed to accommodate broad vaccine skepticism among the French public.

Doctors and opposition politicians pleaded Monday for speedier access to vaccines.

“It’s a state scandal,” said Jean Rottner, president of the Grand-Est region of eastern France, where infections are surging and some hospitals are overwhelmed. “Getting vaccinated is becoming more complicated than buying a car.”

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

— UK takes big step on the vaccine front, starts giving out first coronavirus vaccine shots from Oxford-AstraZeneca

— Congress has convened for a new session, with strict COVID-19 protocols in place

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— Fauci says faster vaccination rate offers a 'glimmer of hope,' says Biden's pledge of 100 million shots in his 1st 100 days is achievable

— Vaccines are a distant thought in Somalia, where coronavirus is spreading with little being done to stop it

— Follow AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

BRUSSELS — Belgium is stepping up its coronavirus vaccination campaign in nursing homes, where more than half of all COVID-19 deaths in the country have been recorded.

Amid strong criticism over its slowness in deploying vaccines, Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke said Monday that 87,000 shots will be given every week to nursing home residents and staff.

Speaking to RTL radio, Vandenbroucke said Belgium took a cautious approach in rolling out vaccines and made safety a priority, adding that logistical issues due to the super-cold temperatures needed for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine did not help.

Vandenbroucke took satisfaction in the high rate of vaccination so far, with about 85% of the nursing home residents willing to take the shots.

Last month, Amnesty International said Belgium authorities "abandoned" thousands of elderly people who died in nursing homes during the pandemic following an investigation in which the group cited "human rights violations."

And last week, authorities said 27 elderly people died in an outbreak at a Belgian nursing home from a super-spreading St. Nick party. One of the hardest-hit countries in Europe, Belgium has reported more than 19,700 deaths linked to the virus.

LONDON — Britain on Monday took another giant step in the fight against COVID-19, ramping up its immunization program by giving the first shots in the world from the vaccine created by Oxford University and pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca.

Dialysis patient Brian Pinker, 82, was the first to get the new vaccine shot, administered by the chief nurse at Oxford University Hospital. Pinker said he was so pleased and now he can "really look forward to celebrating my 48th wedding anniversary with my wife Shirley later this year."

Since Dec. 8, Britain's National Health Service has been using a vaccine made by Pfizer and the German firm BioNTech to inoculate health care workers and nursing home residents and staff. The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine boosts that medical arsenal and is cheaper and easier to use since it does not require the super-cold storage needed by the Pfizer vaccine.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was being administered at a small number of U.K. hospitals for the first few days so authorities can watch out for any adverse reactions. But hundreds of new vaccination sites — at both hospitals as well as local doctors' offices — will launch this week, joining the more than 700 already in operation, NHS England said.

MOSCOW — Russia reported Monday that its number of new coronavirus cases hit a six-week low, continuing a steady decline that began in late December.

The national coronavirus taskforce said 23,551 cases were recorded in the previous day, the lowest daily toll since Nov. 18 and substantially lower than the high of 29,335 reported on Dec. 24.

The taskforce reported 482 new deaths from COVID-19, down from 635 on Dec. 24. More than 3.26 million coronavirus infections have been recorded in Russia throughout the pandemic and 58,988 deaths.

Despite a surge in new infections this fall, Russian officials have shied away from imposing a national lockdown in an effort to protect the economy, relying instead on local restrictions. Russia has been inoculating medical workers and other key groups with its own Russian-made coronavirus vaccine called Sputnik V.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Passenger traffic at the Netherlands' biggest airport plummeted by 71% in

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2020 as coronavirus restrictions slammed the global aviation industry.

Schiphol Airport announced Monday that 20.9 million passengers departed, arrived or transited at the busy aviation hub on the outskirts of Amsterdam.

The annual passenger number reflects the entire year -- before the first wave of coronavirus hit Europe, the relative lull over the summer and surges in infections later in the year that forced re-imposition of lockdowns in many countries.

The airport processed 1.4 million metric tons of cargo, a decrease of 9% compared to 2019.

MADRID — The vaccination roll out in Spain has slowed down with most activity halted over the New Year and Epiphany holidays until after Jan. 6.

Reports from regional authorities showed that less than one-fifth of the existing doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had been administered by Monday, just as the country is set to receive a new batch of 350,000 doses.

Some experts fear that further delays could hamper the authorities' ability to safely store the vaccines, which need to be kept at extreme low temperatures.

Some regions are blaming the delays on a shortage of nurses and other medical personnel over the holiday period.

Authorities in the northeastern Catalonia region are also blaming the delays on a shortage of freezers to store the vaccine, after a batch was caught up in a bottleneck of trucks trying to enter the European mainland from the U.K.

Preliminary data reported by some Spanish regions show that contagion for the new virus has been on a steady increase in recent days. Spain this week is set to surpass 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases and more than 50,000 deaths.

BANGKOK — Thailand registered 745 new coronavirus cases in two days on Monday with a new death reported in Bangkok, where a semi-lockdown went into effect, the government said.

The Centre of COVID-19 Situation Administration said the new infections bring the total number since last January to 8,439, while the overall death toll stands at 65.

The agency said the number included 152 Thais and 577 migrant workers in Samut Sakhon, the province next to Bangkok that is the epicenter of the new outbreak. An additional 13 were found in special quarantine hotels for incoming travelers.

Nearly all the infected workers were employed in fish markets and factories and are all housed in dormitories, which have since the outbreak been closed off to the public. Since the initial surge in late December, the virus has now been found in 54 of Thailand's 73 provinces.

The government has ordered all schools closed from Monday and had taken earlier other steps to try and restrict the spread of the virus, including closing bars, massage parlors, playgrounds and banned all public gatherings.

It has not yet closed down shopping malls and stores.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. has ramped up COVID-19 vaccinations in the past few days after a slower-than-expected start, bringing the number of shots dispensed to about 4 million, government health officials said.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, also said on ABC's "This Week" that President-elect Joe Biden's pledge to administer 100 million shots of the vaccine within his first 100 days in office is achievable.

And he rejected President Donald Trump's false claim on Twitter that coronavirus deaths and cases in the U.S. have been greatly exaggerated.

"All you need to do ... is go into the trenches, go into the hospitals, go into the intensive care units and see what is happening. Those are real numbers, real people and real deaths," Fauci said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

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TOKYO — Japan's prime minister said vaccine approval was being speeded up as the coronavirus spreads in the nation scheduled to hold the already-delayed 2020 Olympics this summer.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga stressed his determination to hold the Olympics and said preparations were moving ahead. The Games are scheduled to be held in July, which will mean the arrival of tens of thousands of athletes, officials and media.

Suga said holding the Olympics will be "proof that people have overcome the coronavirus," giving "hope and courage."

The vaccine timetable will advance by a month, meaning the approvals will start this month and vaccinations will be administered to people beginning in February, instead of March or later.

Cases have been growing in Japan in recent weeks, with more than 3,400 deaths so far related to the coronavirus.

SYDNEY — Wearing masks became mandatory Monday in some circumstances in Australia's largest city due to the risks of the coronavirus.

People risk a \$154 fine in Sydney if they don't wear masks in shopping malls, on public transit and inside various indoor areas. New South Wales state Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant could not say how long the measure would be in place.

The state on Monday reported its first 24-hour period without a new COVID-19 infection being detected since Dec. 15.

A cluster that started in Sydney last month has spread to Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, where masks have been mandatory since July. Three new cases were detected in Melbourne, bringing the national total to 28,504 cases.

DALLAS — Texas has hit a new record high for COVID-19 hospitalizations as a surge in the disease caused by the coronavirus continued to strain state medical resources following holiday travel and gatherings.

State health officials reported 12,563 COVID-19 patients in Texas hospitals on Sunday, an increase of more than 240 from Saturday. It was the sixth time in seven days that the state reported record-breaking hospitalizations.

Intensive care units in several parts of the state were full or nearly full Sunday, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The department reported 14,535 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 Sunday, 1,510 more probable cases and 50 fatalities. Texas has seen more than 1.8 million cases and more than 28,000 deaths.

BALTIMORE — The COVID-19 death toll in the United States has surpassed 350,000 as experts anticipate another surge in coronavirus cases and deaths stemming from holiday gatherings over Christmas and New Year's.

Data compiled by Johns Hopkins University shows the U.S. passed the threshold early Sunday morning. More than 20 million people in the country have been infected. The U.S. has begun using two coronavirus vaccines to protect health care workers and nursing home residents and staff but the rollout of the inoculation program has been criticized as being slow and chaotic.

Multiple states have reported a record number of cases over the past few days, including North Carolina and Arizona. Mortuary owners in hard-hit Southern California say they're being inundated with bodies.

The U.S. by far has reported the most deaths from COVID-19 in the world, followed by Brazil, which has reported more than 195,000 deaths.

Hope fades in Norway landslide that left 7 dead; 3 missing

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Norwegian officials insisted Monday that there was "still hope" in finding

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survivors in air pockets five days after a landslide killed at least seven people as it carried away homes in a village north of the capital. Three people are still missing.

Police spokesman Roger Pettersen said search efforts in the landslide-hit village of Ask, 25 kilometers (16 miles) northeast of Oslo, are still considered "a rescue operation." But only bodies have been found in the last few days.

The region's below-freezing temperatures are "working against us, but we have been very clear in our advice to the (rescuers) that as long as there are cavities where the missing may have stayed, it is possible to survive," said Dr. Halvard Stave, who taking part in the rescue operation.

Temperatures in Ask were -8 degrees Celsius (17.6 degrees Fahrenheit) on Monday.

"I would still describe the situation as very unreal," Anders Oestensen, the mayor of Gjerdrum municipality, where Ask is located.

Search teams patrolled with dogs as helicopters and drones with heat-detecting cameras flew over the ravaged hillside in Ask, a village of 5,000 that was hit by the worst landslide in modern Norwegian history. At least 1,000 people were evacuated.

The landslide early Wednesday cut across a road through Ask, leaving a deep, crater-like ravine. Some buildings are now hanging on the edge of the ravine, which grew to be 700 meters (2,300 feet) long and 300 meters (1,000 feet) wide. At least nine buildings with over 30 apartments were destroyed.

"This is completely terrible," King Harald V said after the Norwegian royals visited the landslide site on Sunday.

The limited number of daylight hours in Norway at this time of year and fears of further erosion have hampered rescue operations. The ground is fragile at the site and unable to hold the weight of heavy rescue equipment.

The exact cause of the accident is not yet known but the area is known for having a lot of quick clay, a material that can change from solid to liquid form. Experts said the quick clay, combined with excessive precipitation and damp winter weather, may have contributed to the landslide.

In 2005, Norwegian authorities warned people not to construct residential buildings in the area saying it was "a high risk zone" for landslides, but houses were eventually built there later in the decade.

Fauci: Vaccinations are increasing in a 'glimmer of hope'

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

The U.S. ramped up COVID-19 vaccinations in the past few days after a slower-than-expected start, bringing the number of shots dispensed to about 4 million, government health officials said Sunday.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, also said on ABC's "This Week" that President-elect Joe Biden's pledge to administer 100 million shots of the vaccine within his first 100 days in office is achievable.

And he rejected President Donald Trump's false claim on Twitter that coronavirus deaths and cases in the U.S. have been greatly exaggerated.

"All you need to do ... is go into the trenches, go into the hospitals, go into the intensive care units and see what is happening. Those are real numbers, real people and real deaths," Fauci said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

The U.S. death toll has climbed past 350,000, the most of any country, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University, while more than 20 million people nationwide have been infected. States have reported record numbers of cases over the past few days, and funeral homes in Southern California are being inundated with bodies.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said the pandemic is getting worse in his city as the virus spreads rapidly within households and people let their guard down with news of a vaccine's arrival. "This is a virus that preys off of our weakness, preys off of our exhaustion," he said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Experts believe that the real numbers of U.S. deaths and infections are much higher and that many cases were overlooked, in part because of insufficient testing.

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Fauci said he has seen "some little glimmer of hope" after 1.5 million doses were administered in the previous 72 hours, or an average of about 500,000 per day, a marked increase in vaccinations. He said that brings the total to about 4 million.

He acknowledged the U.S. fell short of its goal of having 20 million doses shipped and distributed by the end of December.

"There have been a couple of glitches. That's understandable," Fauci said. "We are not where we want to be, there's no doubt about that."

But he expressed optimism that the momentum will pick up by mid-January and that ultimately the U.S. will be vaccinating 1 million people a day. Biden's "goal of vaccinating 100 million people in the first 100 days is a realistic goal," Fauci said.

Dr. Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser to Operation Warp Speed, the government's vaccine development and distribution effort, told CBS that 17.5 million doses have been shipped. About 13 million of those have been distributed to clinics, hospitals and other places where they will be administered, according to Fauci.

The 20 million-dose goal hasn't been reached in part because local health departments and medical facilities had to stay focused on testing to handle a surge in cases, U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams said. And the holiday season meant health workers were taking time off, he said.

"I don't want anyone to think I'm being Pollyannish here. There's what we delivered, and we hope that those will be translated into vaccinations. That has not occurred to the way that we would like," Adams said on CNN's "State of the Union."

On Sunday morning, Trump falsely tweeted that the outbreak has been "far exaggerated" because of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "ridiculous" methodology. He complained, too, that Fauci has been credited by the news media with doing "an incredible job" when Fauci "works for me and the Trump Administration, and I am in no way given any credit for my work."

Fauci and others are warning that an additional surge is likely because of holiday gatherings and the cold weather keeping people indoors.

"It could and likely will get worse in the next couple of weeks, or at least maintain this very terribly high level of infections and deaths that we're seeing," Fauci said.

Arizona on Sunday reported a one-day record of more than 17,200 new cases, eclipsing the previous mark of about 12,000 set in early December. Health officials said the jump appears to reflect infections from Christmas gatherings but was also probably inflated by a reporting lag over New Year's weekend.

North Carolina and Texas reported record numbers of people in the hospital with COVID-19 — nearly 3,600 and over 12,500, respectively.

Overseas, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said more onerous lockdown restrictions in England are likely as a variant of the coronavirus has pushed infection rates to their highest levels on record. More than 50,000 new infections have been reported daily over the past six days.

Scientists have said the variant is up to 70% more contagious. While Fauci said the U.S. needs to do its own study, he noted that British researchers believe that the mutated version is no deadlier or more likely to make people sicker and that vaccines are effective against it.

But Scott Gottlieb, a former U.S. Food and Drug Administration commissioner who serves on the board of vaccine maker Pfizer, said on "Face the Nation" that the variant "really creates more urgency around trying to get this vaccine out more quickly and get more people vaccinated."

Associated Press writers worldwide contributed to this report.

UK ramps up inoculations with Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine

LONDON (AP) — Britain on Monday took another giant step in the fight against COVID-19, ramping up its immunization program by giving the first shots in the world from the vaccine created by Oxford University and pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca.

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Dialysis patient Brian Pinker, 82, was the first to get the new vaccine shot, administered by the chief nurse at Oxford University Hospital. Pinker said he was so pleased and that he can “now really look forward to celebrating my 48th wedding anniversary with my wife Shirley later this year.”

Since Dec. 8, Britain’s National Health Service has been using a vaccine made by Pfizer and the German firm BioNTech to inoculate health care workers and nursing home residents and staff. The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine boosts that arsenal and is cheaper and easier to use since it does not require the super-cold storage needed by the Pfizer vaccine.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was being administered at a small number of U.K. hospitals for the first few days so authorities can watch out for any adverse reactions. But hundreds of new vaccination sites — at both hospitals as well as local doctors’ offices — will launch this week, joining the more than 700 already in operation, NHS England said.

In a shift from practices in the U.S. and elsewhere, Britain now plans to give people second doses of both vaccines within 12 weeks of the first shot rather than within 21 days, to accelerate immunizations across as many people as quickly as possible.

The government’s deputy chief medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam, said Sunday that decision is “the right thing to do for the nation as a whole.”

The U.K. is in the midst of an acute outbreak, recording more than 50,000 new coronavirus infections a day over the past six days. On Sunday, it notched up another 54,990 cases and 454 more virus-related deaths to take its confirmed pandemic death toll total to 75,024, one of the worst in Europe.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned Sunday that more onerous lockdown restrictions in England are likely in the coming weeks as the country reels from a coronavirus variant that has pushed infection rates to their highest recorded levels.

Johnson, though, insisted he has “no doubt” that schools are safe and urged parents to send their children back into the classroom Monday in areas of England where schools plan to reopen. Unions representing teachers have called for schools to turn to remote learning for at least a couple of weeks more due to the variant, which officials have said is up to 70% more contagious.

“We are entirely reconciled to do what it takes to get the virus under control, that may involve tougher measures in the weeks ahead,” Johnson told the BBC.

Johnson conceded that school closures, curfews and the total banning of household mixing could be on the agenda for areas under the most stress.

London and southeast England are facing extremely high levels of new infections and there’s speculation that restrictions there will have to be tightened. Some areas in the region have more than 1,000 coronavirus cases per 100,000 people.

Johnson’s Conservative government is using a tiered coronavirus restrictions system to try to stop the spread of the virus. Most of England is already at the highest Tier 4 level, which involves closing non-essential shops, gyms and recreation centers and going to at-home instruction.

Follow AP coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at:

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Tick-Tock: The Tokyo Olympics hit the 200-days-to-go mark

By STEPHEN WADE and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Tick-Tock-Tick.

The countdown clock for the postponed Tokyo Olympics hit 200 days to go on Monday. Tick-Tock-Tick.

Also on Monday, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said he would consider calling a state of emergency as new coronavirus cases surge to record numbers in Tokyo and neighboring prefectures. Japan

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has never had a lockdown for COVID-19, attempting to juggle the economy and health risks.

Tick-Tock-Tick.

It's nearing deadline time for Tokyo Olympic organizers, the International Olympic Committee, and various Japanese government entities as they try to pull off the Games in the middle of a pandemic.

Officials have promised to announce concrete plans early in the new year about how to get 15,000 Olympic and Paralympic athletes into Japan; about the safety of the Athletes Village, and hundreds of thousands of fans, media, judges, officials, broadcasters and VIPs.

The new year is here.

Suga pledged again to hold the Olympics, saying it would be "proof that people have overcome the coronavirus." And he said vaccine approval would be speeded up by a month so that vaccinations could begin in February instead of March.

Japan has attributed more than 3,400 deaths to COVID-19, modest by global standards for a country of 125 million, but worrying as new cases rise quickly. A poll last month by national broadcaster NHK show 63% want the Olympics postponed or canceled.

Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike and the governors of Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa prefectures asked the national government Saturday to declare the state of emergency after the capital saw a daily record of 1,337 new cases on New Year's Eve. That marked a jump of almost 400 in just a few days.

Yoshiro Mori, the president of the organizing committee and a former prime minister, again ruled out any cancellation of the games in an interview several days ago with the Nikkan Sports newspaper. He was asked when a decision would come about having local fans or fans from abroad.

"Sometime from March through May," he replied. "The final deadline for a decision would be May, but it may come sooner."

Any reduction in fans will hit the organizing committee budget. Tokyo has budgeted \$800 million for ticket sales, and any shortfall will have to be made up by government entities, which are footing most of the Olympic bills.

The official budget for the Tokyo Olympics was increased last month to \$15.4 billion, an increase of \$2.8 billion because of the delay. However, several government audits the last few years suggest the real number is about \$25 billion.

All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

Mori indicated the opening ceremony, scheduled for July 23, could be troublesome with thousands of athletes and officials gathering to parade around the stadium. He also suggested the ceremony couldn't be shortened, since television broadcasters had paid for the lucrative time. He said some officials might be cut out of the parade.

Television determines much of the Olympic scheduling, and selling broadcast rights accounts for 73% of the IOC's income. Another 18% is from large sponsors such as Coca-Cola and Toyota.

The torch relay, which begins on March 25, will also face crowding with 10,000 runners expected across almost four months. Coca-Cola and Toyota are the prime sponsors.

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

Republicans condemn 'scheme' to undo election for Trump

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The unprecedented Republican effort to overturn the presidential election has been condemned by an outpouring of current and former GOP officials warning the effort to sow doubt in Joe Biden's win and keep President Donald Trump in office is undermining Americans' faith in democracy.

Trump has enlisted support from a dozen Republican senators and up to 100 House Republicans to challenge the Electoral College vote when Congress convenes in a joint session to confirm President-elect Joe Biden's 306-232 win.

With Biden set to be inaugurated Jan. 20, Trump is intensifying efforts to prevent the traditional transfer

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of power, ripping the party apart.

Despite Trump's claims of voter fraud, state officials have insisted the elections ran smoothly and there was no evidence of fraud or other problems that would change the outcome. The states have certified their results as fair and valid. Of the more than 50 lawsuits the president and his allies have filed challenging election results, nearly all have been dismissed or dropped. He's also lost twice at the U.S. Supreme Court.

On a call disclosed Sunday, Trump can be heard pressuring Georgia officials to "find" him more votes. But some senior lawmakers, including prominent Republicans, are pushing back.

"The 2020 election is over," said a statement Sunday from a bipartisan group of 10 senators, including Republicans Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Mitt Romney of Utah.

The senators wrote that further attempts to cast doubt on the election are "contrary to the clearly expressed will of the American people and only serve to undermine Americans' confidence in the already determined election results."

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland said, "The scheme by members of Congress to reject the certification of the presidential election makes a mockery of our system and who we are as Americans."

Former House Speaker Paul Ryan, a Republican, said in a statement that "Biden's victory is entirely legitimate" and that efforts to sow doubt about the election "strike at the foundation of our republic."

Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the third-ranking House Republican, warned in a memo to colleagues that objections to the Electoral College results "set an exceptionally dangerous precedent."

One of the more outspoken conservatives in Congress, Arkansas Republican Sen. Tom Cotton, said he will not oppose the counting of certified electoral votes on Jan. 6. "I'm grateful for what the president accomplished over the past four years, which is why I campaigned vigorously for his reelection. But objecting to certified electoral votes won't give him a second term—it will only embolden those Democrats who want to erode further our system of constitutional government."

Cotton said he favors further investigation of any election problems, separate from the counting of the certified Electoral College results.

Other prominent former officials also criticized the ongoing attack on election results. In a brief op-ed in The Washington Post, the 10 living former defense secretaries -- half of them having served Republican presidents -- called on Pentagon officials to carry out the transition to the new administration "fully, cooperatively and transparently." They also asserted that efforts to involve the U.S. armed forces in resolving election disputes "would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory."

Citing election results, legal challenges, state certifications and the Electoral College vote, the former defense secretaries said that "the time for questioning the results has passed; the time for the formal counting of the electoral college votes, as prescribed in the Constitution and statute, has arrived."

The unusual challenge to the presidential election, on a scale unseen since the aftermath of the Civil War, clouded the opening of the new Congress and is set to consume its first days. The House and Senate will meet Wednesday in a joint session to accept the Electoral College vote, a typically routine process that's now expected to be a prolonged fight.

Trump is refusing to concede, and pressure is mounting on Vice President Mike Pence to ensure victory while presiding in what is typically a ceremonial role over the congressional session. Trump is whipping up crowds for a rally in Washington.

The president tweeted Sunday against the election tallies and Republicans not on his side.

Biden's transition spokesman, Mike Gwin, dismissed the senators' effort as a "stunt" that won't change the fact that Biden will be sworn in Jan. 20.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a letter to colleagues that while there is "no doubt" of Biden's victory, their job now "is to convince more of the American people to trust in our democratic system."

The effort in the Senate was being led by Sens. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., and Ted Cruz, R-Texas. Hawley defended his actions in a lengthy email to colleagues, explaining that his Missouri constituents have been "loud and clear" with their belief that Biden's defeat of Trump was unfair.

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"It is my responsibility as a senator to raise their concerns," Hawley wrote late Saturday.

Hawley plans to object to the state tally from Pennsylvania. But that state's Republican senator, Pat Toomey, criticized the attack on Pennsylvania's election system and said the results that named Biden the winner are valid.

Cruz's coalition of 11 Republican senators vows to reject the Electoral College tallies unless Congress launches a commission to immediately conduct an audit of the election results. They are zeroing in on the states where Trump has raised unfounded claims of voter fraud. Congress is unlikely to agree to their demand.

The group formed with Cruz, which presented no new evidence of election problems, includes Sens. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, James Lankford of Oklahoma, Steve Daines of Montana, John Kennedy of Louisiana, Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee and Mike Braun of Indiana. New senators in the group are Cynthia Lumis of Wyoming, Roger Marshall of Kansas, Bill Hagerty of Tennessee and Tommy Tuberville of Alabama.

The convening of the joint session to count the Electoral College votes has faced objections before. In 2017, several House Democrats challenged Trump's win but Biden, who presided at the time as the vice president, swiftly dismissed them to assert Trump's victory. Rarely have the protests approached this level of intensity.

The moment is a defining one for the Republican Party in a post-Trump era. Both Hawley and Cruz are potential 2024 presidential contenders, cementing their alignment with Trump's base of supporters. Others are trying to forge a different path for the GOP.

Pence will be carefully watched as he presides over what is expected to be a prolonged showdown, depending on how many challenges are mounted.

The vice president "welcomes the efforts of members of the House and Senate to use the authority they have under the law to raise objections," Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, said in a statement Saturday.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has warned Republicans off such challenges but said little when asked about it as at the Capitol as the Senate opened Sunday.

"We'll be dealing with all of that on Wednesday," he said.

But Republicans simply said they do not plan to join the effort that will fail.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Sunday his colleagues will have an opportunity to make their case, but they must produce evidence and facts. "They have a high bar to clear," he said.

Congress have been loathe to interfere in the state-run election systems, a longstanding protocol. States choose their own election officials and draft their election laws. During the coronavirus pandemic many states adapted by allowing mail voting to ease health risks of voting in person. Those changes and others are now being challenged by Trump and his allies.

Trump, the first president to lose a reelection bid in almost 30 years, has attributed his defeat to widespread voter fraud, despite the consensus of nonpartisan election officials and even Trump's attorney general that there was none.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the latest challenge from Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, and a group of Arizona electors, who filed suit to try to force Pence to step outside mere ceremony and shape the outcome of the vote. The appellate court sided with the federal judge, a Trump appointee, who dismissed the suit.

Washington braces for intense opening to a pivotal year

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. (AP) — The tumult of 2020 isn't over yet.

The opening week of the new year will be dominated by a collision of events that will test America's commitment to democracy, shape President-elect Joe Biden's incoming administration and determine the future of the Republican Party.

It begins on Tuesday with two runoff elections in Georgia that will decide control of the Senate. Biden's ability to easily set up his Cabinet and enact a legislative agenda hinges on Democrats capturing both seats.

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The focus shifts to Washington on Wednesday, where Congress is set to certify Biden's victory in the Electoral College. The typically procedural afterthought is now a battle as some Republicans, eager to satisfy President Donald Trump's most loyal supporters, say they won't certify the results of a free and fair election. Others in the GOP are warning that such moves are destructive.

Trump, who spent part of the weekend pleading with Georgia's election chief to overturn Biden's win there, has suggested he may make some type of appearance at demonstrations expected in Washington on Wednesday. Some of the protesters who have indicated they will be in the city have ties to white supremacy.

Even in a capital that has become somewhat accustomed to the chaos of the Trump era, the tension heading into this week is particularly acute. The repercussions could be long-lasting, influencing the course of Biden's administration and ultimately the American resolve to peacefully transfer power from one party to another.

"We will be reading about this in history books for decades," said Democratic strategist Andrew Feldman who works with labor and progressive organizations. "Anyone who thought that Trump would cede control of the Republican Party post-an election loss is just dead wrong. This is still very much, and I think will continue to be, Trump's GOP."

Biden spent the weekend at his vacation house on the Delaware coast and has largely shrugged off concerns about the coming week. He plans to announce additional Cabinet picks soon in a sign that he's preparing to assume the presidency on Jan. 20.

But the holiday weekend demonstrated some of the challenges ahead.

In a sign of the hostility coursing through American politics, vandals targeted the homes of congressional leaders from both parties. Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's door in Kentucky was spray painted with derogatory phrases while someone left graffiti, a pig's head and fake blood at the San Francisco home of Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

And Trump's Saturday conversation with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a fellow Republican, was an unprecedented effort by a sitting president to pressure a state official to reverse the outcome of an election. Trump pressed Raffensperger to "find" enough votes for him to win.

The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP will be posting the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

Raffensperger rebuffed Trump's request and Biden's victory in Georgia — and other states that propelled him to victory — is not in doubt.

There was no widespread fraud in the election, which a range of election officials across the country, as well as Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed. Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, have vouched for the integrity of the elections in their states. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, where three Trump-nominated justices preside.

Yet following the president's lead, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz announced a coalition of 11 senators and senators-elect who will join an effort to attempt to subvert American voters during Electoral College certification, joining House Republicans who have already pledged similar.

Wednesday's congressional count is the final step in reaffirming Biden's win, after the Electoral College officially elected him 306-232 last month. That's the same margin Trump won by in 2016.

The constitutionally required meeting is normally a formality. Yet Cruz and the other Republicans, some of whom have their own White House ambitions, say they'll vote against certain state electors unless Congress appoints a commission to immediately audit the election results.

Republicans won't succeed in blocking the results. Challenges would have to be passed by the full Senate and Democrat-controlled House. But simply pledging to do so shows there are few boundaries for prominent Republicans aiming to demonstrate loyalty to Trump.

The last-ditch effort could impress Trump's base, a boost for Cruz and other Republicans thought to be preparing 2024 presidential runs. It's also provoking a heated battle within the GOP.

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Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee in 2012 who has broken with his party before, called the tactic an "egregious ploy" that "may enhance the political ambition of some, but dangerously threatens our Democratic Republic." Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Pat Toomey, who is retiring, called out Cruz by name and said the Texan and other fellow Republican senators were undermining "a fundamental, defining feature" of American democracy. Sen. Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, said he opposed the idea of Congress overturning the results of the Electoral College and thus exceeding its power and establishing "unwise precedents."

The moment is especially awkward for Vice President Mike Pence. In his role as president of the Senate, he presides over Wednesday's proceedings and will ultimately declare Biden's victory.

Previous vice presidents, including Richard Nixon and Al Gore, have played similar roles after tough presidential campaigns. But Pence, who may seek the White House in 2024, is seeking to avoid angering Trump and his base. He signaled support for the GOP's certification challenge over the weekend.

GOP strategist Joe Brettell said that while challenging Electoral College certification will ultimately fail, it could serve to energize the Republican base in Georgia ahead of Tuesday's elections.

But "there has been, over and over, calculation by far right and tea party-elected folks that they can somehow control or bring the base within their grasp" only to see such efforts take on lives of their own, he said.

"It has very real implications for the perception and execution of our elections for years to come and I think that is the real danger," Brettell said. "The stated objective of our foreign enemies — which is to undermine our elections and our system of government — are being carried out here, whether intentionally or not."

Still, the dynamics create a tough balancing act for Biden who has sought to project calm and leadership while calling for bipartisan reconciliation. He also doesn't want to fuel Republican efforts to block the election's results by calling more attention to them.

"The big question is whether this the last gasp of the Trump era or whether this a microcosm of things to come for the next year and for the foreseeable future, and I think it's probably the latter," said Adam Jentleson a Democratic strategist whose book "Kill Switch: The Rise of the Modern Senate" comes out this month.

"The challenge for Biden is he wants to be a healer, but you can't be healer if the patient doesn't want to be healed," Jentleson added. "There's only so much he can do before his efforts start to look delusional."

Here we go again: What to expect as Georgia counts votes

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — This week will find us back in a familiar place — waiting for Georgia to count votes.

With control of the U.S. Senate at stake, all eyes are on a runoff election that has Republicans David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler facing Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. Millions of dollars have poured in, Georgians have been bombarded by advertisements and messages urging them to vote, and both sides have sent their heavy hitters to help turn out voters.

Some things to keep in mind as the polls close Tuesday night:

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Perdue got about 88,000 more votes than Ossoff in the general election, but a Libertarian candidate's 115,000 votes kept him from topping 50%, which is required to win. Gov. Brian Kemp appointed Loeffler to the Senate in December 2019 after Sen. Johnny Isakson stepped down. She and Warnock were competing in a 20-candidate special election to serve the two years remaining in Isakson's term. Warnock got 1.6 million votes, while Loeffler got nearly 1.3 million and Republican U.S. Rep. Doug Collins placed third with nearly a million votes.

WHEN DOES THE BALLOT COUNTING START?

The polls are set to close at 7 p.m. EST on Election Day, and that's when ballot counting can begin. Absentee ballots must be received by the close of polls to be counted. Military and overseas ballots post-

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marked by Tuesday and received by Friday will be counted, and absentee voters also have until Friday to fix any problems so their votes can be counted.

No ballots, including absentee ballots received in advance of Election Day, can be counted until the polls close. But a state election board rule requires county election officials to begin processing absentee ballots — verifying signatures on the outer envelope, opening the envelopes and scanning the ballots — before Election Day. That should speed things up on election night. Still, some absentee ballots received by mail or in drop boxes up until 7 p.m. on Election Day will still need to be processed.

WILL WE KNOW THE WINNER ON ELECTION NIGHT?

Just like in November, it's very possible Americans will go to bed without knowing who won. All indicators point to the likelihood of very tight margins in both races.

Media organizations, including The Associated Press, often declare winners on election night based on the results that are in, voter surveys and other political data.

But in a close race, more of the vote may need to be counted before the AP can call a winner.

THE LEAD MAY VERY WELL SHIFT AS VOTES ARE COUNTED

In a close contest, look for the Republican candidate to jump out to an early lead. That due to two factors: First, Republican areas of the state usually report their results first. Second, Republican voters have been more likely to vote in person, either on Election Day or during the early voting period. Many counties release those in-person results first.

Meanwhile, heavily Democratic counties, including Fulton, DeKalb and Chatham counties, historically take longer to count votes. Democratic candidates could also make late surges because of late-counted mail ballots, which heavily favored Ossoff and Warnock, as well as Joe Biden, in November.

In November, Perdue held a lead of about 380,000 votes over Ossoff at 10 p.m. EST on election night. But Perdue's lead eventually fell below 90,000.

In a very tight race, it could take several days to determine a winner. In November, more than 5 percent of Georgia's votes were counted after noon on the day after Election Day. At that time, Donald Trump led Biden by 100,000 votes in a race that Biden eventually won after all the mail ballots were counted.

GEORGIA'S DONE A LOT OF BALLOT COUNTING ALREADY THIS ELECTION CYCLE

That is true and the trend could continue with the runoff. Under Georgia law, if the margin separating the candidates is within 0.5%, the losing candidate has the right to ask for a recount. That would be done by running the ballots through the scanners again, as happened when President Donald Trump requested a recount after the results showed him losing to Biden by about 12,000 votes.

But we're not likely to see a full hand recount like the one done for the presidential race during the general election. That was triggered by a requirement that one race be audited by hand. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger chose to audit the presidential race and said the close margin in that contest required a full recount. Deputy Secretary of State Jordan Fuchs said the audit requirement doesn't apply to runoff elections.

Associated Press writer Stephen Ohlemacher in Washington contributed to this report.

Still there: Trump's fans part of his legacy, Biden's trial

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Their candidate may have lost the election, but President Donald Trump's supporters have no intention of fading away. After spending weeks amplifying Trump's unfounded claims that the November election was rigged against him, many of his loyal fans are eagerly awaiting his next ventures, including a potential presidential run in 2024.

In the meantime, they present a daunting challenge for President-elect Joe Biden: how to govern a bitterly divided nation that now includes many who not only disagree with his policies, but view him as an illegitimate president who won only because of mass election fraud, which did not actually happen.

"The effort by the Trump forces to delegitimize Biden has poisoned our political bloodstream so badly

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that it could take years to recover," said David Gergen, who served as an adviser to Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

Trump will leave the White House on Jan. 20 with an iron grip on a Republican Party that has been transformed on his watch. Once known for its country club elites and embrace of military intervention and free trade, the GOP under Trump has become a populist party with an "America first" foreign policy that has alienated allies and fomented distrust in both international and domestic government institutions.

"I think the Republican Party today is the party of President Trump, and so his positions are the positions of the Republican voters," Sen. Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, recently told SiriusXM. The Utah senator said he believes Trump's "enormous influence" with the party is likely to wane to a certain degree as new faces step forward.

But among "those that are circling the 2024 race, beyond President Trump, it seems that many of them are headed in the same, more populist-oriented direction," he said.

In any case, Trump has no intention of ceding the spotlight as he openly flirts with running again in four years.

Trump will "loom very large over the Republican Party," predicted Alyssa Farah, until recently White House communications director. Don't expect Trump and Trumpism to "go off into the sunset," Farah says.

"He's got the most energetic base in modern political history," she said. "What the party is going to face is the reality that the president, even though it looks like he didn't win, got more votes than a Romney, than a McCain, than any Republican candidate in history. And we can't discount the voices of those 70 million Americans."

Exactly what Trump's post-White House future will look like is a work in progress.

He is expected to decamp to Florida with a small coterie of aides, where he will likely continue to use his Twitter bullhorn to reward allies and lash out at those who cross him as he mulls his next venture. That has put many of those eyeing taking on his mantle to run in 2024 in an awkward position.

"Look, he's the leader of this movement. No matter what happens in 2020, 2024 is there for his taking," White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a recent appearance on Fox News Channel. "His base is strong, they're not going away."

That also poses a conundrum for Biden, who will take an oath to lead a nation that appears more bitterly divided than at any time in modern history. Those divisions have only been exacerbated by Trump's campaign to cast doubt on the integrity of the election and overturn the will of the American people.

As a result, just 60% of Americans, including just 23% of Republicans, believe Biden's victory was legitimate, according to a recent Quinnipiac University poll.

Trump has repeatedly blamed his defeat on widespread voter fraud, despite the consensus of nonpartisan election officials that there wasn't any. Of the dozens of lawsuits the president and his allies have filed challenging election results, nearly all have been dismissed or dropped.

Gergen said the future of Trump's base will likely depend on a number of factors, including how the media cover him post-presidency and whether he becomes embroiled in legal troubles. He predicted Trump's actions will make it far harder for Biden to govern.

"It's going to be harder for a lot of Republicans to come to the negotiating table," Gergen said. He added that Trump's backers were likely to "keep a lot of pressure on mainstream Republicans not to break too often."

Charlie Sykes, a conservative talk radio host-turned-Trump critic who bemoaned Trump's efforts to delegitimize Biden's election, sees the potential for long-term damage to trust in fundamental Democratic institutions.

"Trumpism is going to be a major force because he's both a cause and symptom of our division," Sykes said. "And he leaves behind him a legacy of real distrust, real divisions, Americans really not trusting one another, not trusting institutions."

Biden is well aware of the difficult road ahead in uniting a divided nation. But his aides have expressed confidence, pointing to positive signs like General Motors' recent decision to switch sides in its legal fight

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against California's right to set its own clean-air standards. And they voice hope that Biden may be able to appeal to some of Trump's working-class voters with priorities like bolstering American manufacturing and ensuring critical supplies are made in the U.S.

"We are realistic that there will always be folks who refuse to support the president-elect's agenda that more than 81 million Americans voted for. But that's not everyone," said Biden transition spokesman TJ Ducklo. "We believe there are a lot of Americans who voted for Donald Trump who just want their elected officials to deliver meaningful help during this once-in-a-generation crisis."

That will depend on people like Marthamae Kottschade, a self-described "Trumper" and member of "Trump's Front Row Joes," who traveled the county attending the president's campaign rallies.

Kottschade, who lives in Rochester, Minnesota, said she still has her Washington, D.C., hotel room booked for Inauguration Day and expects to see Trump sworn in again as president, even though Trump has no realistic path to overturn Biden's victory.

She said if Biden does end up in the White House, a lot of Trump supporters are ready to get more involved in politics at the local level before moving on to the next election.

"I know it's a movement. We firmly believe that as Trumpians," she said. "A year from now we may have Joe Biden as our president. ... We will have to accept it. This was the hand we were dealt with. And move on from there."

Follow Colvin on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/colvinj>

AP FACT CHECK: Trump's made-up claims of fake Georgia votes

By HOPE YEN, JEFF AMY and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

President Donald Trump put forth a dizzying array of fuzzy accounting and outright false claims in an extraordinary phone call to Georgia's secretary of state seeking a reversal of his election defeat, fabricating a slew of votes that he said should've been counted in his favor.

In the hourlong conversation Saturday with Georgia's secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, Trump suggested that the Republican "find" enough votes to hand Trump the victory.

The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP plans to post the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

A look at Trump's claims on the call and how they compare with reality:

TRUMP: "If we can go over some of the numbers, I think it's pretty clear we won, we won very substantially in Georgia."

THE FACTS: No, Trump lost Georgia in an election the state has certified for Democrat Joe Biden. Republican election officials have affirmed the election was conducted and counted fairly.

With ballots counted three times, including once by hand, Georgia's certified totals show Trump lost to Biden by 11,779 votes out of nearly 5 million cast. Raffensperger certified the totals with officials saying they've found no evidence that Trump won.

No credible claims of fraud or systemic errors have been sustained. Judges have turned away legal challenges to the results, although at least one is still pending in state court.

TRUMP: "People should be happy to have an accurate count... We have other states I believe will be flipping to us shortly."

THE FACTS: No reversal of the election outcome is in the offing, in Georgia or other states.

Biden defeated Trump by some 7 million popular votes nationwide and by a tally of 306-232 in the Electoral College, achieving victory in other key states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Arizona.

Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, found no evidence of widespread election fraud. Trump's allegations of massive voting fraud have been dismissed by a succession of judges and refuted by state election officials and an arm of his own administration's Homeland Security Department.

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A group of Senate Republicans, led by Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, say they plan to object to the election results when Congress meets on Wednesday to tally Biden's Electoral College victory over Trump. The objections will force votes in both the House and Senate, but none are expected to prevail.

TRUMP: "The other thing, dead people. So dead people voted. And I think the number is in the — close to 5,000 people. And they went to obituaries. They went to all sorts of methods to come up with an accurate number. And a minimum is close to about 5,000 voters."

THE FACTS: Not true. Georgia officials have debunked previous claims by the Trump campaign in November that three particular people had voted illegally, finding that other people with similar names had voted. At the time, a local district attorney announced an investigation into whether a ballot had illegally been cast in the name of a northwest Georgia man who died in 2015.

On Saturday, Raffensperger said two illegal votes on behalf of dead people have been confirmed, not thousands as Trump alleged. "The actual number were two. Two. Two people that were dead that voted. And so that's wrong," Raffensperger said.

TRUMP: "We have anywhere from 250 (thousand) to 300,000 ballots were dropped mysteriously into the rolls, much of that had to do with Fulton County, which hasn't been checked."

THE FACTS: There's nothing mysterious or suspect about it. He is describing a legitimate vote counting process, not a sudden surge of malfeasance.

Trump appears to be referring to large numbers of votes that were tabulated in the early hours of Wednesday morning after Election Day and later. The arrival of those votes was not mysterious, but expected, because many of Georgia's 159 counties had large stacks of mail-in ballots that had to be tabulated after polls closed and in-person ballots were counted.

Indeed, news organizations and officials had warned in the days leading up to the election that the results would likely come in just as they did: In-person votes, which tend to be counted more quickly, would likely favor the president, who had spent months warning his supporters to avoid mail-in voting and to vote in person either early or on Election Day.

And mail-in-ballots, which take longer to count since they must be removed from envelopes and verified before they are counted, would favor Biden. States tend to count mail-in ballots at the end of the process.

TRUMP: "We think ... if (there is) a real check of signatures going back in Fulton County, you'll find at least a couple of hundred thousand of forged signatures."

THE FACTS: That has no basis in reality.

It would be impossible for anyone to have forged hundreds of thousands of signatures on mail-in ballots in Fulton County because there were only about 147,000 mail-in ballots in Georgia's most populous county, with about 116,000 of them going to Biden.

TRUMP, claiming thousands of voters moved out of Georgia, registered in another state, and then improperly cast ballots in Georgia: "They came back in, and they voted. That was a large number."

THE FACTS: Not so. Trump supporters are working from a list of questionable accuracy, according to Ryan Germany, the general counsel for Raffensperger's office. He told Trump during the call that the claims have been investigated and that in many cases, voters "moved back years ago. It's not like it happened just before the election. There's something about that data that it's just not accurate."

TRUMP: "It doesn't pass the smell test, because we hear they're shredding thousands and thousands of ballots and now what they're saying (is) 'Oh, we're just cleaning up the office.'"

THE FACTS: The shredding in question was taking place in suburban Cobb County, not in Fulton County as Trump claimed. Cobb County elections officials said Nov. 24 that none of the items shredded by a contractor were "relevant to the election or the re-tally" and instead were things like old mailing labels, other papers with voter information, old emails and duplicates of absentee ballot applications.

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TRUMP, claiming that a Fulton County election worker fed ballots through a machine three times instead of only once, saying his campaign would release a video proving it: "It can't be disputed. We have a version that you haven't seen, but it's magnified. It's magnified and you can see everything. For some reason, they put it in three times each ballot. And I don't know why, I don't know why three times and not five times, right?"

THE FACTS: There was no double or triple tallying of ballots. Raffensperger noted that ballots in Georgia have been counted and then recounted twice more for accuracy, including once by hand, and no discrepancy showed up in the Fulton County ballots, as it would have if someone improperly counted votes multiple times. "We did an audit of that," Raffensperger told Trump. "It was proved conclusively that they were not scanned three times."

TRUMP, attacking a legal settlement that Georgia signed with the state Democratic Party over how signatures on absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots are verified. "You can't check signatures, you can't do that... You're allowed to do harvesting, I guess, in that agreement. That agreement is a disaster for this country."

THE FACTS: There is nothing in the March 6 consent decree that prevents Georgia's election clerks from scrutinizing signatures. The legal settlement addresses accusations about a lack of statewide standards for judging signatures on absentee ballot envelopes. Raffensperger has said that not only is it entirely possible to match signatures, but that the state requires it.

Ballot harvesting, the practice of collecting numbers of absentee ballots and delivering them back to elections officials, remains illegal in Georgia.

TRUMP, referring to investigations into his baseless claims of voter fraud: "You have your never-Trumper U.S. attorney there."

THE FACTS: The U.S. attorney in Atlanta is actually a Trump appointee. Byung J. "BJay" Pak is a longtime Republican who also served in the Georgia House of Representatives from 2011 until 2017. He was nominated by Trump to become the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia in 2017. In announcing his nomination, the White House said that Pak and five other nominees for U.S. attorney's posts "share the president's vision for 'Making America Safe Again.'" Pak had previously also worked as an assistant U.S. attorney.

TRUMP, citing 18,000 "suspicious" votes: "The tape that's been shown all over the world ... they said very clearly there was a major water main break. Everybody fled the area and then they came back ... there were no Republican poll watchers ... and there was no law enforcement ... It was stuffed with votes. They weren't in an official voter box, they were in what looked to be in suitcases or trunks. ... The minimum number it could be ... was 18,000 ballots, all for Biden."

THE FACTS: That's a gross distortion of what actually happened.

State and Fulton County election officials say surveillance video that Trump refers to shows no improper behavior, but normal ballot processing using not suitcases, but ballot containers on wheels. Officials said that the entire video showed the same workers had earlier packed the ballot containers with valid, uncounted ballots.

Republicans have contended that their observers were told to leave Fulton County's vote counting center, but elections officials said they actually left after confusion that arose because election workers thought they were done for the night.

An independent monitor and an investigator in fact oversaw the vote count, according to state and county officials. Trump also refers to a fake confession attributed by a woman allegedly involved in the incident that was posted on social media.

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TRUMP: "In other states we think we found tremendous corruption with Dominion machines, but we'll have to see."

THE FACTS: No "tremendous corruption" has been found.

There's "no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes or was in any way compromised," said the federal agency that oversees election security, in a statement joined by state and electoral-industry officials.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker and Mark Sherman contributed to this report.

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

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Extraordinary warning to Trump by 10 former Pentagon chiefs

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — In an extraordinary rebuke of President Donald Trump, all 10 living former secretaries of defense are cautioning against any move to involve the military in pursuing claims of election fraud, arguing that it would take the country into "dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory."

The 10 men, both Democrats and Republicans, signed on to an opinion article published Sunday in The Washington Post that implicitly questioned Trump's willingness to follow his Constitutional duty to peacefully relinquish power on Jan. 20. Following the Nov. 3 election and subsequent recounts in some states, as well as unsuccessful court challenges, the outcome is clear, they wrote, while not specifying Trump in the article.

"The time for questioning the results has passed; the time for the formal counting of the electoral college votes, as prescribed in the Constitution and statute, has arrived," they wrote.

The former Pentagon chiefs warned against use of the military in any effort to change the outcome.

"Efforts to involve the U.S. armed forces in resolving election disputes would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory," they wrote. "Civilian and military officials who direct or carry out such measures would be accountable, including potentially facing criminal penalties, for the grave consequences of their actions on our republic."

A number of senior military officers, including Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have said publicly in recent weeks that the military has no role in determining the outcome of U.S. elections and that their loyalty is to the Constitution, not to an individual leader or a political party.

The 10 former Pentagon leaders also warned in their Post article of the dangers of impeding a full and smooth transition at Defense Department prior to Inauguration Day as part of a transfer to power to President-elect Joe Biden. Biden has complained of efforts by Trump-appointed Pentagon officials to obstruct the transition.

Without mentioning a specific example, the former defense secretaries wrote that transfers of power "often occur at times of international uncertainty about U.S. national security policy and posture," adding, "They can be a moment when the nation is vulnerable to actions by adversaries seeking to take advantage of the situation."

Tensions with Iran represent just such a moment. Sunday marked one year since the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani, the top Iranian general; Iran has vowed to avenge the killing, and U.S. officials said in recent days that they are on heightened alert for potential Iranian attack on U.S. forces or interests in the Middle East.

In a further sign of U.S.-Iranian tension, the acting secretary of defense, Christopher Milller, announced Sunday evening that he has changed his mind about sending the Navy aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, home from the Middle East and instead will keep the vessel on duty. Just last week, Miller announced that he was sending the Nimitz home, a decision that had been opposed by senior military officers.

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In reversing himself, Miller cited "recent threats issued by Iranian leaders against President Trump and other U.S. government officials." He did not elaborate, and the Pentagon did not respond to questions.

The opinion article in the Post was signed by Dick Cheney, William Perry, Donald Rumsfeld, William Cohen, Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, Chuck Hagel, Ash Carter, James Mattis and Mark Esper. Mattis was Trump's first defense secretary; he resigned in 2018 and was succeeded by Esper, who was fired just days after the Nov. 3 election.

The Post reported that the idea for writing the opinion piece began with a conversation between Cheney and Eric Edelman, a retired ambassador and former senior Pentagon official, about how Trump might seek to use the military in coming days.

Malaysia coroner rules out others in French-Irish teen death

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — A Malaysian coroner ruled Monday that the death of a French-Irish teen whose body was found near a Malaysian jungle resort where she vanished while on vacation was most likely a misadventure that didn't involve other people.

Coroner Maimoonah Aid ruled out homicide, natural death and suicide and said Nora Anne Quoirin likely got lost after leaving her family's cottage on her own.

The 15-year-old disappeared at the Dusun eco-resort in southern Negeri Sembilan state on Aug. 4, 2019, a day after the family arrived for a vacation. After a massive search, her naked body was found on Aug. 13 beside a stream on a palm oil estate about 2.5 kilometers (1.6 miles) from the resort.

Police believed she climbed out of the cottage window on her own, with no evidence of any foul play. But the teen's parents said she was likely kidnapped because she had mental and physical disabilities and wouldn't have wandered off on her own. They told the inquest that a third party could have dumped her body in the area following the search operation for her.

The coroner described the family's suggestions as "nothing more than probably theory" with no evidence.

Nora Anne was clad only in underwear when she went missing, but her body was found naked. The coroner noted the family's contention that this lent credence to the possibility of sexual assault but said an extensive autopsy could find no such proof, nor evidence of struggle marks or smothering.

Maimoonah also said there were no suspicious circumstances prior to the teen's disappearance, no ransom request and no signs of intrusion into the family cottage.

"I ruled that there was no one involved in the death of Nora Anne. It is more probable than not that she died by misadventure, i.e. that she had gone out of the (cottage) on her own and subsequently got lost in the abundant palm oil plantation," the coroner said.

Nora Anne's parents were listening to the online verdict from their home in London, but gave no immediate statement.

A British pathologist who performed a second autopsy on Nora Anne's body in the United Kingdom testified that he agreed with the Malaysian findings that she died of intestinal bleeding due to starvation and stress. However, he said he couldn't fully rule out sexual assault due to severe body decomposition.

Maimoonah said Nora Anne, who was sleeping in the loft with her siblings, could have been woken by the heat or loud noises from a party at another cottage nearby and gone downstairs to find her parents.

But the coroner said the teenager may not have been able to open the heavy sliding door to her parents' bedroom and could have then gone out of the cottage. Her mother had testified that a cottage window, with a broken latch, was found opened the morning Nora Anne disappeared but the coroner said she could have pushed it open by accident.

Rescuers may have overlooked Nora's body due to the thick jungle terrain, Maimoonah added. The autopsy estimated that she died between two and four days before her body was discovered.

A total of 49 witnesses have testified over 24 days since August last year via video-conferencing due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Republicans condemn 'scheme' to undo election for Trump

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By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The extraordinary Republican effort to overturn the presidential election was condemned Sunday by an outpouring of current and former GOP officials warning the effort to sow doubt in Joe Biden's win and keep President Donald Trump in office is undermining Americans' faith in democracy.

Trump has enlisted support from a dozen Republican senators and up to 100 House Republicans to challenge the Electoral College vote when Congress convenes in a joint session to confirm President-elect Joe Biden's 306-232 win.

With Biden set to be inaugurated Jan. 20, Trump is intensifying efforts to prevent the traditional transfer of power, ripping the party apart.

Despite Trump's claims of voter fraud, state officials have insisted the elections ran smoothly and there was no evidence of fraud or other problems that would change the outcome. The states have certified their results as fair and valid. Of the more than 50 lawsuits the president and his allies have filed challenging election results, nearly all have been dismissed or dropped. He's also lost twice at the U.S. Supreme Court.

On a call disclosed Sunday, Trump can be heard pressuring Georgia officials to "find" him more votes.

"The 2020 election is over," said a statement Sunday from a bipartisan group of 10 senators, including Republicans Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Mitt Romney of Utah.

The senators wrote that further attempts to cast doubt on the election are "contrary to the clearly expressed will of the American people and only serve to undermine Americans' confidence in the already determined election results."

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland said, "The scheme by members of Congress to reject the certification of the presidential election makes a mockery of our system and who we are as Americans."

Former House Speaker Paul Ryan, a Republican, said in a statement that "Biden's victory is entirely legitimate" and that efforts to sow doubt about the election "strike at the foundation of our republic."

Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the third-ranking House Republican, warned in a memo to colleagues that objections to the Electoral College results "set an exceptionally dangerous precedent."

One of the more outspoken conservatives in Congress, Arkansas Republican Sen. Tom Cotton, said he will not oppose the counting of certified electoral votes on Jan. 6. "I'm grateful for what the president accomplished over the past four years, which is why I campaigned vigorously for his reelection. But objecting to certified electoral votes won't give him a second term—it will only embolden those Democrats who want to erode further our system of constitutional government."

Cotton said he favors further investigation of any election problems, separate from the counting of the certified Electoral College results.

Other prominent former officials also criticized the ongoing attack on election results. In a brief op-ed in The Washington Post, the 10 living former defense secretaries -- half of them having served Republican presidents -- called on Pentagon officials to carry out the transition to the new administration "fully, cooperatively and transparently." They also asserted that efforts to involve the U.S. armed forces in resolving election disputes "would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory."

Citing election results, legal challenges, state certifications and the Electoral College vote, the former defense secretaries said that "the time for questioning the results has passed; the time for the formal counting of the electoral college votes, as prescribed in the Constitution and statute, has arrived."

The unusual challenge to the presidential election, on a scale unseen since the aftermath of the Civil War, clouded the opening of the new Congress and is set to consume its first days. The House and Senate will meet Wednesday in a joint session to accept the Electoral College vote, a typically routine process that's now expected to be a prolonged fight.

Trump is refusing to concede, and pressure is mounting on Vice President Mike Pence to ensure victory while presiding in what is typically a ceremonial role over the congressional session. Trump is whipping up crowds for a rally in Washington.

The president tweeted Sunday against the election tallies and Republicans not on his side.

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Biden's transition spokesman, Mike Gwin, dismissed the senators' effort as a "stunt" that won't change the fact that Biden will be sworn in Jan. 20.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a letter to colleagues that while there is "no doubt" of Biden's victory, their job now "is to convince more of the American people to trust in our democratic system."

The effort in the Senate was being led by Sens. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., and Ted Cruz, R-Texas. Hawley defended his actions in a lengthy email to colleagues, explaining that his Missouri constituents have been "loud and clear" with their belief that Biden's defeat of Trump was unfair.

"It is my responsibility as a senator to raise their concerns," Hawley wrote late Saturday.

Hawley plans to object to the state tally from Pennsylvania. But that state's Republican senator, Pat Toomey, criticized the attack on Pennsylvania's election system and said the results that named Biden the winner are valid.

Cruz's coalition of 11 Republican senators vows to reject the Electoral College tallies unless Congress launches a commission to immediately conduct an audit of the election results. They are zeroing in on the states where Trump has raised unfounded claims of voter fraud. Congress is unlikely to agree to their demand.

The group formed with Cruz, which presented no new evidence of election problems, includes Sens. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, James Lankford of Oklahoma, Steve Daines of Montana, John Kennedy of Louisiana, Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee and Mike Braun of Indiana. New senators in the group are Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, Roger Marshall of Kansas, Bill Hagerty of Tennessee and Tommy Tuberville of Alabama.

The convening of the joint session to count the Electoral College votes has faced objections before. In 2017, several House Democrats challenged Trump's win but Biden, who presided at the time as the vice president, swiftly dismissed them to assert Trump's victory. Rarely have the protests approached this level of intensity.

The moment is a defining one for the Republican Party in a post-Trump era. Both Hawley and Cruz are potential 2024 presidential contenders, cementing their alignment with Trump's base of supporters. Others are trying to forge a different path for the GOP.

Pence will be carefully watched as he presides over what is expected to be a prolonged showdown, depending on how many challenges are mounted.

The vice president "welcomes the efforts of members of the House and Senate to use the authority they have under the law to raise objections," Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, said in a statement Saturday.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has warned Republicans off such challenges but said little when asked about it as at the Capitol as the Senate opened Sunday.

"We'll be dealing with all of that on Wednesday," he said.

But Republicans simply said they do not plan to join the effort that will fail.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Sunday his colleagues will have an opportunity to make their case, but they must produce evidence and facts. "They have a high bar to clear," he said.

Congress have been loathe to interfere in the state-run election systems, a longstanding protocol. States choose their own election officials and draft their election laws. During the coronavirus pandemic many states adapted by allowing mail voting to ease health risks of voting in person. Those changes and others are now being challenged by Trump and his allies.

Trump, the first president to lose a reelection bid in almost 30 years, has attributed his defeat to widespread voter fraud, despite the consensus of nonpartisan election officials and even Trump's attorney general that there was none.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the latest challenge from Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, and a group of Arizona electors, who filed suit to try to force Pence to step outside mere ceremony and shape the outcome of the vote. The appellate court sided with the federal judge, a Trump appointee, who dismissed the suit.

AP FACT CHECK: Trump's made-up claims of fake Georgia votes

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By HOPE YEN, JEFF AMY and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

President Donald Trump put forth a dizzying array of fuzzy accounting and outright false claims in an extraordinary phone call to Georgia's secretary of state seeking a reversal of his election defeat, fabricating a slew of votes that he said should've been counted in his favor.

In the hourlong conversation Saturday with Georgia's secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, Trump suggested that the Republican "find" enough votes to hand Trump the victory.

The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP will be posting the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

A look at Trump's claims on the call and how they compare with reality:

TRUMP: "If we can go over some of the numbers, I think it's pretty clear we won, we won very substantially in Georgia."

THE FACTS: No, Trump lost Georgia in an election the state has certified for Democrat Joe Biden. Republican election officials have affirmed the election was conducted and counted fairly.

With ballots counted three times, including once by hand, Georgia's certified totals show Trump lost to Biden by 11,779 votes out of nearly 5 million cast. Raffensperger certified the totals with officials saying they've found no evidence that Trump won.

No credible claims of fraud or systemic errors have been sustained. Judges have turned away legal challenges to the results, although at least one is still pending in state court.

TRUMP: "People should be happy to have an accurate count... We have other states I believe will be flipping to us shortly."

THE FACTS: No reversal of the election outcome is in the offing, in Georgia or other states.

Biden defeated Trump by some 7 million popular votes nationwide and by a tally of 306-232 in the Electoral College, achieving victory in other key states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Arizona.

Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, found no evidence of widespread election fraud. Trump's allegations of massive voting fraud have been dismissed by a succession of judges and refuted by state election officials and an arm of his own administration's Homeland Security Department.

A group of Senate Republicans, led by Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, say they plan to object to the election results when Congress meets on Wednesday to tally Biden's Electoral College victory over Trump.

The objections will force votes in both the House and Senate, but none are expected to prevail.

TRUMP: "The other thing, dead people. So dead people voted. And I think the number is in the — close to 5,000 people. And they went to obituaries. They went to all sorts of methods to come up with an accurate number. And a minimum is close to about 5,000 voters."

THE FACTS: Not true. Georgia officials have debunked previous claims by the Trump campaign in November that three particular people had voted illegally, finding that other people with similar names had voted. At the time, a local district attorney announced an investigation into whether a ballot had illegally been cast in the name of a northwest Georgia man who died in 2015.

On Saturday, Raffensperger said two illegal votes on behalf of dead people have been confirmed, not thousands as Trump alleged. "The actual number were two. Two. Two people that were dead that voted. And so that's wrong," Raffensperger said.

TRUMP: "We have anywhere from 250 (thousand) to 300,000 ballots were dropped mysteriously into the rolls, much of that had to do with Fulton County, which hasn't been checked."

THE FACTS: There's nothing mysterious or suspect about it. He is describing a legitimate vote counting process, not a sudden surge of malfeasance.

Trump appears to be referring to large numbers of votes that were tabulated in the early hours of Wednesday morning after Election Day and later. The arrival of those votes was not mysterious, but expected,

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because many of Georgia's 159 counties had large stacks of mail-in ballots that had to be tabulated after polls closed and in-person ballots were counted.

Indeed, news organizations and officials had warned in the days leading up to the election that the results would likely come in just as they did: In-person votes, which tend to be counted more quickly, would likely favor the president, who had spent months warning his supporters to avoid mail-in voting and to vote in person either early or on Election Day.

And mail-in-ballots, which take longer to count since they must be removed from envelopes and verified before they are counted, would favor Biden. States tend to count mail-in ballots at the end of the process.

TRUMP: "We think ... if (there is) a real check of signatures going back in Fulton County, you'll find at least a couple of hundred thousand of forged signatures."

THE FACTS: That has no basis in reality.

It would be impossible for anyone to have forged hundreds of thousands of signatures on mail-in ballots in Fulton County because there were only about 147,000 mail-in ballots in Georgia's most populous county, with about 116,000 of them going to Biden.

TRUMP, claiming thousands of voters moved out of Georgia, registered in another state, and then improperly cast ballots in Georgia: "They came back in, and they voted. That was a large number."

THE FACTS: Not so. Trump supporters are working from a list of questionable accuracy, according to Ryan Germany, the general counsel for Raffensperger's office. He told Trump during the call that the claims have been investigated and that in many cases, voters "moved back years ago. It's not like it happened just before the election. There's something about that data that it's just not accurate."

TRUMP: "It doesn't pass the smell test, because we hear they're shredding thousands and thousands of ballots and now what they're saying (is) 'Oh, we're just cleaning up the office.'"

THE FACTS: The shredding in question was taking place in suburban Cobb County, not in Fulton County as Trump claimed. Cobb County elections officials said Nov. 24 that none of the items shredded by a contractor were "relevant to the election or the re-tally" and instead were things like old mailing labels, other papers with voter information, old emails and duplicates of absentee ballot applications.

TRUMP, claiming that a Fulton County election worker fed ballots through a machine three times instead of only once, saying his campaign would release a video proving it: "It can't be disputed. We have a version that you haven't seen, but it's magnified. It's magnified and you can see everything. For some reason, they put it in three times each ballot. And I don't know why, I don't know why three times and not five times, right?"

THE FACTS: There was no double or triple tallying of ballots. Raffensperger noted that ballots in Georgia have been counted and then recounted twice more for accuracy, including once by hand, and no discrepancy showed up in the Fulton County ballots, as it would have if someone improperly counted votes multiple times. "We did an audit of that," Raffensperger told Trump. "It was proved conclusively that they were not scanned three times."

TRUMP, attacking a legal settlement that Georgia signed with the state Democratic Party over how signatures on absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots are verified. "You can't check signatures, you can't do that... You're allowed to do harvesting, I guess, in that agreement. That agreement is a disaster for this country."

THE FACTS: There is nothing in the March 6 consent decree that prevents Georgia's election clerks from scrutinizing signatures. The legal settlement addresses accusations about a lack of statewide standards for judging signatures on absentee ballot envelopes. Raffensperger has said that not only is it entirely possible to match signatures, but that the state requires it.

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Ballot harvesting, the practice of collecting numbers of absentee ballots and delivering them back to elections officials, remains illegal in Georgia.

TRUMP, referring to investigations into his baseless claims of voter fraud: "You have your never-Trumper U.S. attorney there."

THE FACTS: The U.S. attorney in Atlanta is actually a Trump appointee. Byung J. "BJay" Pak is a longtime Republican who also served in the Georgia House of Representatives from 2011 until 2017. He was nominated by Trump to become the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia in 2017. In announcing his nomination, the White House said that Pak and five other nominees for U.S. attorney's posts "share the president's vision for 'Making America Safe Again.'" Pak had previously also worked as an assistant U.S. attorney.

TRUMP, citing 18,000 "suspicious" votes: "The tape that's been shown all over the world ... they said very clearly there was a major water main break. Everybody fled the area and then they came back ... there were no Republican poll watchers ... and there was no law enforcement ... It was stuffed with votes. They weren't in an official voter box, they were in what looked to be in suitcases or trunks. ... The minimum number it could be ... was 18,000 ballots, all for Biden."

THE FACTS: That's a gross distortion of what actually happened.

State and Fulton County election officials say surveillance video that Trump refers to shows no improper behavior, but normal ballot processing using not suitcases, but ballot containers on wheels. Officials said that the entire video showed the same workers had earlier packed the ballot containers with valid, uncounted ballots.

Republicans have contended that their observers were told to leave Fulton County's vote counting center, but elections officials said they actually left after confusion that arose because election workers thought they were done for the night.

An independent monitor and an investigator in fact oversaw the vote count, according to state and county officials. Trump also refers to a fake confession attributed by a woman allegedly involved in the incident that was posted on social media.

TRUMP: "In other states we think we found tremendous corruption with Dominion machines, but we'll have to see."

THE FACTS: No "tremendous corruption" has been found.

There's "no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes or was in any way compromised," said the federal agency that oversees election security, in a statement joined by state and electoral-industry officials.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker and Mark Sherman contributed to this report.

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

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By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

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ington Post that implicitly questioned Trump's willingness to follow his Constitutional duty to peacefully relinquish power on Jan. 20. Following the Nov. 3 election and subsequent recounts in some states, as well as unsuccessful court challenges, the outcome is clear, they wrote, while not specifying Trump in the article.

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In a further sign of U.S.-Iranian tension, the acting secretary of defense, Christopher Miller, announced Sunday evening that he has changed his mind about sending the Navy aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, home from the Middle East and instead will keep the vessel on duty. Just last week, Miller announced that he was sending the Nimitz home, a decision that had been opposed by senior military officers.

In reversing himself, Miller cited "recent threats issued by Iranian leaders against President Trump and other U.S. government officials." He did not elaborate, and the Pentagon did not respond to questions.

The opinion article in the Post was signed by Dick Cheney, William Perry, Donald Rumsfeld, William Cohen, Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, Chuck Hagel, Ash Carter, James Mattis and Mark Esper. Mattis was Trump's first defense secretary; he resigned in 2018 and was succeeded by Esper, who was fired just days after the Nov. 3 election.

The Post reported that the idea for writing the opinion piece began with a conversation between Cheney and Eric Edelman, a retired ambassador and former senior Pentagon official, about how Trump might seek to use the military in coming days.

Pelosi narrowly reelected speaker, faces difficult two years

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nancy Pelosi was narrowly reelected Sunday as speaker, giving her the reins of Democrats' slender House majority as she and President-elect Joe Biden set a challenging course of producing legislation to tackle the pandemic, revive the economy and address other party priorities.

"We accept a responsibility as daunting and demanding as any that previous generations of leadership have faced," the California Democrat told the chamber as she accepted a fresh two-year term in her post, perhaps her last. Citing the 350,000 Americans who've died from COVID-19 and the millions who've lost jobs and livelihoods, she won a standing ovation when she said, "Our most urgent priority will continue to be defeating the coronavirus. And defeat it, we will."

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Yet even before House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., ceremonially handed her the speaker's gavel — a normally genial moment — he provided a stark reminder of the partisan divide coloring Congress.

McCarthy accused Pelosi of over the past two years leading “the least productive Congress in nearly 50 years” and said there was a clear message in last November's elections, when Republicans gained seats by defeating a dozen Democratic incumbents. “It was a wake-up call,” he said. “The question I ask of this majority: were you listening?”

Those are assertions that Democrats strongly dispute, saying it's Republicans, especially in the GOP-led Senate, who've blocked progress on pandemic aid and other issues.

Pelosi, who has led her party in the House since 2003 and is the only woman to be speaker, received 216 votes to 209 for McCarthy, who again will be the chamber's minority leader.

It was the first vote of the new Congress, which convened Sunday with COVID-19 guidelines requiring testing and face coverings for lawmakers. There was widespread mask-wearing and far fewer legislators and guests in the chamber than usual, an unimaginable tableau when the last Congress commenced two years ago, before the pandemic struck.

Pelosi's election came 17 days before Biden is inaugurated. Yet rather than a fresh start for him and Pelosi, there are issues and undercurrents that will carry over from President Donald Trump's tempestuous administration.

Though Congress enacted — and Trump finally signed — a \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package late last month, Biden and many Democrats say they consider that measure a down payment. They say more aid is needed to bolster efforts to vaccinate the public, curb the virus and restore jobs and businesses lost to the pandemic.

Biden's priorities also include efforts on health care and the environment.

Guiding such legislation through the House will be a challenge for Pelosi because her party's narrow majority means just a handful of defectors could be fatal.

In addition, cooperation with Republicans could be made more difficult as many in the GOP are continuing to demonstrate fealty to the divisive Trump, backing his unfounded claims that his reelection loss was tainted by fraud. Congress will meet Wednesday to officially affirm Biden's clear Electoral College victory over Trump. Many House and Senate Republicans say they will contest the validity of some of those votes, but their efforts are certain to fail.

There was no widespread fraud in the election, which a range of election officials across the country including Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed. Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, have also vouched for the integrity of the elections in their states. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, which includes three Trump-nominated justices.

In another hurdle for Democrats, it's not clear which party will control the Senate. Republicans will control it unless Democrats win both Senate runoff elections in Georgia on Tuesday.

To win, Pelosi had to overcome some Democratic grumbling about her longevity, a slim 222-211 edge over Republicans after November's elections and a handful of absences because of the coronavirus. There were two vacancies in the 435-member House, and whatever happens Democrats will have the smallest House majority in two decades.

With little margin for error, Pelosi suffered only a handful of Democratic defections in her latest display of her ability to line up support, and no opponent challenged her for the job. She has won plaudits from Democrats for leading their opposition to President Donald Trump, largely keeping her party's moderates and progressives united and raising mountains of campaign funds.

“She's had one finger in the dike and one finger in the eye of Donald Trump,” said Rep. Gerald Connolly, D-Va.

But she's 80 years old, and ambitious younger members continue chafing at the longtime hold she and other older top leaders have had on their jobs. Democrats were also angry after an Election Day that many expected would mean added House seats for the party but instead saw a dozen incumbents lose,

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without defeating a single GOP representative.

In the end, Rep. Jared Golden, D-Me., voted for Illinois Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth — the Constitution doesn't require the speaker to be a House member. Rep. Conor Lamb, D-Pa., voted for Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., who is seen as a strong contender to succeed Pelosi whenever she steps down.

Three Democrats who opposed Pelosi's election as speaker two years ago voted present on Sunday — Reps. Mikie Sherrill of New Jersey, Abigail Spanberger of Virginia and Elissa Slotkin of Michigan, and five others who opposed her in 2019 back her this time. Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Fla., who has been battling cancer, missed the vote.

Democrats gave Pelosi a standing ovation as the final tally was announced, while the Republican side of the chamber was nearly empty. The vote took over two-and-a-half hours, an unusually long time as lawmakers were divided into groups to reduce health risks.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., a progressive leader, backed Pelosi and told reporters that Democratic unity was important "at a time when the Republican Party is attempting an electoral coup." She referred to the support many congressional Republicans are giving outgoing President Donald Trump's baseless effort to reverse the election results.

Ocasio-Cortez said she and other progressives "have been in conversations and negotiations" with Pelosi, but did not describe what they accomplished.

With every vote at a premium, workers had constructed an enclosure in a balcony overlooking the House chamber so lawmakers exposed to or testing positive for the coronavirus could more safely vote.

In the House, one race in New York is still being decided and there is a vacancy in Louisiana after GOP Rep.-elect Luke Letlow, 41, died after contracting COVID-19.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro and AP writer Andrew Taylor contributed to this report.

Trump, on tape, presses Ga. official to 'find' him votes

By JEFF AMY, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Donald Trump pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state to "find" enough votes to overturn Joe Biden's win in the state's presidential election, repeatedly citing disproven claims of fraud and raising the prospect of "criminal offense" if officials did not change the vote count, according to a recording of the conversation.

The phone call with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Saturday was the latest step in an unprecedented effort by a sitting president to pressure a state official to reverse the outcome of a free and fair election that he lost. The president, who has refused to accept his loss to Democratic president-elect Biden, repeatedly argued that Raffensperger could change the certified results.

"All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

Georgia counted its votes three times before certifying Biden's win by a 11,779 margin, Raffensperger noted: "President Trump, we've had several lawsuits, and we've had to respond in court to the lawsuits and the contentions. We don't agree that you have won."

Audio snippets of the conversation were first posted online by The Washington Post. The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP will be posting the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

Trump's renewed intervention and the persistent and unfounded claims of fraud come nearly two weeks before he leaves office and two days before twin runoff elections in Georgia that will determine political control of the U.S. Senate.

The president used the hourlong conversation to tick through a list of claims about the election in Georgia, including that hundreds of thousands of ballots mysteriously appeared in Fulton County, which includes Atlanta. Officials have said there is no evidence of that happening.

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The Georgia officials on the call are heard repeatedly pushing back against the president's assertions, telling him that he's relying on debunked theories and, in one case, selectively edited video.

At another point in the conversation, Trump appeared to threaten Raffensperger and Ryan Germany, the secretary of state's legal counsel, by suggesting both could be criminally liable if they failed to find that thousands of ballots in Fulton County had been illegally destroyed. There is no evidence to support Trump's claim.

"That's a criminal offense," Trump says. "And you can't let that happen."

Others on the call included Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, and attorneys assisting Trump, including Washington lawyer Cleta Mitchell.

Democrats and a few Republicans condemned Trump's actions, while at least one Democrat urged a criminal investigation. Legal experts said Trump's behavior raised questions about possible election law violations.

Biden senior adviser Bob Bauer called the recording "irrefutable proof" of Trump pressuring and threatening an official in his own party to "rescind a state's lawful, certified vote count and fabricate another in its place."

"It captures the whole, disgraceful story about Donald Trump's assault on American democracy," Bauer said.

Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Democrat in that chamber, said Trump's conduct "merits nothing less than a criminal investigation."

Trump confirmed in a tweet Sunday that he had spoken with Raffensperger. The White House referred questions to Trump's reelection campaign, which did not respond Sunday to an emailed request for comment. Raffensperger's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Trump has repeatedly attacked how Raffensperger conducted Georgia's elections, claiming without evidence that the state's 16 electoral votes were wrongly given to Biden.

"He has no clue!" Trump tweeted of Raffensperger, saying the state official "was unwilling, or unable" to answer questions.

Raffensperger's Twitter response: "Respectfully, President Trump: What you're saying is not true. The truth will come out."

Various election officials across the country and Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have said there was no widespread fraud in the election. Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, have also vouched for the integrity of their state elections. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, which includes three Trump-nominated justices.

In Georgia, the ballots were counted three times, including a mandatory hand count and a Trump-requested recount.

Still, Trump has publicly disparaged the election, worrying Republicans that may discourage GOP voters from participating in Tuesday's runoffs pitting Sen. Kelly Loeffler against Democrat Raphael Warnock and Republican David Perdue against Democrat Jon Ossoff.

Rebecca Green, who helps direct the election law program at William and Mary Law School, said that while it is appropriate for a candidate to question the outcome of an election, the processes for doing so for the presidential election have run their course. States have certified their votes.

Green said Trump had raised "lots of questions" about whether he violated any election laws.

Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond, said Trump is guilty of "reprehensible and, possibly illegal, conduct."

Trump noted on the call that he intended to repeat his claims about fraud at a Monday night rally in Dalton, a heavily Republican area in north Georgia.

"The people of Georgia are angry, the people of the country are angry," he says on the recording.

Biden is also due to campaign in Georgia on Monday, and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris stumped in Garden City, Georgia, on Sunday, slamming Trump for the call.

"It was a bald, bald-faced, bold abuse of power by the president of the United States," she said.

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Loeffler and Perdue have largely backed Trump in his attempts to overturn election results. But on Sunday, Loeffler said she hadn't decided whether to join Republican colleagues in challenging the legitimacy of Biden's victory over Trump when Congress meets Wednesday to affirm Biden's 306-232 vote win in the Electoral College.

Perdue, who was quarantining after being exposed to a staff member with the coronavirus, said he supports the challenge, although he will not be a sitting senator when the vote happens because his term has expired. Still, he told Fox News Channel he was encouraging his colleagues to object, saying it's "something that the American people demand right now."

His rival, Ossoff, speaking at the Garden City rally, attacked Perdue and Loeffler for failing to stand up for Georgia's voters, specifically saying that the state's Black voters were being targeted.

"When the president of the United States calls up Georgia's election officials and tries to intimidate them to change the result of the election, to disenfranchise Georgia voters, to disenfranchise Black voters in Georgia who delivered this state for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, that is a direct attack on our democracy," he said.

Superville reported from Washington and Brumback from Atlanta. Associated Press writer Russ Bynum in Garden City, Georgia, contributed to this report.

Congress opens new session as virus, Biden's win dominate

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress convened Sunday for the start of a new session, swearing in lawmakers during a tumultuous period as a growing number of Republicans work to overturn Joe Biden's victory over President Donald Trump and the coronavirus surges.

Democrat Nancy Pelosi was reelected as House speaker by her party, which retains the majority in the House but with the slimmest margin in 20 years after a surprisingly strong GOP performance in the November election.

Opening the Senate could be among Mitch McConnell's final acts as majority leader. Republican control is in question until Tuesday's runoff elections for two Senate seats in Georgia. The outcome will determine which party holds the chamber.

The House and Senate were required to convene Sunday, by law, and imposed strict COVID-19 protocols. Elbow bumps replaced handshakes as senators took the oath of office. Fewer family members than usual joined lawmakers at the Capitol. A special enclosed seating section was designed for lawmakers in COVID-19 quarantine, but testing negative for the virus.

But by day's end, House lawmakers were hugging and congratulating one another after taking the oath of office in the crowded chamber, an alarming scene during the pandemic.

"To say the new Congress convenes at a challenging time would be an understatement," McConnell said as the chamber opened.

Still, McConnell said with the start of a new year there are reasons for optimism, "let's make the American people proud."

Pelosi said the top priority is defeating the coronavirus. And "defeat it we will," she said to applause.

It's often said that divided government can be a time for legislative compromises, but lawmakers are charging into the 117th Congress with the nation more torn than ever, disputing even basic facts including that Biden won the presidential election.

Fraud did not spoil the 2020 presidential election, a fact confirmed by election officials across the country. Before stepping down last month, Attorney General William Barr, a Republican appointed by Trump, said there was no evidence of fraud that affected the election's outcome. Arizona's and Georgia's Republican governors, whose states were crucial to Biden's victory, have also stated that their election results were accurate.

Nevertheless, a dozen Republicans bound for the new Senate, led by Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz,

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and even more in the House have pledged to become a resistance force to Biden's White House, starting with efforts to subvert the will of American voters. These GOP lawmakers plan to object to the election results when Congress meets on Wednesday to tally his 306-232 Electoral College victory over Trump.

Vice President Mike Pence, who as president of the Senate, presides over the session and declares the winner, is facing growing pressure from Trump's allies over that ceremonial role.

Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, said in a statement Saturday that Pence "welcomes the efforts of members of the House and Senate to use the authority they have under the law to raise objections."

Democrats, meanwhile, are pushing ahead, eager to partner with Biden on shared priorities, starting with efforts to stem the pandemic and economic crisis. They plan to revisit the failed effort to boost pandemic aid to \$2,000 for most people.

"This has been a moment of great challenge in the United States of America filled with trials and tribulations, but help is on the way," Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., the chairman of the House Democratic caucus, said in an interview.

"America is a resilient nation, filled with resilient people," he said. "We will continue to rise to the occasion, emerge from this pandemic and continue to march toward our more perfect union."

Among the House Republican newcomers are Trump-aligned Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who has given nod to conspiracy Q-Anon theories, and gun rights advocate Lauren Boebert of Colorado, who circulated a letter of support to retain the right of lawmakers to carry firearms in the Capitol.

Greene was among a group of House Republicans led by Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama who visited with Trump at the White House during the holiday season about their effort to undo the election.

The "Jan. 6 challenge is on," Taylor Greene said in a tweet pinned to the top of her social media account. Boebert also tweeted support for those challenging Biden's victory.

House Republicans boosted their ranks in the November election, electing a handful of women and minorities, more than ever. Some of the new GOP lawmakers are being called the "Freedom Force," and a counter to the "squad" — Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and other liberal Democratic women who swept to office in the last session.

In a statement Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., the minority leader, said the new Republican members "are a strong representation of who America is and where we come from."

Progressive Democrats bolstered their ranks with newcomers aligned with more liberal priorities.

The Capitol itself is a changed place under coronavirus restrictions. Lawmakers are arriving in Washington from all parts of the country potentially exposed to the virus during their travel.

Several lawmakers have been sickened by the virus and some will be absent Sunday. Also, a memorial was held Saturday for newly elected Republican lawmaker Luke Letlow, 41, of Louisiana, who died of complications from COVID-19 days before the swearing in.

The Office of the Attending Physician has issued several lengthy memos warning lawmakers off meeting in groups or holding traditional receptions to prevent the spread of the virus. Masks have been ordered worn at all times and Pelosi has required them to be used in the House chamber. Members are required to have coronavirus tests and have access to vaccines.

"Do not engage any in-person social events, receptions, celebrations, or appointments, outside your family unit, and always wear a face covering outside your home," the physician's office warned in one memo.

Even the traditional swearing in ceremonies will be limited in the House. No more big family portraits with new lawmakers taking the oath of office. Instead, each representative-elect can bring one guest in line with social distancing protocols. The day's session lasted into evening so lawmakers could vote spaced out in groupings.

The vice president typically swears in the senators and Pence elbow-bumped senators as he did.

Pelosi, who is returning as speaker, the first woman to hold the job, faced a tight race, with the House split 222-211, with one race still undecided and one vacancy after Letlow's death.

The California Democrat won a majority of those present and voting to retain the speaker's gavel.

Associated Press writers Alan Fram, Andrew Taylor and Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

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Biden inauguration to feature virtual, nationwide parade

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration will include a "virtual parade across America" consistent with crowd limits during the coronavirus era, organizers announced Sunday.

Following the swearing-in ceremony on Inauguration Day on Jan. 20 on the west front of the U.S. Capitol, Biden and his wife, first lady Jill Biden, will join Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and her husband in participating in a socially distanced Pass in Review on the Capitol's opposite front side. Those are military traditions where Biden will review the readiness of military troops.

Biden will also receive a traditional presidential escort with representatives from every branch of the military from 15th Street in Washington to the White House. That, the Presidential Inaugural Committee says, will be socially distanced too, while "providing the American people and world with historic images of the President-elect proceeding to the White House without attracting large crowds."

Workers in recent days began dismantling an inaugural parade reviewing stand in front of the White House as Biden's transition team continues to prepare for festivities that will be mostly virtual. Accordingly, organizers also said they will hold a virtual parade nationwide to "celebrate America's heroes, highlight Americans from all walks of life in different states and regions, and reflect on the diversity, heritage, and resilience of the country as we begin a new American era."

The parade event will be televised and feature "diverse, dynamic" performances in communities across the country, the inaugural committee promised. Participants will be announced in coming weeks.

"We are excited about the possibilities and opportunities this moment presents to allow all Americans to participate in our country's sacred inaugural traditions," said Presidential Inaugural Committee Executive Director Maju Varghese said in a statement.

EXPLAINER: How Congress will count Electoral College votes

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wednesday's congressional joint session to count electoral votes has taken on added importance this year as congressional Republicans allied with President Donald Trump are pledging to try and undo Democrat Joe Biden's victory and subvert the will of the American people.

The Republicans — a dozen senators and many more House members — are citing Trump's repeated, baseless charges of widespread fraud. They say they will officially object to the results, forcing votes in the Republican-run Senate and the Democratic-controlled House that will almost certainly fail.

There was not widespread fraud in the election, as has been confirmed by a range of election officials and by William Barr, who stepped down as attorney general last month. Neither Trump nor any of the lawmakers promising to object to the count have presented credible evidence that would change the outcome.

Nearly all of the legal challenges put forth by Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges. The Supreme Court, which includes three Trump-nominated justices, has also denied requests to hear a pair of cases aimed at invalidating the outcome of the election in key battleground states.

The congressional meeting on Jan. 6 is the final step in reaffirming Biden's win, after the Electoral College officially elected him in December. The meeting is required by the Constitution and includes several distinct steps.

A look at the joint session:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONGRESS MEETS WEDNESDAY?

Under federal law, Congress must meet Jan. 6 to open sealed certificates from each state that contain a record of their electoral votes. The votes are brought into the chamber in special mahogany boxes used for the occasion.

Bipartisan representatives of both chambers read the results out loud and do an official count. The president of the Senate, Vice President Mike Pence, presides over the session and declares the winner. The session begins at 1 p.m. EST.

WHAT DOES THE CONSTITUTION REQUIRE?

The Constitution requires Congress to meet and count the electoral votes. If there is a tie, then the

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House decides the presidency, with each congressional delegation having one vote. That hasn't happened since the 1800s, and Biden's electoral win over Trump was decisive, 306-232.

HOW DOES THE SESSION UNFOLD?

The two chambers meet together midday to count the votes. If the vice president cannot preside, there is precedent for the Senate pro-tempore, or the longest-serving senator in the majority party, to lead the session. That's currently Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

The presiding officer opens and presents the certificates of the electoral votes in alphabetical order of the states. The appointed "tellers" from the House and Senate, members of both parties, then read each certificate out loud and record and count the votes. At the end, the presiding officer announces who has won the majority votes for both president and vice president.

WHAT IF THERE'S AN OBJECTION?

After a teller reads the certificate from a state, any member can stand up and object to that state's vote on any grounds. But the presiding officer will not hear the objection unless it is in writing and signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

If there is such a request, then the joint session suspends and the House and Senate go into separate sessions to consider it. For the objection to be sustained, both chambers must agree to it by a simple majority vote. If they do not both agree, the original electoral votes are counted with no changes.

The last time such an objection was considered was 2005, when Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio and Sen. Barbara Boxer of California, both Democrats, objected to Ohio's electoral votes, claiming there were voting irregularities. Both the House and Senate debated the objection and easily rejected it. It was only the second time such a vote had occurred.

WHO IS EXPECTED TO OBJECT?

Dozens of House Republicans and a smaller group of GOP senators are expected to object to the count from some swing states where Trump has alleged fraud, despite the consensus of nonpartisan election officials and even Trump's former attorney general that there was none. None of the members have presented detailed evidence and none of them objected to the swearing-in of congressional lawmakers who won election on the same ballots.

In the Senate, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley was the first to say he would join with the House Republicans. On Saturday, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas announced a coalition of 11 additional senators who vowed to vote against unspecified state electors on Wednesday unless Congress appoints an electoral commission to immediately conduct an audit of the election results. Hawley and Cruz are both among potential 2024 presidential contenders.

The challenges have split the party. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell has urged his colleagues not to object, saying last month on a private call that the vote would be "terrible."

Several other Senate Republicans have criticized the effort as well, including Texas Sen. John Cornyn and South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican. Thune said last month that any objections will go down "like a shot dog" in the Senate.

On Sunday, Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse said the challenge is "bad for the country and bad for the party."

WHAT IS PENCE'S ROLE?

Pence's role is largely ceremonial and he has no power to affect the outcome, despite Trump's wishes to the contrary.

The role of the vice president as presiding officer is often an awkward one, as it will be for Pence, who will be charged with announcing Biden's victory — and his own defeat — once the electoral votes are counted.

Pence won't be the first vice president put in an uncomfortable situation. In 2001, Vice President Al Gore presided over the counting of the 2000 presidential election he narrowly lost to Republican George W. Bush. Gore had to gavel several Democrats' objections out of order. In 2017, Biden presided over the count that declared Trump the winner. Biden also shot down objections from House Democrats that did not have any Senate support.

ONCE CONGRESS COUNTS THE VOTES, WHAT'S NEXT?

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The joint session is the last official chance for objections, beyond court cases that have so far proven ineffective for Trump and his team.

"I think there comes a time when you have to realize that, despite your best efforts you've been unsuccessful," Cornyn said earlier this month.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

Brian Urquhart, early leader of United Nations, dies at 101

TYRINGHAM, Mass. (AP) — British diplomat Brian Urquhart, an early leader of the United Nations who played a central role in developing the U.N. practice of peacekeeping, has died, according to his family. He was 101.

Urquhart's son, Thomas, confirmed he died at his home in Tyringham, Massachusetts, on Saturday but didn't provide a specific cause, the New York Times reported.

Urquhart, born in Bridport, England in 1919, served in British military and intelligence during World War II before becoming the second official hired by the U.N. after its formation in 1945. He went on to be a principal adviser to the first five U.N. secretary-generals.

Urquhart worked for the commission that set up the United Nations Secretariat in 1945, arranged the General Assembly's first meeting in London and settled on New York City as the U.N.'s permanent home. But he was best known for creating and directing U.N. peacekeeping operations in war zones around the world.

Urquhart called peacekeeping forces an army without an enemy and decided they should wear blue helmets to distinguish them from combatants. He said they should enter a war zone only with broad political support, with the goal of ending hostilities and facilitating negotiations.

Before he retired in 1986, Urquhart had directed 13 peacekeeping operations, recruited a force of 10,000 troops from 23 countries and established peacekeeping as one of the U.N.'s most visible and politically popular functions. The U.N. peacekeeping forces won the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize.

Urquhart served 12 years as the U.N.'s No. 2 official, succeeding Ralph J. Bunche as under secretary general for political affairs in 1974.

"Sir Brian's imprint on the United Nations was as profound as that of anyone in the organization's history," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement. "As an aide to Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, he helped to define the U.N.'s scope of action in addressing armed conflict and other global challenges. And as a close associate of Ralph Bunche, the renowned U.N. official and Nobel-Peace-Prize-winner, Sir Brian helped to establish and then propel international peacekeeping into wide-ranging use."

Urquhart joined the Ford Foundation after he retired and wrote books and frequent commentaries for The New York Review of Books and other publications. His books include a 1987 autobiography, "A Life in Peace and War," as well as books on United Nations leaders and operations.

He is survived by his wife, his five children, a stepson, 14 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

'You'll Never Walk Alone:' Singer Gerry Marsden dies at 78

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Gerry Marsden, lead singer of the 1960s British group Gerry and the Pacemakers that had such hits as "Ferry Cross the Mersey" and the song that became the anthem of Liverpool Football Club, "You'll Never Walk Alone," has died. He was 78.

His family said that Marsden died Sunday "after a short illness in no way connected with COVID-19" and that his wife, daughters and grandchildren are "devastated."

His friend Pete Price said on Instagram after speaking to Marsden's family that the singer died after a short illness related to a heart infection.

"I'm sending all the love in the world to (his wife) Pauline and his family," he said. "You'll Never Walk

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Alone.”

Marsden was the lead singer of the band that found fame in the Merseybeat scene in the 1960s. Though another Liverpool band — The Beatles — reached superstardom, Gerry and the Pacemakers will always have a place in the city’s consciousness because of “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”

“I thought what a beautiful song. I’m going to tell my band we’re going to play that song,” Marsden told The Associated Press in 2018 when recalling the first time he heard the song at the cinema. “So I went back and told my buddies we’re doing a ballad called ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone.’”

Marsden is best known for his band’s rendition of the song from “Carousel,” which was a 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical that became a feature film in 1956. The Pacemakers’ cover version was released in October 1963 and became the band’s third No. 1 hit on the British singles chart.

It was adopted by fans of the soccer club Liverpool and is sung with spine-tingling passion before each home game of the 19-time English champion — before coronavirus restrictions meant many matches being played in empty stadiums.

“I was saddened by Gerry Marsden’s passing. His voice will always lead the way at Anfield, in times of celebration or lament,” singer Elvis Costello said, referring to Liverpool’s stadium.

The song’s lyrics, showcasing unity and perseverance through adversity — including “When you walk through a storm, Hold your head up high, And don’t be afraid of the dark” — have been a rallying cry for the Liverpool faithful and the song’s title are on the Liverpool club crest.

The song has also been adopted by supporters of Scotland’s Celtic and Germany’s Borussia Dortmund.

Liverpool tweeted alongside a video of the fans in full voice that Marsden’s voice “accompanied our biggest nights” and that his “anthem bonded players, staff and fans around the world, helping create something truly special.”

The song was embraced during the outset of the coronavirus pandemic last spring when a cover of the song, which featured World War II veteran Tom Moore, reached number one. Moore had captivated the British public by walking 100 laps of his garden in England in the run-up to his 100th birthday in April to raise some 33 million pounds (\$40 million) for the National Health Service.

The Cavern Club in Liverpool, the music venue which was the venue for many of The Beatles’ early gigs, described Marsden as a “legend” and a “very good friend.”

In 1962, Beatles manager Brian Epstein signed up the band and their first three releases reached No. 1 in 1963 — “How Do You Do It?” and “I Like It” as well as “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” Later hits included “Ferry Cross the Mersey,” and “Don’t Let the Sun Catch You Crying.” The group split in 1967 and Marsden pursued a solo career before reforming the band a few years later.

Paul McCartney from The Beatles said Marsden was “a mate from our early days in Liverpool” and that his group were “our biggest rivals” on the local scene.

“His unforgettable performances of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ and ‘Ferry Cross the Mersey’ remain in many people’s hearts as reminders of a joyful time in British music,” he said.

Marsden is survived by his wife Pauline, whom he married in 1965. The couple had two daughters.

Businessman and family die when plane hits Michigan house

LYON TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A small plane flying from Georgia crashed into a house in southeastern Michigan, killing the pilot and two family members.

The victims were David S. Compo, the former president of the Home Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan, his wife Michele and their son Dawson, the association said in a news release.

The Federal Aviation Administration said a single-engine Piper PA-24 Comanche crashed in a residential area at 3:47 p.m. Saturday, roughly half a mile from Oakland Southwest Airport, according to preliminary information. The FAA and National Transportation Safety Board are investigating the crash.

The family was returning home to Michigan from Georgia, according to the association.

Five people inside the two-story house were able to avoid injury, but fire severely damaged the home in Lyon Township, which is 40 miles (65 kilometers) northwest of Detroit, according to authorities.

David Compo's term at the helm of the builder's association ended Dec. 31. His mother, Janet Compo, served as its president in 1995.

Michael Stoskopf, HBA's CEO, remembered Compo for his contributions to the organization.

"His involvement, professionalism and experience over the years have been great assets to our organization and he has been a true friend to me as we faced challenge after challenge during this past year," Stoskopf said in a statement.

Head-on crash kills 7 kids, 2 adults in central California

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Investigators are asking for the public's help to determine what led up to a head-on crash that killed seven children and two adults in central California on New Year's Day.

The California Highway Patrol says everyone who reported Friday's fiery crash on rural State Route 33 came upon the scene after the collision. The CHP hopes to talk to witnesses who saw what happened in the seconds before the SUV and the truck collided between Avenal and Coalinga.

The children, who were between 6 and 15 years old, were members of two related families traveling in a Ford F-150 truck that was struck by around 8 p.m. by a Dodge Journey SUV, the Fresno County Coroner's office and the CHP said.

Evidence from the scene indicated that the Dodge being driven by a 28-year-old man was traveling southbound on the highway when it veered onto the dirt shoulder for an unknown reason, the CHP said. The driver then overcorrected and swerved into the southbound lane, where it struck the Ford driven by a woman, officials said.

The Ford burst into flames on the dirt shoulder, while the Dodge came to a stop straddling both lanes of the highway, the CHP said.

"When the fire was extinguished, tragically it was discovered there were eight occupants — seven of which appeared to be juveniles — inside the Ford," CHP Capt. Kevin Clays said at a Saturday afternoon news conference. "We are working with the Fresno County Coroner's Office to identify the occupants."

The driver of the Dodge, the SUV's only occupant, was identified as Daniel Luna of Avenal.

It was unknown if alcohol or drugs were a factor, pending toxicology results. Investigators will try to determine how fast both vehicles were going at the time of the crash, the Fresno Bee reported.

Weather or other road conditions did not appear to be a factor, officials said.

"Highway 33 is fairly straight in this location and not a lot of collisions occur at the same location where this collision occurred," Clays said. "It's well maintained."

Clays said counseling has been offered for the officers who responded to the crash.

IRS says executors undervalued Prince's estate by 50%

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The ongoing controversy over the money left behind by Prince when he died without a will is heating up again after Internal Revenue Service calculations showed that executors of the rock star's estate undervalued it by 50%, or about \$80 million.

The IRS determined that Prince's estate is worth \$163.2 million, overshadowing the \$82.3 million valuation submitted by Comerica Bank & Trust, the estate's administrator. The discrepancy primarily involves Prince's music publishing and recording interests, according to court documents.

Documents show the IRS believes that Prince's estate owes another \$32.4 million in federal taxes, roughly doubling the tax bill based on Comerica's valuation, the Star Tribune reported.

The IRS also has ordered a \$6.4 million "accuracy-related penalty" on Prince's estate, citing a "substantial" undervaluation of assets, documents show.

Prince's death of a fentanyl overdose on April 21, 2016, created one of the largest and most complicated probate court proceedings in Minnesota history. Estimates of his net worth have varied widely, from \$100 million to \$300 million.

With Prince's probate case dragging on, his six sibling heirs have grown increasingly unhappy, particularly

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as the estate has doled out tens of millions of dollars to lawyers and consultants.

Comerica and its lawyers at Fredrikson & Byron in Minneapolis maintain their estate valuations are solid. Comerica sued the IRS this summer in U.S. Tax Court in Washington, D.C., saying the agency's calculations are riddled with errors.

"What we have here is a classic battle of the experts — the estate's experts and the IRS' experts," said Dennis Patrick, an estate planning attorney at DeWitt LLP in Minneapolis who is not involved in the case. Valuing a large estate, Patrick added, "is way more of an art than a science."

Comerica, a Dallas-based financial services giant, has asked the tax court to hold a trial in St. Paul. A trial could dramatically lengthen the settlement of Prince's estate and generate more legal fees at the expense of Prince's heirs, Patrick said.

Britons flying home to Spain caught in post-Brexit red tape

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Blame COVID-19 travel restrictions or Brexit but whatever the cause, some British citizens trying to return to their homes in several European countries this weekend have been barred from boarding flights.

Airlines refused documents that before Brexit had been valid proof of the Britons' status as residents in Spain, Italy and Germany, although Spanish authorities claimed that the issue had been resolved by mid-Sunday.

Their ordeal came amid heightened travel restrictions due to a coronavirus variant that has been blamed for faster contagion in the U.K. and highlights the bureaucratic complexities resulting from Britain's departure from the 27-nation European Union.

Both Spanish and British authorities said Sunday that the green-colored certificate of EU citizenship with a foreign national identification number issued by Spain is still valid for British citizens residing in Spain under the bilateral provisions that followed the U.K.'s withdrawal from the bloc on Dec. 31.

But the travelers say British Airways and Iberia, which are part of the IAG group, have been refusing to let them board for the past two days.

Iberia said in a statement late Sunday that a communication from Spain's border police on Jan. 1 had created "some confusion" and that it was later clarified. British Airways didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Around 300,000 British citizens are registered as permanent residents in Spain, although before Brexit, many more had been living full or part-time in the country without officially registering.

Patricia Moody, a 69-year-old retiree who has called the southern Spanish town of Zurgena home for nearly four years, was among a group of at least nine people unable to board a Madrid-bound BA/Iberia flight from London's Heathrow Airport on Saturday.

Moody said she and her husband, who she says needs to see his doctor back in Spain, have spent 1,900 pounds (\$2,600) on getting tested for the virus, traveling to the airport and booking new tickets after they were refused boarding. Their second attempt was also futile.

"Throughout all the months of negotiating Brexit, we were always assured that nothing would change for us," she said. Referring to the airlines and authorities in both countries, she added: "It's horrendous and we are suffering because of their incompetence."

Following the discovery of the coronavirus variant in the U.K., many European nations have banned all travel from the British isles except for their own nationals and U.K. citizens with residency rights.

Travelers to Pisa, Italy, and Berlin have also reported similar hurdles in boarding planes operated by Ryanair and Lufthansa despite carrying documents that had been accepted by the Italian and German governments, respectively.

Matt Bristow, a spokesman for the British in Germany association of residents in that country, said: "This appears to be a case of U.K. airport staff not knowing what documents to accept or applying the rules more stringently than the German border police would."

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Spain has been rolling out a new system to register permanent foreign residents called TIE but it's suffering a backlog due to the high number of requests. Authorities told AP that proof of application for the TIE and the "green certificate" for EU citizens were still valid to travel for British residents under the new health restrictions in place until Jan. 19.

"This should not be happening," said the U.K. embassy in Spain said in a Facebook post. "The Spanish authorities have today re-confirmed that the green residency document will be accepted for travel to return to Spain, as stated in our travel advice."

But Sam Dakin, a 32-year-old English-language teacher based in Barcelona for the last four years, and his partner, who has been in the Spanish city for 8 years, said they needed more assurances before they could rebook flights.

The couple had been blocked from flying Saturday morning despite carrying their certificate and then were refused boarding on another flight Saturday evening that British Airways had initially said they could take.

"Just because the government adviser said that we could travel, we don't know whether that will happen when we turn up at the counters," Dakin said. "We just don't know where we're going to get answers."

In a statement, Spain's Foreign Ministry said there had been "an isolated communication problem with some airlines that affected a very small number of travelers" and that air traffic between the U.K. and Spain was proceeding "with normality" by mid-Sunday.

AP writer Geir Moulson in Berlin contributed to this report.

UK's Johnson warns of more lockdown measures as virus soars

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned Sunday that more onerous lockdown restrictions in England are likely in the coming weeks as the country reels from a new coronavirus variant that has pushed infection rates to their highest recorded levels.

Johnson, though, insisted he has "no doubt" that schools are safe and urged parents to send their children back into the classroom in areas of England where they can. Unions representing teachers have called for schools to turn to remote learning for at least a couple of weeks more due to the new variant, which scientists have said is up to 70% more contagious.

The U.K. is in the midst of an acute outbreak, recording more than 50,000 new coronavirus infections a day over the past six days. On Sunday, it notched up another 54,990 cases, down slightly from the previous day's daily record of 57,725. The country also recorded another 454 virus-related deaths to take the total to 75,024. According to figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University, the U.K. is alternating with Italy as the worst-hit European nation.

"We are entirely reconciled to do what it takes to get the virus under control, that may involve tougher measures in the weeks ahead," Johnson said in an interview with the BBC. "Obviously there are a range of tougher measures that we would have to consider."

Johnson conceded that school closures, curfews and the total banning of household mixing could be on the agenda for areas under the most stress.

London and southeast England are facing extremely high levels of new infections and there is speculation that restrictions there will have to be tightened to bring the virus under control. In some parts of the British capital and its surrounding areas, there are more than 1,000 cases per 100,000 people.

Johnson's Conservative government is using a tiered coronavirus restrictions system. Most of England is already at the highest Tier 4 level, which involves the closure of shops not selling nonessential items and places like gyms and recreation centers as well as a stay-at-home instruction.

"What we are using now is the tiering system, which is a very tough system, and alas probably about to get tougher to keep things under control," he said. "We'll review it and we have the prospect of vaccines coming down the tracks in their tens of millions, offering people literally life and hope."

Keir Starmer, the leader of the main opposition Labour Party, urged Johnson to bring in further national

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restrictions in the next day or so though he stopped short of calling for the closure of schools as he said he didn't want to "add to the chaos" that is likely to emerge on Monday.

"The virus is clearly out of control," Starmer said. "We can't allow the prime minister to use up the next two or three weeks and then bring in a national lockdown which is inevitable."

Starmer also said it's unavoidable that more schools will close and urged the government to come up with a plan both for students and for working parents.

One area the U.K. has moved quickly is on the vaccination front. It was the first to begin vaccinating people over age 80 and health care workers on Dec. 8 with the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine. Last week, regulators approved another vaccine made by Oxford University and pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca that is cheaper and easier to use than the Pfizer vaccine.

Hundreds of new vaccination sites are due to be up and running this week as the National Health Service ramps up its immunization program with the Oxford-AstraZeneca shot. Officials say around 530,000 doses of the new vaccine will be in place Monday as the country moves towards its goal of vaccinating 2 million people a week as soon as possible.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will be administered at a small number of hospitals for the first few days so authorities can be on the lookout for any adverse reactions. Hundreds of new vaccination sites — at both hospitals as well as local doctors' offices — are due to launch this week, joining the more than 700 already in operation, NHS England said.

In a shift from practices in the U.S. and elsewhere, Britain plans to give people second doses of both vaccines within 12 weeks of the first shot rather than within 21 days, to accelerate immunizations across as many people as quickly as possible.

"My mum, as well as you or your older loved ones, may be affected by this decision, but it is still the right thing to do for the nation as a whole," the government's deputy chief medical officer, Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, said in an article for the Mail on Sunday newspaper.

Follow AP coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at:

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Minority-owned companies waited months for loans, data shows

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG and JUSTIN MYERS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Thousands of minority-owned small businesses were at the end of the line in the government's coronavirus relief program as many struggled to find banks that would accept their applications or were disadvantaged by the terms of the program.

Data from the Paycheck Protection Program released Dec. 1 and analyzed by The Associated Press show that many minority owners desperate for a relief loan didn't receive one until the PPP's last few weeks while many more white business owners were able to get loans earlier in the program.

The program, which began April 3 and ended Aug. 8 and handed out 5.2 million loans worth \$525 billion, helped many businesses stay on their feet during a period when government measures to control the coronavirus forced many to shut down or operate at a diminished capacity. But it struggled to meet its promise of aiding communities that historically haven't gotten the help they needed.

Congress has approved a third, \$284 billion round of PPP loans. While companies that did not get loans previously have another chance at help, according to a draft of the legislation, businesses hard-hit by the virus outbreak will be eligible for a second loan.

The first round of the program saw overwhelming demand and the Small Business Administration approved \$349 billion in loans in just two weeks. But many minority-owned firms applied to multiple banks early in the program and were rejected, while others couldn't get banks to respond to their applications and inquiries.

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"Many of our businesses were being turned down in the first and second round of funding. That caused application fatigue and frustration," says Ron Busby, president of the U.S. Black Chambers, a nationwide chamber of commerce.

Loan data analyzed according to ZIP codes found that in that first round of funding, six loans were approved for every 1,000 people living in the 20% of ZIP codes with the greatest proportions of white residents, nearly twice the rate of loans approved for people living in the 20% of ZIP codes with the smallest proportions of whites.

That pattern reversed itself over the final four weeks of round two, partly because banks responded to criticism by making it easier to apply for a loan. Over the entire course of the program, the number of loans approved grew and evened out at 14 loans per 1,000 residents in the most ZIP codes with the most and fewest number of white-owned businesses.

Still, minority owners were kept waiting while their companies were in jeopardy.

"Many are hanging on by the skin of their teeth. Most are in the professional services, small retail shops, restaurants, barber shops," says Ramiro Cavazos, president of the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The recent data from the SBA provided a more in-depth look at businesses that received loans than data released on July 6. The earlier data provided only limited details on loans under \$150,000; the government initially refused to release more information on those borrowers, citing privacy concerns. The AP and other news organizations successfully sued under the Freedom of Information Act to make data on all PPP loans public, leading to the latest release.

The SBA did not address the timing of loans to minority-owned businesses when asked for comment by the AP. But spokesperson Shannon Giles said in an email that \$133 billion, or 25%, of PPP funding had gone to companies in economically disadvantaged areas known as Historically Underutilized Business Zones, and 27% went to low and moderate-income neighborhoods.

The bill President Donald Trump signed into law on Dec. 27 provides for \$15 billion to be set aside for community banks, minority-owned financial institutions and community development financial institutions, non-bank lenders that aim to get funding to underserved communities.

The AP analysis shows restaurants slammed by the virus outbreak got the most loans in the first round, but they were followed by businesses in two high-income professions: law firms and doctors' practices. When the first round ended millions of small businesses were left waiting.

The program's disparities were apparent from the start. An AP analysis of the initial data release found some of the nation's largest banks had processed larger loans first. That included loans to well-known and well-financed companies including Shake Shack, Ruth's Chris Steakhouse and the Los Angeles Lakers. Many have returned the money.

What's more, the program's terms helped exclude minority-owned firms. A primary goal for the loans was to allow owners to keep paying employees who otherwise would go on unemployment. So, non-employer firms, or businesses that have owners but no other staffers, weren't allowed to apply until a week after the program began.

Of the 2.6 million Black-owned companies in business before the pandemic, 2.1 million were non-employer firms, according to the U.S. Black Chambers.

That discouraged many minority owners, Busby says.

"This program was made available for payroll and so many firms did not have payroll and did not apply," he says.

Minority-owned and other very small companies were also left out at first because some banks refused to process applications that weren't from well-established customers with multiple accounts. Many of those banks ended that practice after being criticized publicly. The SBA, which initially had more than 3,000 lenders in the program, eventually brought in 2,000 more banks, non-bank lenders and online lenders, which helped more minority applications get approved as the PPP wore on.

"Many of our Hispanic-owned businesses in the first round never heard back from their banks or were turned down. They had to wait until the second round, and many had to leave their banks and go to a

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community lender or a nonprofit minority-run agency," Cavazos says.

Lisa Marsh tried in vain to get banks to process her application. She first applied in June but she couldn't get answers on her status from her bank, a subsidiary of a big national bank. She also got nowhere with smaller community banks.

Marsh, owner of MsPsGFree, a Chicago-based gluten-free baking business, finally applied through an online lender in late July and got her loan a few days before the PPP ended.

"I was very frustrated and almost gave up," she says.

Lack of a banking relationship was one of the reasons the New York Federal Reserve Bank cited for disparities in PPP loan approvals to Black- and white-owned companies. The study based on the first SBA data release found that in parts of the country where there were concentrations of businesses owned by Blacks, the percentage of loans was far below the national average. For example, only 7% of companies in the New York City borough of the Bronx and 11.6% of firms in Wayne County, Michigan, where Detroit is located, received PPP loans, compared to nearly 18% of companies nationwide.

Community outreach helped turn the tide. Community development financial institutions connected with local minority-owned businesses and helped them apply during the second round, says Claire Kramer Mills, co-author of the NY Fed study.

"The disparities that were found earlier were really appalling," Mills says.

The outreach brought in thousands of last-minute applications, the SBA data show.

MBE Capital, a lender focusing on minority-owned companies, received a commitment in mid-May from NBA Hall of Fame member Magic Johnson for funding for \$100 million in PPP loans.

MBE loans accounted for nearly a quarter of approvals on the PPP's last day, according to the AP analysis. More than half of the company's loan approvals came in the last three weeks of the program. MBE did not respond to requests for comment.

Busby noted that the PPP was supposed to help underserved communities.

"We know that did not happen," he says.

AP Data Journalist Justin Myers reported from Chicago.

Small-town Alabama resident transformed to protest leader

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

ALBERTVILLE, Ala. (AP) — During her final year at Albertville High School in 2015, teachers gave Unique Morgan Dunston a citizenship award and fellow seniors voted her the class clown. Today, she's the target of death threats and jeers on Main Street.

The change is because of what Dunston does now, not who she was years ago. A Black woman transformed by leaving a virtually all-white Alabama hometown where new ideas about race and justice run up against Old South traditions, Dunston has led regular protests since August against a Confederate monument on the court lawn.

Dunston and a small band of compatriots regularly chant anti-racist slogans, hold signs and use chalk to mark up the street with unrelenting demands to take down the monument, which has an image of a rebel soldier holding a Confederate battle flag. It was installed on public property by the Sons of Confederate Veterans more than two decades ago with the county's permission.

"My hope and my desire is that as we continue, more people from the community will start coming out, that they will realize that this wasn't a phase, that, 'They are serious and they need our help,'" she said. "Because we do."

The movement has some support: A retired county judge wrote a public letter endorsing the removal of the monument, and groups including the Council on American-Islamic Relations have sided with Dunston. More than 3,300 people have signed an online petition supporting the cause.

Yet like a biblical prophet unwelcome in her own home, Dunston has become a lightning rod for criticism by people who wish she'd just go away. Rather than removing the stone monument, the county has built

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a metal fence around it and passed a law to restrict demonstrations, some of which became shouting matches between Dunston's group, Reclaiming Our Time, and Confederate sympathizers.

"Everybody's getting tired," Marshall County Commission Chairman James Hutcheson said in an interview. "People want to move on with their lives and move past this."

There's no sign an end is near: Dunston said the protests will continue until the monument is gone, and county officials haven't made any move to remove it.

Located 80 miles (130 kilometers) northeast of Birmingham on Sand Mountain, a plateau near the Southern tip of the Appalachians, Albertville is a city of about 22,000 people in Marshall County, where the poultry industry and mid-sized manufacturing plants employ thousands.

Overwhelmingly white, the county's population is about 15% Hispanic, many of whom work in poultry plants, and only 3% Black, census figures show.

Though her family has lived in the county for decades, Dunston said she was one of only two Black students in her graduating class of about 225 people. With so few Black people, Dunston said, there was little community awareness of African American culture or attitudes when she was growing up.

"February was just February," she said. "No Black History Month."

After graduating from Albertville High School with accolades, Dunston enrolled in college in the Gulf Coast city of Mobile, with a population about about 190,000 people that's slightly more than half Black. Suddenly, she was immersed in a city with a rich Black culture.

"I got to experience something that I never got to experience here in my hometown of Albertville," she said.

Aware of racial injustice like never before, Dunston came home from Mobile to help organize two "unity marches" in Marshall County in June after police in Minneapolis killed George Floyd in May. Hundreds attended each, and most of the participants were white since not many people of color live in the area.

Organizing through social media and word of mouth, Dunston decided to take on the Confederate monument. Hopeful after the two marches drew so many people, Dunston couldn't help but notice the difference in turnout at the first demonstration in August.

"It probably went from 600 (at the marches) to, the first time we came out here, 15," she said. Online threats that began during the marches became more frequent, and the public jeers began. Several white men screamed at Dunston or blew horns as they drove past a demonstration held outside the courthouse in early December.

Unlike places where protests began in the spring and died out by the time the weather turned cool, demonstrations have persisted in Albertville. The crowds aren't huge, and sometimes there are as many or more people from Birmingham or Huntsville as there are locals standing with Dunston, who commutes to and from Mobile for events.

Travis Jackson, a Black Lives Matter activist who lives near Montgomery, said coming to protest in little Albertville is motivating. "I love every bit of it," he said.

Dunston's father is usually around in the background, keeping watch over his daughter as a bodyguard, and mother Elizabeth Stewart is a participant. Counterprotesters are common, including an area Black man who supports the Confederate monument and rebel flag.

Stewart said she recalls attending movies in a racially segregated theater in the county as a girl, and she's happy Dunston is speaking out now.

"I raised her to be just what her name says, Unique – the only one," she said. "I am very proud of the message that God sparked in her heart to stand up."

Senate race thrusts 'Black America's church' into spotlight

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — For decades, the red-bricked Gothic Revival church where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached has been a monument to the history of Black Americans' fight for civil rights and the legacy of an activist icon.

It took a high-stakes Senate race and a Trump-era cultural debate to thrust Ebenezer Baptist Church

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into the center of the current political debate.

Its senior pastor, the Rev. Raphael Warnock, is running for the Senate in one of two runoff elections that could decide which party ultimately controls Congress in the first years of the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden. But Warnock's preaching has become a focal point in the debate about race and justice in the election.

His opponent, Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler, has run attack ads using snippets of sermons Warnock preached from Ebenezer's pulpit to accuse him of being a far left, radical socialist who doesn't support police officers or military service members.

For King's former church, the intense spotlight isn't new. Its 6,000 members are accustomed to standing-room only Sunday services, due in large part to the out-of-town visitors who flocked to the church. Still, Loeffler's criticisms have renewed attention on a pillar of Black life in Atlanta and a tradition of political activism it represents.

"The Republican attack is not just against Warnock, it's against the Black church and the Black religious experience," said the Rev. Timothy McDonald III, pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta who served as assistant pastor of Ebenezer from 1978 to 1984.

McDonald describes Warnock's views as consistent with the church's opposition to racism, police brutality, poverty and militarism. Loeffler's attacks include selectively edited portions of Warnock's sermon in which he decries "police power showing up in a kind of gangster and thug mentality," as a criticism of law enforcement practices that have historically driven a wedge between departments and Black residents.

"I don't care what you think about Warnock," he said. "We've got to defend our church, our preaching, or prophetic tradition, our community involvement and engagement. We're going to defend that."

Ebenezer is "Black America's church," McDonald added. "It's bigger than any individual."

Loeffler has responded, saying in a tweet last month that she isn't attacking the Black church. "We simply exposed your record in your own words," she wrote in a reply to Warnock.

Commonly referred to as "Martin Luther King's church," Ebenezer sits in the middle of a national park dedicated to the civil rights icon's life and legacy, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors and tourists annually. Warnock's leadership at the church is his chief credential, a position so prestigious some note the U.S. Senate is a step down.

Warnock has continued to preach as he campaigns for office — albeit pre-recorded in an empty sanctuary, due to the pandemic. In a message delivered Sunday, Warnock seemed to allude to the runoff, telling viewers that they are "on the verge of victory" in their lives, if they accept that God has already equipped them with the ability to win against their adversaries.

"When God is with you, you can defeat giants," said Warnock, who ended the early morning service by also encouraging Georgians to vote on Tuesday.

"It's so very important that your voice be heard in this defining moment in our country," he said. "I would not be so presumptuous as to tell you who to vote for."

The church has kept some distance from Warnock's bid. Ebenezer declined interview requests for members of the pastoral staff. Instead, it issued a statement detailing its public ministry, including social services for the poor, elderly and formerly incarcerated people and more recently, free COVID-19 testing and flu shots.

"Ebenezer Baptist Church embodies the mission of Jesus Christ, through acts of service that strive to feed the poor, liberate the oppressed, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick or imprisoned," the church said in a statement emailed to the AP.

Since before the abolition of slavery, the Black church has played a role in brokering congregants' relationship to political power. It's not uncommon for politicians, most often Democrats, to campaign from Black church pulpits. But it's still relatively rare for church leaders to cross over into public office.

If he were elected, Warnock would be sworn into a small group of other ministers who have served in Congress, including at least one other Black pastor, Rep. Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri.

Within the last year, Ebenezer has been part of a few major national news events.

It hosted the funeral of Rayshard Brooks, a Black man fatally shot in the back by Atlanta police in June,

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amid nationwide protests over George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police in late May.

Warnock was an officiant for that service, and for the late July funeral of civil rights icon and Atlanta congressman John Lewis, who was an Ebenezer member.

"This church is situated at the heart of Atlanta and its leadership has always opened its doors to the community," said Daunta Long, pastor of Seed Planters Church of God In Christ in McDonough, about 40 miles southeast of the city.

Balancing pastoral duties and a national public profile is a common source of tension, noted McDonald, the former assistant pastor. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was not present for the voting rights march now known as Bloody Sunday because he was expected to preach at Ebenezer for communion Sunday, the first sabbath of the month, according to Clayborne Carson, the historian who maintains King's papers at Stanford University.

Ebenezer was founded in 1886. Its second pastor, the Rev. Adam Daniel Williams, brought on his son-in-law, Martin Luther King Sr., as assistant pastor in 1927. His son, King Jr., co-pastored from 1960 to 1968.

The elder King, who served as pastor of Ebenezer for more than 40 years, continued in leadership after his son's assassination in Memphis in 1968. The Rev. Joseph Roberts, Jr. became Ebenezer's fourth pastor after King Sr.'s retirement in 1975.

Warnock, who is Ebenezer's fifth pastor in more than 130 years, was selected as Roberts's successor in 2005.

Ebenezer's members, many who support Warnock's candidacy, say they worry about losing his leadership.

"People love him as their pastor," said Xernona Clayton, 90, a King family confidante and member of the church since 1963. "I think selfishly they don't want to lose him. They want the best of two areas: good representation in the political arena and a pastor in the pulpit."

"I'd imagine both of those jobs would be full-time," she added.

Morrison is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow him on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/aaronlmorrison>.

Spanish-flagged boat rescues 265 migrants in Mediterranean

ROME (AP) — A Spanish-flagged humanitarian ship on Sunday was seeking a port of safety for 265 migrants its crew rescued from the Mediterranean Sea in the last few days.

The Open Arms charity tweeted that its vessel on Saturday had safely brought aboard 96 migrants who had been adrift in a wooden boat with without life vests in international waters. It said the passengers, most of them from Eritrea, included two women and 17 minors and were suffering from hypothermia.

In a separate operation two days before that rescue, Open Arms took aboard 169 migrants, who had departed Libyan shores, where many human traffickers are based.

The traffickers launch vessels, many of them flimsy rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats, crowded with migrants who hope to reach European shores to seek asylum. Some are fleeing conflict or persecution, but many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have been rescued at sea in recent years are fleeing poverty and thus are denied asylum by European Union countries.

Italy and fellow EU nation Malta have often refused docking permission to the humanitarian rescue boats, contending that most migrants want to reach jobs or relatives in northern Europe. Italian and Maltese government authorities have insisted other European nations do their share.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Jan. 4, the fourth day of 2021. There are 361 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 4, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered his State of the Union address in which he out-

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lined the goals of his "Great Society."

On this date:

In 1821, the first native-born American saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton, died in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

In 1904, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Gonzalez v. Williams*, ruled that Puerto Ricans were not aliens and could enter the United States freely; however, the court stopped short of declaring them citizens. (Puerto Ricans received U.S. citizenship in March 1917.)

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address, called for legislation to provide assistance for the jobless, elderly, impoverished children and the handicapped.

In 1944, Ralph Bunche became the first African-American officer at the State Department as he was appointed to a post in the Near East and African Section.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI began a visit to the Holy Land, the first papal pilgrimage of its kind

In 1974, President Richard Nixon refused to hand over tape recordings and documents subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate Committee.

In 1987, 16 people were killed when an Amtrak train bound from Washington, D.C., to Boston collided with Conrail locomotives that had crossed into its path from a side track in Chase, Maryland.

In 1999, Europe's new currency, the euro, got off to a strong start on its first trading day, rising against the dollar on world currency markets. Former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura took the oath of office as Minnesota's governor.

In 2002, Sgt. 1st Class Nathan Ross Chapman, a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier, was killed by small-arms fire during an ambush in eastern Afghanistan; he was the first American military death from enemy fire in the war against terrorism.

In 2006, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a significant stroke; his official powers were transferred to his deputy, Ehud Olmert (EH'-hood OHL'-murt). (Sharon remained in a coma until his death in January 2014.)

In 2007, Nancy Pelosi was elected the first female speaker of the House as Democrats took control of Congress.

In 2010, Dubai opened the world's tallest skyscraper, and in a surprise move renamed the 2,717-foot gleaming glass-and-metal tower Burj Khalifa in a nod to the leader of neighboring Abu Dhabi, the oil-rich sheikdom that had come to its financial rescue.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed a \$1.4 billion overhaul of the nation's food safety system. The Navy fired the commander of the USS Enterprise, Capt. Owen Honors, more than three years after he'd made lewd videos to boost morale for his crew. (Honors was later reprimanded but allowed to remain in the Navy; he retired in 2012.) The Mega Millions lottery drew two winning tickets for a jackpot totaling \$380 million. (In a strange coincidence, four of the six winning numbers matched those used by a lottery-winning character on the TV show "Lost.")

Five years ago: Workers returned to their offices at the San Bernardino, California campus where 14 people were killed the previous month in a terror attack carried out by a county restaurant inspector and his wife. The Justice Department sued Volkswagen over emissions-cheating software found in nearly 600,000 vehicles sold in the United States.

One year ago: Thousands of militiamen and other supporters marched across Iraq's capital in a funeral procession for Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike. President Donald Trump threatened to hit dozens of targets in Iran "very fast and very hard," including sites "important to Iran & the Iranian culture," if Iran retaliated for the killing. Australia's prime minister said the death toll in the worst wildfire season in Australian history had climbed to 23, including a father and son who had been battling flames for two days.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Barbara Rush is 94. Opera singer Grace Bumbry is 84. Actor Dyan Cannon is 82. Author-historian Doris Kearns Goodwin is 78. Country singer Kathy Forester (The Forester Sisters) is 66. Actor Ann Magnuson is 65. Rock musician Bernard Sumner (New Order, Joy Division) is 65. Country singer Patty Loveless is 64. Actor Julian Sands is 63. Rock singer Michael Stipe is 61. Actor Patrick Cassidy is 59. Actor Dave Foley is 58. Actor Dot Jones is 57. Actor Rick Hearst is 56. Singer-musician Cait O'Riordan

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is 56. Actor Julia Ormond is 56. Former tennis player Guy Forget (ghee fohr-ZHAY') is 56. Country singer Deana Carter is 55. Rock musician Benjamin Darvill (Crash Test Dummies) is 54. Actor Josh Stamberg is 51. Actor Damon Gupton is 48. Actor-singer Jill Marie Jones is 46. Actor D'Arcy Carden is 41. Christian rock singer Spencer Chamberlain (Underoath) is 38. Actor Lenora Crichlow is 36. Comedian-actor Charlyne Yi is 35. MLB All-Star Kris Bryant is 29. Actor-singer Coco Jones is 23.