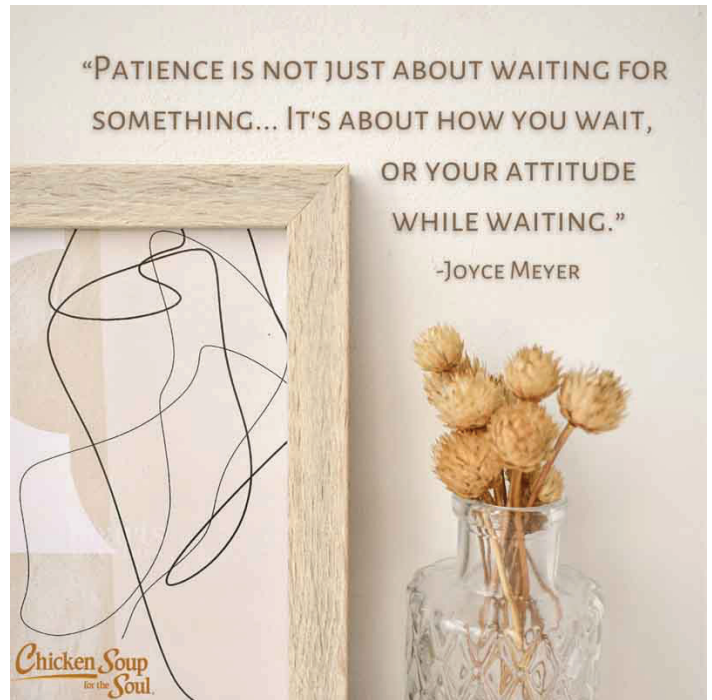


Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 1 of 95

- [1- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [2- 3M Hiring Event](#)
- [3- Upcoming Schedule](#)
- [4- Statewide Mask Mandate Filed by Legislative Democratic Caucus](#)
- [5- SHIINE Warns of Potential COVID-19 Vaccine Scams](#)
- [5- Silver Skates Ad](#)
- [6- Photo of dances performing](#)
- [6- Scenery put up](#)
- [7- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [10- State rebuttal on New York Times article](#)
- [13- Volunteer for COVID-19 Vaccination Response](#)
- [13- Johnson Proposal Circumvents Need for D.C. Statehood by Merging Suburbs with Maryland](#)
- [14- USDA Temporarily Suspends Debt Collections, Foreclosures and Other Activities on Farm Loans for Several Thousand Distressed Borrowers Due to Coronavirus](#)
- [15- January 26th COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [22- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [23- Weather Pages](#)
- [26- Daily Devotional](#)
- [27- News from the Associated Press](#)



Coming up on GDILIVE.COM



**82nd Annual
Carnival of
Silver Skates**
**Sunday,
Jan. 31, 2021**
2:30 p.m.
Skating Rink

Sponsored by
the Carnival of
Silver Skates



Girls
JV at 6 p.m.
followed by varsity
Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021
Northwestern at Groton Area



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

You're Invited

Date: Saturday, Jan. 30th

Time: 9:00am-1:00pm

Location:

Aberdeen Civic Arena
203 S. Washington St.

**COVID protocols apply;
face covering required**

**Onsite
OFFERS**

3M

HIRING EVENT

- ✓ Production Operators
- ✓ Maintenance Technicians
- ✓ Electrical System Technicians

3M is an equal opportunity employer

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 3 of 95

Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Jan. 28

Girls Basketball hosts Northwestern (JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game).
Northeast Conference Wrestling at Redfield, 4 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 30

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.
Boys Basketball at DAK12-NEC Clash in Madison

Sunday, Jan. 31

Carnival of Silver Skates: 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Monday, Feb. 1

Junior High Basketball at Redfield (7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.)

Tuesday, Feb. 2

Boys Basketball at Langford (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game)
Girls Basketball hosting Aberdeen Roncalli with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Thursday, Feb. 4

Doubleheader Basketball hosting Faulkton. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m. followed by Boys Varsity.

Friday, Feb. 5

Wrestling at Lyman High School, 5 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 6

Girls Basketball at DAK12-NEC Clash in Madison.
Boys Basketball at Tiospa Zina (C game at 1 p.m., JV at 2:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

Monday, Feb. 8

Junior High Basketball hosts Webster. 5:30 p.m.
School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 9

Girls Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina. JV game at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Wednesday, Feb. 10

LifeTouch Pictures in GHS Gym, 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Thursday, Feb. 11

Parent-Teacher Conference, 1:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.
Basketball Doubleheader with Milbank in Groton. JV girls at 4 p.m. followed by JV boys, Varsity Girls and Varsity Boys.

Saturday, Feb. 12

Basketball Doubleheader at Mobridge. JV girls at 1 p.m., JV boys at 2 p.m., Varsity Girls at 3 p.m. followed by Varsity Boys.

Monday, Feb. 15

Junior High Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli Elementary School (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)
Boys Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 and Varsity at 7:30).

Thursday, Feb. 18

Junior High Basketball hosts Mobridge-Pollock in the Arena. 7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 19

Basketball Doubleheader with Deuel in Groton. JV girls at 4 p.m., JV boys at 5 p.m. followed by Varsity Girls and Varsity Boys.

Saturday, Feb. 20

Regional Wrestling Tournament in Groton, 10 a.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 23: GBB Region

Thursday, Feb. 25: GBB Region

Friday, Feb. 26

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Tuesday, March 2: BBB Region

Thursday, March 4: GBB SoDAK 16

Friday, March 5: BBB Region

Tuesday, March 9: BBB SoDAK 16

March 11-13: State Girls Basketball Tournament in Watertown

March 18-20: State Boys Basketball Tournament in Sioux Falls

Statewide Mask Mandate Filed by Legislative Democratic Caucus

Pierre, SD (Jan. 27, 2021) – State Senator Reynold F. Nesiba (D15) has brought forward a statewide mask mandate (Senate Bill 125) to the South Dakota State legislature to protect the health and safety of all South Dakotans during the coronavirus pandemic. The bill was filed today, and awaits committee assignment from Senate President Pro Tem Lee Schoenbeck.

The bill uses language almost identical to mask requirements already in place in South Dakota, mirroring Sioux Falls' ordinance. Since passing, the city has seen a sharp decline in hospitalizations, positive cases and percent positive test results. Sioux Falls is one of many municipalities across the state with a mask mandate in place, including Brookings, Vermillion, Yankton, Huron and seven of South Dakota's nine reservations.

"Despite support from communities and health care organizations across the state, Governor Noem has resisted encouraging South Dakotans to wear masks, ignoring health experts and actively spreading false information about infection prevention," stated Nikki Gronli, Vice Chair of the South Dakota Democratic Party. "She has failed to model the mitigation measures suggested by the CDC, refusing to wear a mask, maintain an appropriate distance from others and attending and hosting large gatherings. It's too late for those we've lost, but we can still prevent further illness and disruptions to our schools and businesses."

"South Dakota was well-positioned from the outset to weather COVID as best we could, but the governor chose to flaunt our advantages of population and geography and promoted zero personal responsibility," said Sen. Nesiba. "Our economy has endured, thanks to our great local business owners and workers. What we need from the State is real leadership to prevent this virus from spreading. It's time for us to provide cover for small business owners across the state who have been forced to implement policies on their own. It's time for us to do our jobs."

To date, there have been 1,739 deaths and 6,242 hospitalizations due to COVID-19 in South Dakota. Every single loss of life to this virus is a tragedy. Every single hospitalization is an undue hardship on South Dakotan families and an added strain on our health care resources. Each day the numbers continue to grow.

"Absent any leadership from Governor Noem, our state legislature is compelled to take action," added Sen. Nesiba. "With vaccine distribution making its way through our population, we are turning a corner in the fight against this pandemic. Let's finish strong by taking reasonable precautions to ensure the least amount of damage during the closing months of this pandemic -- by avoiding disruptions to businesses and schools, by keeping people healthy and by avoiding further preventable deaths. I urge my colleagues in both chambers of the state legislature to join me in passing this critical safety measure."

Senator Nesiba will discuss this bill at the regularly scheduled press conference tomorrow at 9:30 am.



**82nd Annual
Carnival of Silver Skates
"Faith, Hope, Love"
Nearly 100 Skaters Performing!
Sunday, Jan. 31,
2021**

**Performances at
2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.
Groton Ice Rink
(West side of Groton)**

**Admission is \$3 for those 13 years
and older for the afternoon session.
The evening session is free.**

**The Carnival of Silver Skates Queen
will be crowned during the
2 p.m. performance.**

**THERE WILL BE NO PARKING
ON THE ICE THIS YEAR!**

SHIINE Warns of Potential COVID-19 Vaccine Scams

PIERRE, S.D. - The South Dakota Senior Health Information and Insurance Education (SHIINE) program is advising Medicare beneficiaries to be suspicious of scams during the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine.

South Dakota Department of Human Services Secretary Shawnie Rechtenbaugh said, "Scammers rapidly alter their tactics and adapt their schemes to the changing landscape, and we anticipate that they will leverage the COVID-19 vaccine to prey on unsuspecting beneficiaries."

Scammers use public health emergencies as opportunities for new fraud schemes, and because older adults are at greater risk for serious illness from COVID-19, they may target older populations.

SHIINE is asking all Medicare beneficiaries to be vigilant and protect themselves from potential fraud concerning COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

If any fraudulent activity is suspected, please report it to the South Dakota Attorney General's Office, Division of Consumer Protection at 1-800-300-1986 or by emailing them at consumerhelp@state.sd.us.

For more information, please visit www.shiine.net.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 6 of 95



The Groton Area Dance Team performed at halftime of the boys Northwestern Game.

(Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)



The City of Groton crew put up the scenery for the Carnival of Silver Skates. The scenery will have a different look this year as Katie Anderson and her parents, Ron and Doris Anderson, worked on the project this summer. There will be snowflakes added to the scenery.

#339 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

The downward trends continue, a very good thing. We're up to 25,621,800 reported cases in the US, 0.6% more than yesterday. There were just 143,800 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations are down for a seventeenth consecutive day at 108,960. There were 3324 deaths reported today, high, but nothing like we've been seeing at our worst. We have now lost 428,427 American lives to this virus, 0.8% more than yesterday. I find myself chronicling this steady decline and remembering the great relief with which I reported similar declines (from far less lofty numbers) last spring; I also find myself remembering what happened next. Twice. And I am not relaxing much, not yet.

I know we've talked about these new variants two nights in a row already, but I have a feeling they're going to be the hot new topic of conversation for a while yet. This latest is on the UK variant, B.1.1.7, and it's not great. There is some evidence emerging that it may be more virulent after all; modeling from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine indicates that, among 1000 men, age 60 and up, the D614G virus would kill 10 and the new variant would kill 13 or 14, an increase of over 30 percent. We already have evidence it spreads more easily; the last thing we need is to know it is also more deadly. But here we are. Be careful; we expect this variant to take over the world from our old, relatively more comfortable D614G. If there's good news in this, it is that our current immunity, either from natural infection or from vaccines, doesn't seem to have any problem with this variant.

More unhappy news about one of these new variants, this one the South Africa variant (B.1.351 or 501Y. V2): A team at Columbia University has found the Eli Lilly monoclonal antibody treatment is not beneficial against it, and one of the two antibodies in the Regeneron monoclonal antibody cocktail is significantly less effective against it as well. Silver lining: The Regeneron therapeutic is, overall, still effective; that other antibody must be a real killer. I will note that these findings have not yet been peer-reviewed and are available only in preprint. The Brazil variant, B.1.1.28.1 or P.1, is expected to behave much like B.1.351. We should also note that just one case with B.1.1.28.1 has been identified in the US, and that in a traveler returning from Brazil, and no cases with B.1.351 have been identified so far in this country. Now we haven't been doing the sort of genomic surveillance which would give us high confidence in this finding; but it's something—and such surveillance has been picking up in the last week or so. For the record, the UK variant, B.1.1.7, is still susceptible to both therapies, as well as to our active immunity.

We will want to remember that both vaccines currently authorized in the US still successfully neutralize this variant, although they are slightly less effective against it than they are against the currently-dominant D614G. No one seriously believes these are the last variants we're going to deal with. Dr. David Ho, infectious disease expert at Columbia and lead author on this paper, told the New York Times, "We've got to expect more of this, because so many people are infected with this virus. The virus has so many chances to mutate."

I have a sick feeling I'm going to have plenty more opportunities to quote Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, in coming weeks as more and more of this sort of thing turns up because we simply refuse to do the necessary to control this virus: "Viruses don't mutate unless they replicate."

There's some new CDC guidance out on vaccines; it's pretty minor and in line with what they've been signaling lately. First, for people who have received a first dose of either the Moderna vaccine or the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and have lost their record, it is OK for them to receive whichever of the two is available. This applies only in those rare cases where it cannot be determined which vaccine the person had received. I don't find this very surprising; I'm not sure what else you can do in a situation like this one. I will repeat something I said a few days ago when this subject arose: Keep track of this. You will receive a card when you are vaccinated which indicates which vaccine you received; you can also simply try to remember—or tell all your friends so one of them can jog your memory—write it down somewhere. While it seems likely the vaccines will be relatively effective in such a scenario, it is important to remember that they have not been tested in this dosing configuration, and I don't like to see us get ahead of the evidence. When I am

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 8 of 95

vaccinated, I'm going for maximal effectiveness, and that means taking the vaccine precisely as it was tested in the clinical trials. There's where the smart money is.

The second item is that, while it is still considered vastly preferable to receive a second dose on schedule, it may be given as much as six weeks after the first. Once again, no one's surprised to hear this. On this one, we do have some limited evidence a delay in that second dose is not a serious problem, at least for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, since some such was collected during the clinical trials. I am not aware whether we have similar data to support a delay with the Moderna vaccine. It should be noted, though, that this is not the recommended vaccination protocol; every effort should be made to receive the second dose within the defined time frame. See my note about maximal effectiveness above.

Late last summer, with the opening of the school year approaching, I had many conversations with people trying to figure out whether it was a good idea or not for schools to open with in-person instruction. We just didn't have much evidence on the point: It's not like we've had a lot of experience with this sort of situation in the recent past. It appears that now we do have some evidence. The CDC published an article yesterday in the Journal of the American Medical Association which shows there isn't much evidence schools contributed meaningfully to transmission of the coronavirus this fall. The report says their data show "the type of rapid spread that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites has not been reported in education settings in schools."

The scientists are not, however, advocating throwing the doors open and caution to the winds; they were quite clear that, while they are advocating for in-person instruction, this must be accompanied by safety precautions, writing, "All recommended mitigation measures in school must continue: requiring universal face mask use, increasing physical distance . . . increasing room air ventilation, and expanding screening testing to rapidly identify and isolate asymptomatic infected individuals." They also point out that there are activities which are high-risk, primarily indoor sports. They cited a couple of wrestling tournaments in Florida which drove transmission: 38 of the 54 wrestlers who were tested were positive and, of course, took virus home with them, passing it along. They also suggested a community that wants to keep its schools open needs to be prepared to give up something else to offset risks; indoor dining-out was mentioned in particular.

The report mentioned that teachers and staff members who became infected were as likely to be infected in the community as in the school, so that it doesn't appear schools are driving transmission in the community. I do get that, but an issue this doesn't address is the matter of who those people are and who gets a choice. For example, I know a whole lot of people, some of them teachers and others of them parents of school kids, who are living life as though it was 2019—going maskless and unafraid to the movies, out to eat, shopping, to Grandma's for dinner, to the bars on Saturday night, on vacations, to ball games and concerts and school programs; they're not taking precautions of any kind in or out of the home. I am also aware most of the schools in my area are taking few to none of the above-recommended precautions. (They're "encouraging" mask use, and for the record, virtually no one's using them.) If I were a teacher in my community, I'd be terrified to go to work because, if I got infected, it would almost certainly be at school: You see, I'm staying out of the theaters and the bars and the restaurants and the rest. Only I wouldn't have had a choice about my exposure at school: My freedom to choose would have been swallowed up by the choices the rest of the community made for me. And what would I do with that? Give up my livelihood? Very few of us are in a position to do that.

So I guess I'm wondering just which of those teachers are getting infected in the community and which of them are getting infected at school. It isn't much of a stretch to imagine that a good share of those who are becoming infected in the community are those who take few or no precautions in the community and don't limit their activity, while a good share of those who are being careful in the community are becoming infected in the school by the no-precautions crowd. And that doesn't sit well with me. The no-precautions crowd say, "Well, stay home if you're a scaredy-cat," and that's what this scaredy-cat is doing nowadays. Five years ago before I retired, I would not have had that luxury. And I suspect a whole lot of teachers and school staff are in that situation today—at risk, with a need to go to work, and exposed to the risks taken by others without regard for these folks' safety. Heartwarming articles in the hometown paper about

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 9 of 95

how well-loved you were are very nice, but most of us can't read those after we're dead. There have been far too many articles like this in the past year; I wonder how many of those folks were infected at work by careless and thoughtless colleagues or students infected by careless and thoughtless parents.

I know kids need to be in school. I know teachers are expected (rightly or wrongly) to sacrifice a great deal for the good of their students. (Cue the heart-warming stories about the teacher who spent her meager salary on learning tools that the school failed to provide for her students.) Nonetheless, it seems a bit much to ask them to put their lives on the line when I am not seeing much interest in addressing this employee safety issue by putting basic precautions in place. If you wonder why teachers are raising so much hell in so many school systems about returning to in-person teaching, consider what we are asking of them. Surely we can do better. Surely we should.

Today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the seventy-sixth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the death camp where an estimated 1.1 million people perished in a paean to bigotry and racism, the echoes of which have never fully died, certainly not here. The survivors of those horrors are all very elderly at this point and highly susceptible to this new coronavirus, simply by virtue of age if not also from the damage they suffered all those years ago. Jewish leaders in Europe have been pushing to prioritize these folks for vaccination. There are about 20,000 such survivors in Europe today, and I think we can all agree they've suffered enough.

Well today, on this Remembrance Day, in Austria and Slovakia, hundreds of those survivors were vaccinated. Four hundred people 85 and older, many of them Holocaust survivors, were vaccinated in Vienna. The Jewish Community of Vienna organized the event with the Austrian Ministry of Health, and another event was held to provide vaccinations in Bratislava, Slovakia. Symbolism matters: Today is the perfect day to protect these at-risk people who have been through so much.

Erika Jakubovits, executive director of the Jewish Community of Vienna, told the New York Times, "I think we owe it to our parents and grandparents to take care of these Holocaust survivors. . . . [T]hese are our most vulnerable members of society, and we have to treat them accordingly."

The president of the European Jewish Congress, Moshe Cantor, who had also called on leaders to ensure these people were vaccinated, spoke during a commemorative event held online this week, saying, "Throughout their lives, they have shown mighty strength of spirit, but in the current crisis, many have sadly died alone and in pain, or are now fighting for their lives, and many others are suffering from extreme isolation. We have a duty to ensure that Holocaust survivors are able to live their last years in dignity and in the company of their loved ones." Surely no one here thinks they should die before their time or in any way except peacefully and surrounded by others when that time is up. I'm glad they were accommodated; those in my and subsequent generations who haven't known real suffering can wait.

While we wait, take care. We'll talk again.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 10 of 95

State rebuttal on New York Times article

For those of you who get questions about the agitprop the New York Times put out this morning about Governor Noem, I thought you'd like to have the actual facts in hand.

The Times asserts that Governor Noem is "a uniquely dangerous kind of politician, one who's reckless but sounds rational, smart but intellectually dishonest and is willing to endanger South Dakotans just to get a few political points."

Not quite the "tender embrace" we had hoped for, but there's still time...

I'm going to skip the point-by-point rebuttal, and instead highlight a couple of the most absurd issues with the piece.

The opening CNN clip stating, "More people are testing positive than negative" in South Dakota, is not true. At no point during the pandemic was it true. Anybody following the data put out by the South Dakota Department of Health knows that this claim is 100% false.

The claim that China stopped the spread of the virus is laughable. How did the virus – which originated in China – spread to every across the globe?

Why did the Times make no mention of South Dakota's outstanding deployment of the vaccine. Governor Noem is the "Vaccine Queen," according to the Wall Street Journal. Of course, this is a testament to the people of South Dakota, the outstanding team at the Department of Health, and our health care providers across the state.

Given the Times' attempt to rewrite history here, it's probably time to revisit the facts we sent out when these hit pieces originally ran back in November.

Using a 7-day rolling average is ridiculous. The virus moved across the globe in waves. The better statistic would be to layer each of the waves on top of each other and compare data points. When you do that, you get a very different picture.

As I pointed out back in November, the entire United States hadn't broken the top 10 list for deaths (per 100,000) globally.

The death rate (per 100,000) on November 16th:

New Jersey – 187
New York – 175
Massachusetts – 150
Connecticut – 133
Louisiana – 132

North Dakota was 8th on the list at 97.

South Dakota was 17th on the list at 73 – lower than the overall US death rate per 100,000.

Also at the time, the world was seeing a rise in cases. The Midwest – not only North and South Dakota, but also Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and many others – saw cases rise. Then, and still today, there is zero science – yes, zero – to support the claim that South Dakota saw a rise in cases because Governor Noem wouldn't issue a mask mandate or other harsh restrictions.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 11 of 95

We shared:

Illinois health officials reported 10,631 new cases, and 72 deaths on Sunday. Illinois has had a mask mandate for everyone over the age of 2 since May 1.

Minnesota health officials reported a record 8,703 new cases and 35 new deaths on Saturday. Minnesota's mask mandate has been in place since July 25.

Wisconsin health officials reported more than 5,100 new cases and 52 more deaths on Saturday. Wisconsin's mask mandate has been in place since August 1.

Today, if we look exclusively at death rate, South Dakota still fares better than the Times' beloved lockdown states:

The death rate (per 100,000) as of January 27, 2021:

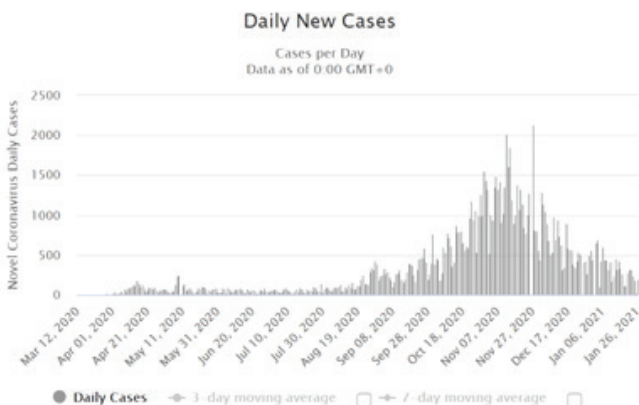
- New Jersey – 238
- New York – 220
- Massachusetts – 206
- Rhode Island – 201
- Mississippi – 197

South Dakota is 7th on the list at 193.
North Dakota is 8th on the list at 189.

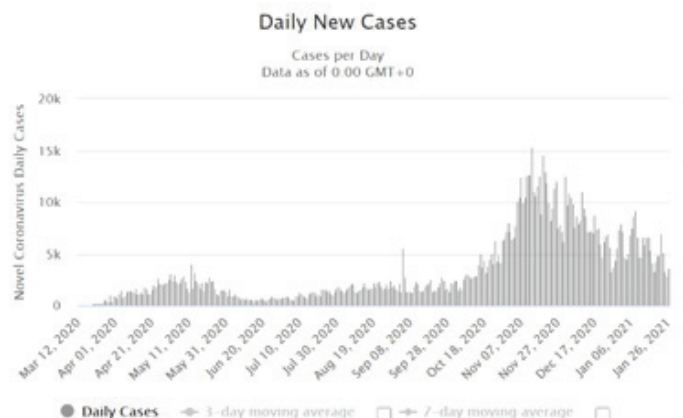
But the story runs deeper than that. Because the author moves back and forth between case and death-rate data as if they're interchangeable – a frequent and deliberately misleading tactic of those agitating for more intrusive government mandates. The viewer is left with the impression that South Dakota is somehow unique when it comes to Covid deaths. That's totally false.

The Times also failed to note that our cases in the fall/winter came down as fast or faster than states under severe lockdowns, like Illinois (see below).

Daily New Cases in South Dakota



Daily New Cases in Illinois



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 12 of 95

Key Metrics

Total Per 1M people Last 90 days **Historical**

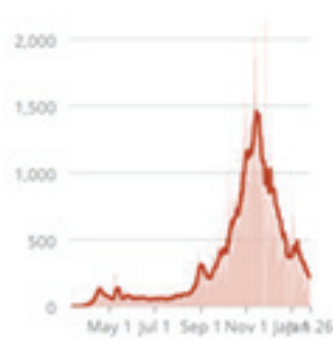
— Solid line represents South Dakota 7-day average

New tests

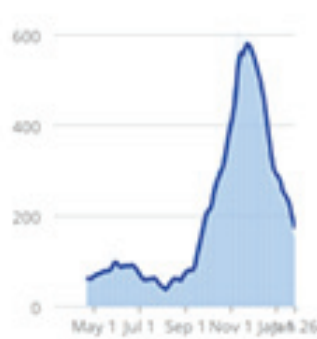
Total PCR tests (people)



New cases



Current hospitalizations



New deaths



[Chart information and data](#)



Key Metrics

Total Per 1M people Last 90 days **Historical**

— Solid line represents Illinois 7-day average

New tests

Total test results (Specimens)



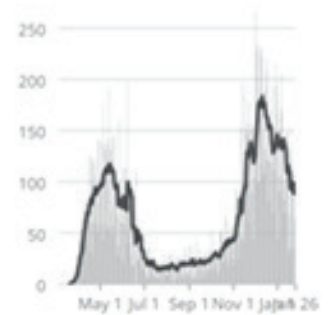
New cases (Notes)



Current hospitalizations



New deaths



[Chart information and data](#)



The sad news is that this piece recycles the same stale narrative the mainstream media has attacked Governor Noem with for months. This piece is irresponsible, intellectually dishonest, and the latest example of purposeful media manipulation.

Curious, should we hold our breath for the Times to do a similar piece on Andrew Cuomo?

Stay well.

-Maggie

Maggie Seidel
Senior Advisor & Policy Director
Office of Governor Kristi Noem

Volunteer for COVID-19 Vaccination Response

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health (DOH) released a [volunteer registration portal](#) where residents from across the state can register to assist with COVID-19 vaccination efforts. While South Dakota is among those states leading in vaccine distribution and administration nationwide, an effective and streamlined volunteer pool that is willing and able to assist will be key as vaccination efforts are expanded. This becomes even more important as federal vaccine allocation is expected to increase in the weeks and months ahead.

“The Department of Health and our hospital partners are responding to an outpour in support and willingness to help in bringing this pandemic to an end,” said Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon. “Since the beginning of the pandemic there is not a week that goes by in which we are not asked, ‘how can I help?’—this is part of what makes South Dakota such a great place to call home. We work with what we have, while helping as many as we can. I encourage state residents to sign up today!”

Volunteers who register on the [portal](#) can select what type of volunteer work they are seeking and answer simple questions as to the skills and experience they are offering. All are encouraged to apply, even those without a medical background. Registration only takes a few minutes, and this information will be vetted by staff at DOH prior to any volunteer opportunities being offered.

In addition to any future vaccination opportunities offered by DOH, their registration will also be entered into [SERVESD](#) and securely shared with [PHASE I vaccinators](#) (hospital systems), who may call upon them for vaccination assistance. Volunteers that are willing to assist in medical settings may also qualify to receive their COVID-19 vaccine ahead of time.

For additional information and the latest COVID-19 resources, visit [COVID.SD.GOV.](#)

Johnson Proposal Circumvents Need for D.C. Statehood by Merging Suburbs with Maryland

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) reintroduced the District of Columbia-Maryland Reunion Act, legislation that would revert the majority of Washington, D.C., suburbs to the state of Maryland. The National Capitol Service Area, consisting solely of the National Mall and federal buildings, would remain the District of Columbia.

“The District of Columbia-Maryland Reunion Act kills two birds with one stone,” said Johnson. “It removes the need for D.C. statehood, while also providing representation to individuals living in the district by merging the suburbs with Maryland. This proposal isn’t out of the question, Congress has done it before in 1847 when large parts of D.C. were returned to Virginia. My proposal accomplishes the goal of representation without creating a 51st state – that’s compromise.”

Additionally, Johnson introduced a constitutional amendment to repeal the 23rd Amendment which provides electoral college votes to the District of Columbia. If residential areas of Washington were returned to the state of Maryland, residents would have full representation in Congress, in addition to representation through the Electoral College.

A bill to give statehood to Washington, D.C., passed the U.S. House on June 26, 2020. President Biden and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer have also expressed their support for D.C. statehood.

Click [here](#) for the full bill text and [here](#) for the constitutional amendment.

USDA Temporarily Suspends Debt Collections, Foreclosures and Other Activities on Farm Loans for Several Thousand Distressed Borrowers Due to Coronavirus

Huron, South Dakota, Jan. 27, 2021 – Due to the national public health emergency caused by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced the temporary suspension of past-due debt collections and foreclosures for distressed borrowers under the Farm Storage Facility Loan and the Direct Farm Loan programs administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). USDA will temporarily suspend non-judicial foreclosures, debt offsets or wage garnishments, and referring foreclosures to the Department of Justice. USDA will work with the U.S. Attorney's Office to stop judicial foreclosures and evictions on accounts that were previously referred to the Department of Justice. Additionally, USDA has extended deadlines for producers to respond to loan servicing actions, including loan deferral consideration for financially distressed and delinquent borrowers. In addition, for the Guaranteed Loan program, flexibilities have been made available to lenders to assist in servicing their customers.

Today's announcement by USDA expands previous actions undertaken by the Department to lessen financial hardship. According to USDA data, more than 12,000 borrowers—approximately 10% of all borrowers—are eligible for the relief announced today. Overall, FSA lends to more than 129,000 farmers, ranchers and producers.

"USDA and the Biden Administration are committed to bringing relief and support to farmers, ranchers and producers of all backgrounds and financial status, including by ensuring producers have access to temporary debt relief," said Robert Bonnie, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Secretary. "Not only is USDA suspending the pipeline of adverse actions that can lead to foreclosure and debt collection, we are also working with the Departments of Justice and Treasury to suspend any actions already referred to the applicable Agency. Additionally, we are evaluating ways to improve and address farm related debt with the intent to keep farmers on their farms earning living expenses, providing for emergency needs, and maintaining cash flow."

The temporary suspension is in place until further notice and is expected to continue while the national COVID-19 disaster declaration is in place.

USDA's Farm Service Agency provides several different loans for producers, which fall under two main categories:

Guaranteed loans are made and serviced by commercial lenders, such as banks, the Farm Credit System, credit unions and other non-traditional lenders. FSA guarantees the lender's loan against loss, up to 95%.

Direct loans are made and serviced by FSA using funds from the federal government.

The most common loan types are Farm Ownership, Farm Operating and Farm Storage Facility Loans, with Microloans for each:

Farm Ownership: Helps producers purchase or enlarge a farm or ranch, construct a new or improve an existing farm or ranch building, pay closing costs and pay for soil and water conservation and protection.

Farm Operating: Helps producers purchase livestock and equipment and pay for minor real estate repairs and annual operating expenses.

Farm Storage Facility Loans are made directly to producers for the construction of cold or dry storage and includes handling equipment and mobile storage such as refrigerated trucks.

Microloans: Direct Farm Ownership, Operating Loans and Farm Storage Facility Loans have a shortened application process and reduced paperwork designed to meet the needs of smaller, non-traditional and niche-type operations.

Contact FSA

FSA encourages producers to contact their county office to discuss these programs and temporary changes to farm loan deadlines and the loan servicing options available. For Service Center contact information, visit farmers.gov/coronavirus. For servicing information, access farmers.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 15 of 95

County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	448	415	809	14	Moderate	10.00%
Beadle	2603	2499	5472	39	Substantial	8.89%
Bennett	377	361	1116	9	Minimal	4.30%
Bon Homme	1499	1465	1964	23	Minimal	0.00%
Brookings	3389	3202	10811	33	Substantial	7.00%
Brown	4879	4639	11779	77	Substantial	9.01%
Brule	678	654	1764	8	Substantial	5.88%
Buffalo	416	403	859	12	Minimal	0.00%
Butte	953	915	3007	20	Substantial	7.07%
Campbell	121	112	233	4	Minimal	22.73%
Charles Mix	1219	1148	3716	15	Substantial	4.69%
Clark	333	322	904	4	Moderate	7.69%
Clay	1750	1692	4868	15	Substantial	8.82%
Codington	3720	3544	9093	74	Substantial	8.09%
Corson	458	441	962	11	Minimal	9.09%
Custer	725	695	2543	11	Substantial	13.33%
Davison	2884	2773	6069	58	Substantial	7.28%
Day	601	545	1626	26	Substantial	6.82%
Deuel	457	432	1054	8	Moderate	0.00%
Dewey	1383	1335	3660	19	Substantial	11.11%
Douglas	411	385	854	9	Moderate	8.82%
Edmunds	456	423	947	8	Substantial	6.38%
Fall River	502	473	2447	14	Substantial	7.32%
Faulk	335	313	647	13	Moderate	7.69%
Grant	907	819	2062	37	Substantial	27.18%
Gregory	497	463	1163	27	Moderate	17.07%
Haakon	240	230	502	9	Minimal	10.00%
Hamlin	664	607	1640	38	Substantial	9.09%
Hand	320	309	738	5	Minimal	3.85%
Hanson	331	322	655	4	Minimal	4.35%
Harding	90	89	166	1	None	0.00%
Hughes	2194	2084	6060	31	Substantial	7.79%
Hutchinson	752	698	2169	23	Substantial	6.45%

Groton Daily Independent

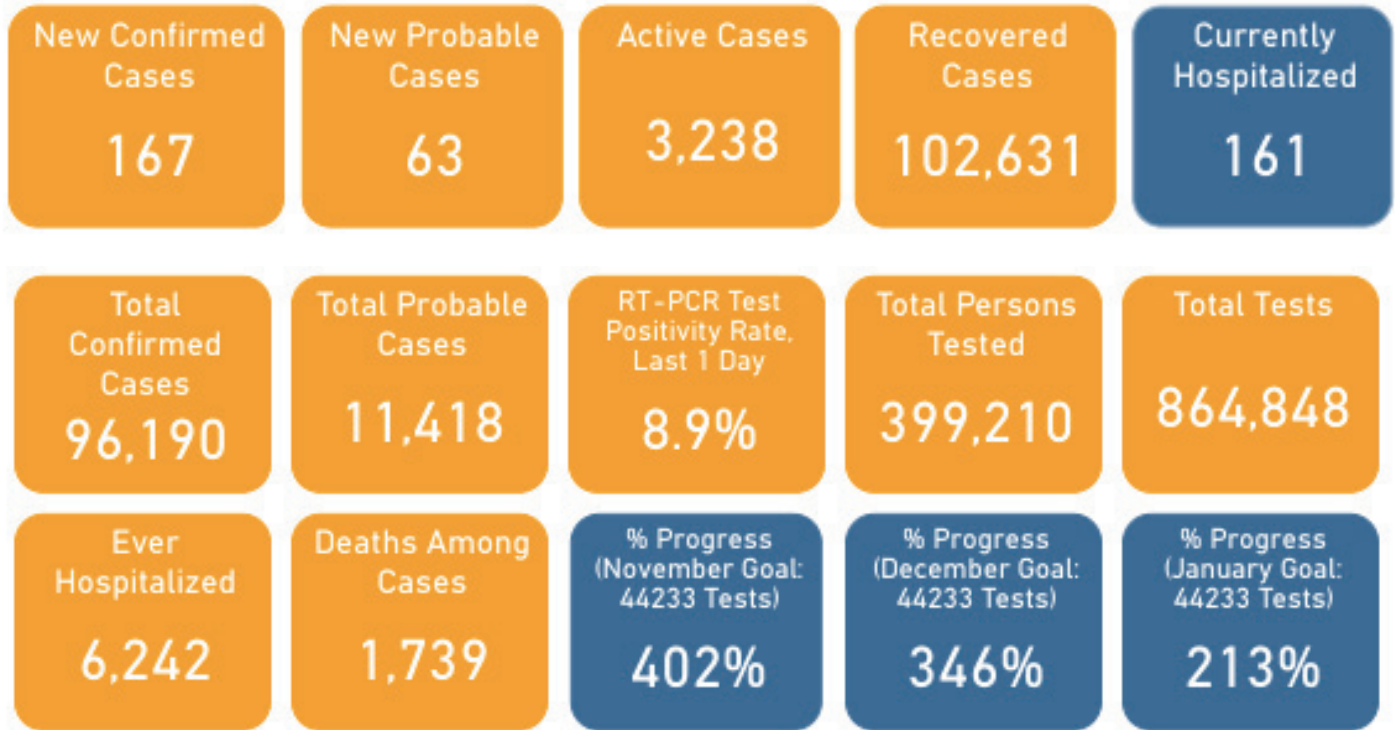
Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 16 of 95

Hyde	134	131	385	1	None	0.00%
Jackson	268	252	882	13	Minimal	0.00%
Jerauld	266	246	528	16	None	0.00%
Jones	82	75	193	0	Moderate	14.29%
Kingsbury	601	562	1505	13	Substantial	16.07%
Lake	1134	1065	3017	17	Substantial	7.37%
Lawrence	2742	2656	8003	40	Substantial	6.82%
Lincoln	7411	7117	18668	73	Substantial	13.52%
Lyman	588	555	1805	10	Substantial	7.37%
Marshall	284	267	1077	5	Moderate	7.14%
McCook	713	683	1500	22	Moderate	11.36%
McPherson	234	203	529	4	Substantial	3.28%
Meade	2459	2348	7133	28	Substantial	12.25%
Mellette	238	231	695	2	Moderate	19.23%
Miner	261	234	528	7	Moderate	22.22%
Minnehaha	26861	25774	72272	306	Substantial	10.99%
Moody	600	555	1645	16	Substantial	16.67%
Oglala Lakota	2033	1938	6385	42	Substantial	13.16%
Pennington	12295	11765	36583	167	Substantial	12.43%
Perkins	332	294	732	11	Substantial	28.21%
Potter	343	327	773	3	Moderate	5.56%
Roberts	1102	1037	3889	34	Substantial	13.27%
Sanborn	323	310	635	3	Moderate	0.00%
Spink	762	700	1971	25	Substantial	8.33%
Stanley	313	302	848	2	Moderate	3.03%
Sully	134	122	281	3	Moderate	14.29%
Todd	1208	1162	3996	24	Moderate	6.12%
Tripp	651	631	1402	15	Moderate	8.89%
Turner	1041	963	2505	50	Substantial	11.11%
Union	1847	1719	5768	38	Substantial	15.57%
Walworth	699	654	1724	14	Substantial	16.46%
Yankton	2723	2633	8618	27	Substantial	5.57%
Ziebach	334	313	826	9	Moderate	8.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1942	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 17 of 95

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4142	0
10-19 years	11974	0
20-29 years	19403	4
30-39 years	17706	14
40-49 years	15336	34
50-59 years	15163	94
60-69 years	12311	226
70-79 years	6572	393
80+ years	5001	974

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	56183	825
Male	51425	914

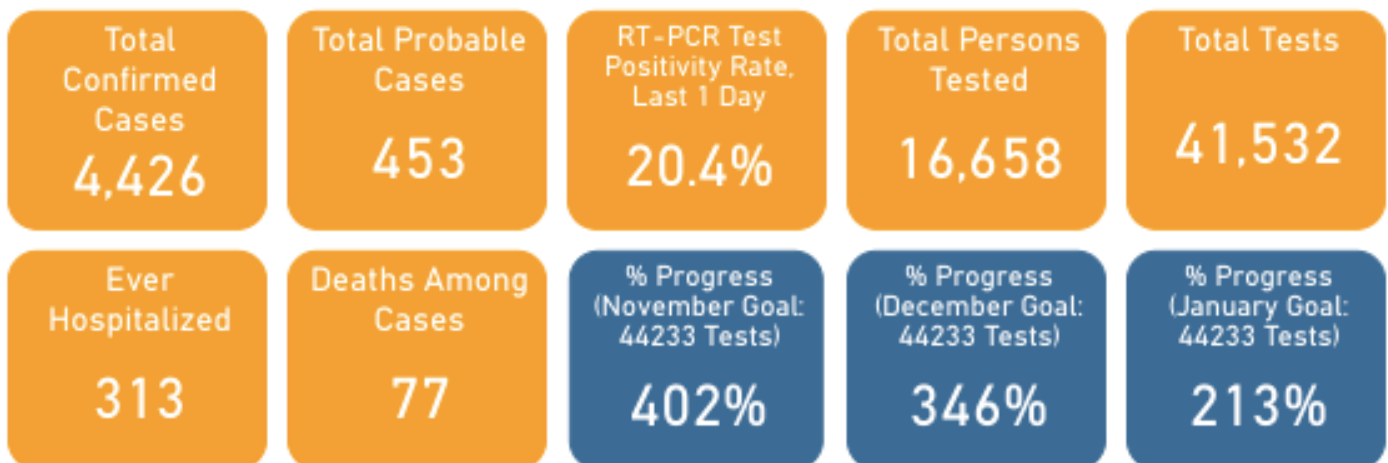
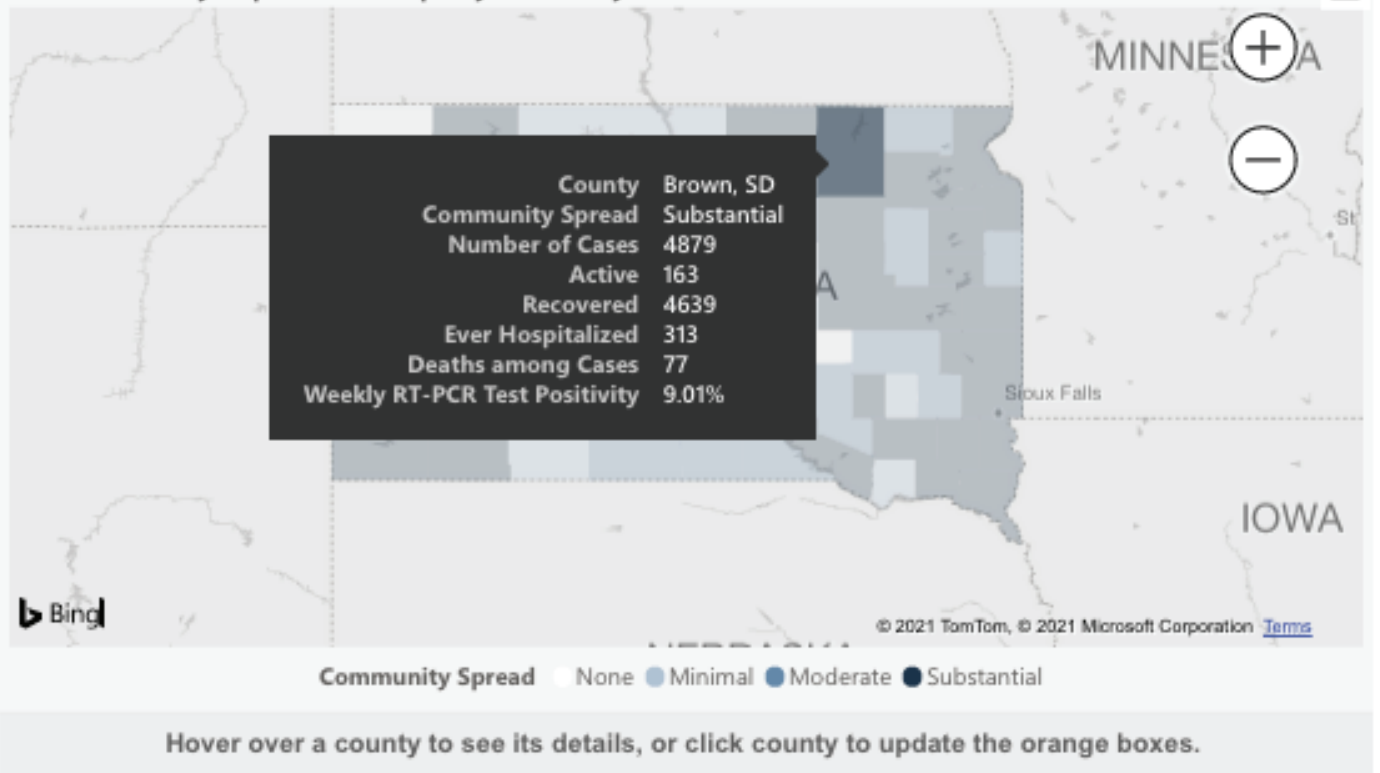
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 18 of 95

Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



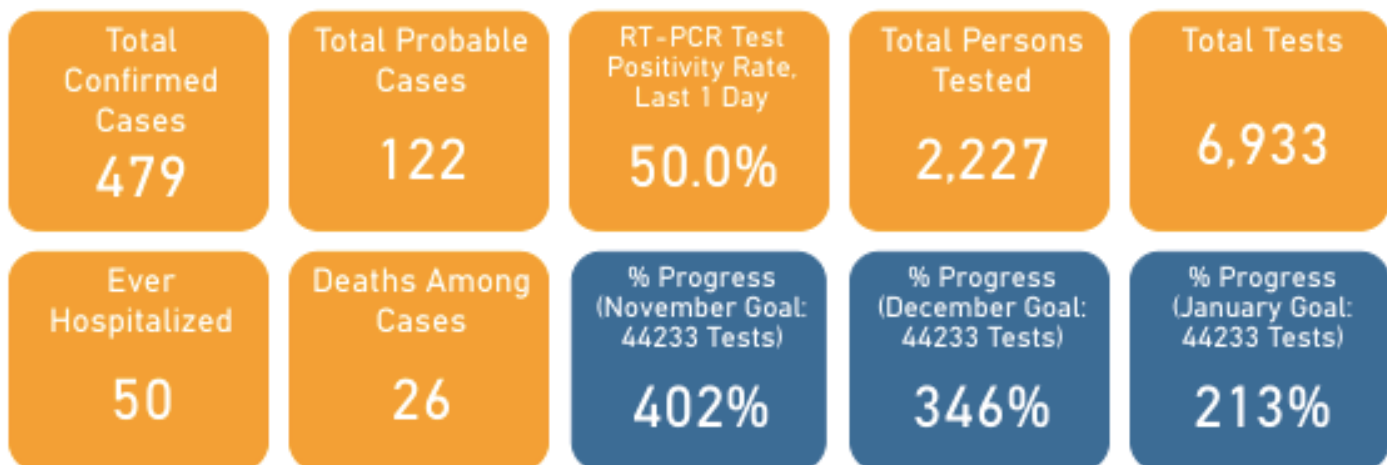
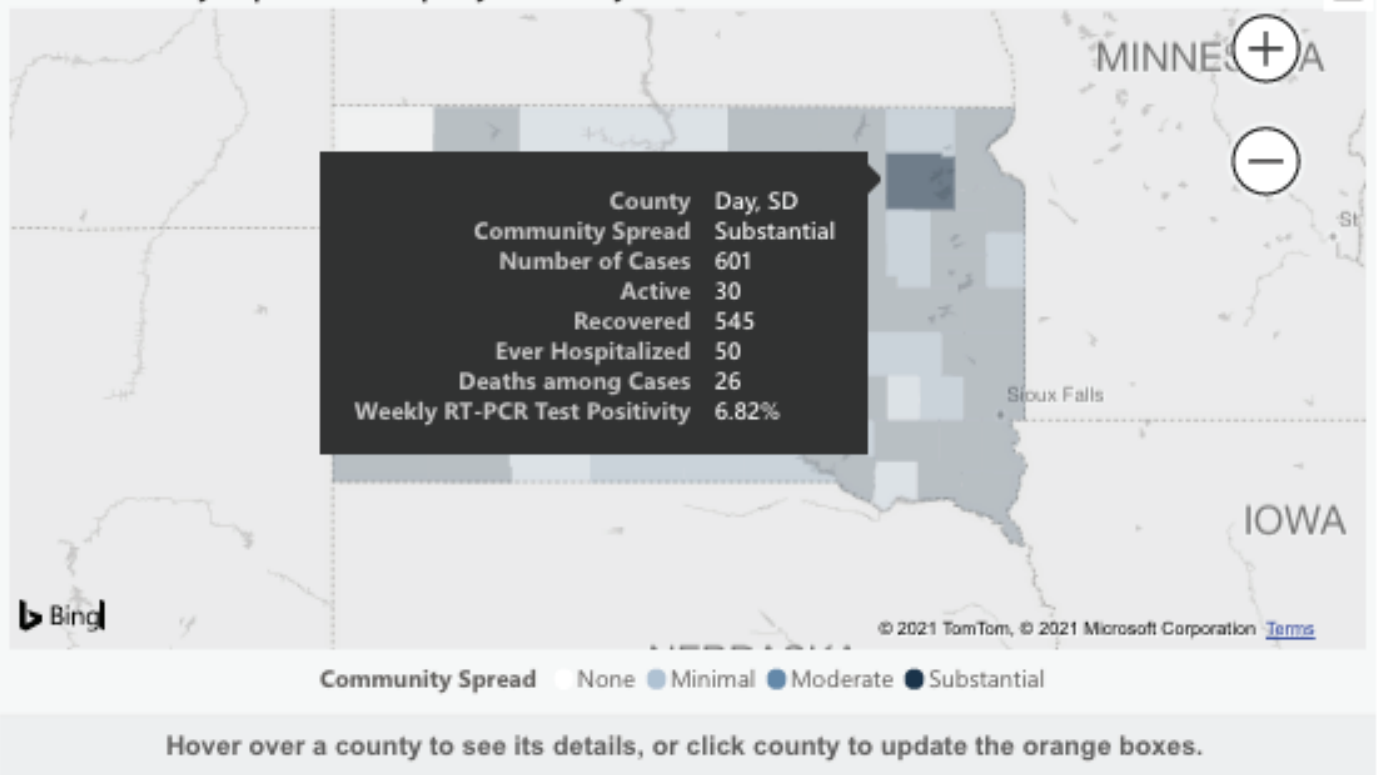
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 19 of 95

Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 20 of 95

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

82,021

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

60,272

Manufacturer	Number of Doses
Moderna	43,033
Pfizer	38,988

Doses	Number of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	26,601
Moderna - Series Complete	8,216

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	145	63	41	104
Beadle	1442	636	403	1,039
Bennett*	162	126	18	144
Bon Homme*	668	250	209	459
Brookings	2142	1,172	485	1,657
Brown	4136	1,792	1,172	2,964
Brule*	434	318	58	376
Buffalo*	16	12	2	14
Butte	330	294	18	312
Campbell	312	142	85	227
Charles Mix*	667	231	218	449
Clark	277	241	18	259
Clay	1250	844	203	1,047
Codington*	2578	1,484	547	2,031
Corson*	52	46	3	49
Custer*	534	408	63	471
Davison	2185	857	664	1,521
Day*	599	365	117	482
Deuel	338	196	71	267
Dewey*	122	116	3	119
Douglas*	331	181	75	256
Edmunds	311	155	78	233
Fall River*	607	459	74	533
Faulk	206	182	12	194
Grant*	612	304	154	458
Gregory*	485	187	149	336
Haakon*	173	85	44	129

Groton Daily Independent

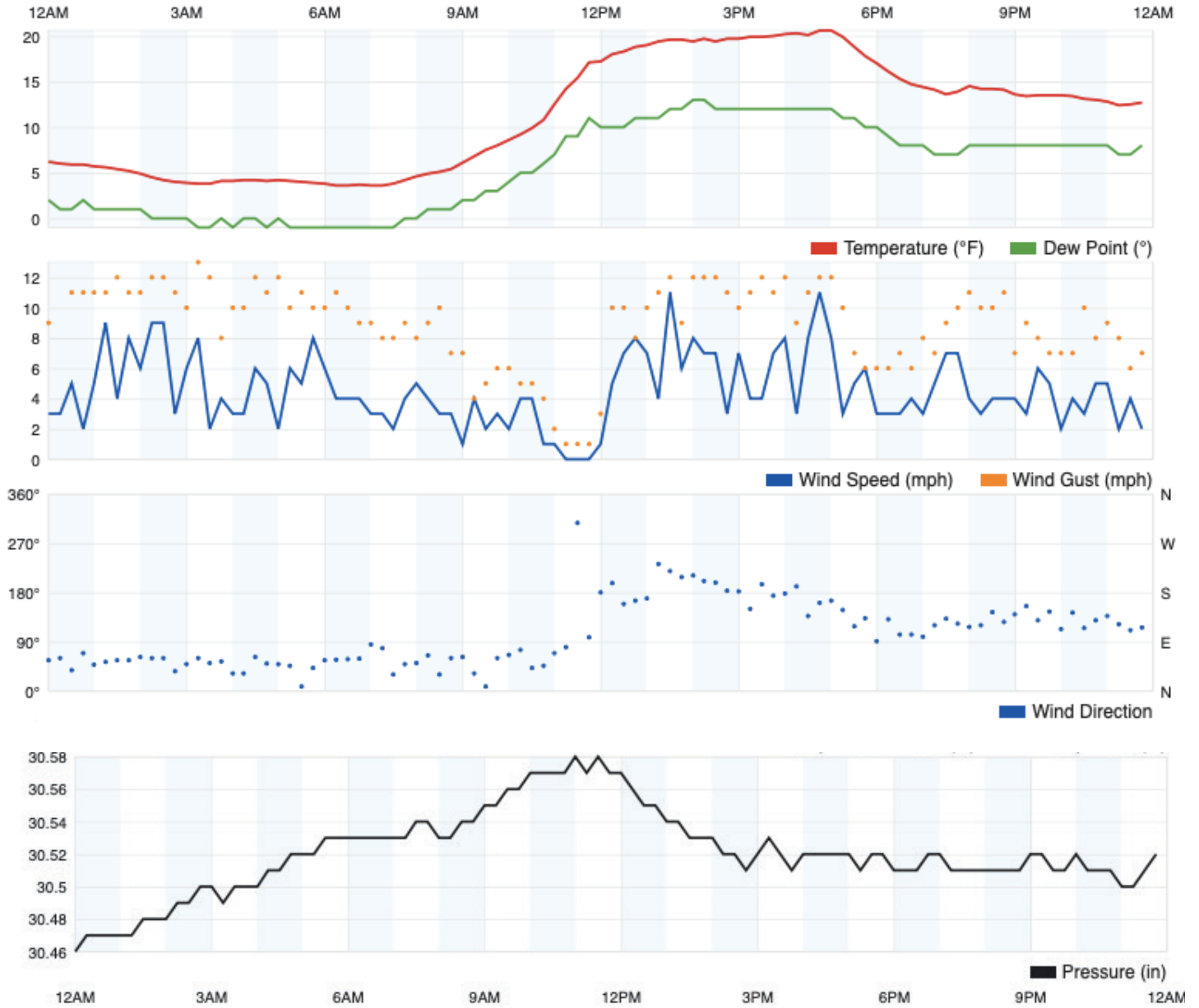
Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 21 of 95

Hamlin	452	206	123	329
Hand	339	123	108	231
Hanson	117	29	44	73
Harding	5	5	0	5
Hughes*	1945	991	477	1,468
Hutchinson*	1051	331	360	691
Hyde*	115	93	11	104
Jackson*	97	83	7	90
Jerauld	179	57	61	118
Jones*	136	102	17	119
Kingsbury	515	229	143	372
Lake	1001	329	336	665
Lawrence	1408	1,246	81	1,327
Lincoln	8623	2,639	2,992	5,631
Lyman*	147	97	25	122
Marshall*	388	176	106	282
McCook	500	274	113	387
McPherson	48	16	16	32
Meade*	1119	831	144	975
Mellette*	12	8	2	10
Miner	184	128	28	156
Minnehaha	23410	8,176	7,617	15,793
Moody*	409	165	122	287
Oglala Lakota*	34	24	5	29
Pennington*	8487	5,856	1,315	7,171
Perkins*	98	64	17	81
Potter	161	109	26	135
Roberts*	837	725	56	781
Sanborn	232	136	48	184
Spink	662	564	49	613
Stanley*	279	125	77	202
Sully	64	30	17	47
Todd*	36	28	4	32
Tripp*	544	358	93	451
Turner	1034	520	257	777
Union	474	262	106	368
Walworth*	575	353	111	464
Yankton	2910	924	993	1,917
Ziebach*	17	17	0	17
Other	2263	949	657	1,606

Groton Daily Independent



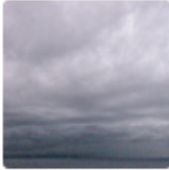


Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 22 of 95

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




Groton Daily Independent


Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 23 of 95


Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Cloudy	Cloudy	Chance Snow
High: 25 °F	Low: 15 °F	High: 30 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 32 °F




Variable Cloudiness Today

Thursday, Jan 28th
 HI: 20 to 38°
 LO: 12 to 19°


Friday
 HI: 26 to 39°
 LO: 19 to 24°


Saturday
 HI: 29 to 34°
 LO: 15 to 21°


Sunday
 HI: 26 to 44°
 LO: 6 to 20°


www.weather.gov/abr
 Updated: 1/28/2021 4:56 AM Central

Variable cloudiness is expected across the area today with a warmer airmass moving in. There could be some areas of fog tonight into Friday morning. Light snow is possible across northeastern SD and west central MN on Saturday.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 24 of 95

Today in Weather History

January 28, 1983: Freezing rain coated much of eastern South Dakota with up to a half-inch accumulation before it changed over to light snow from the late evening of the 28th to the late evening of the 29th. The combination of ice, light snow, and powerful winds made travel extremely difficult. Numerous accidents and stranded vehicles resulted. Visibilities were near zero at times.

January 28, 1996: Extreme wind chills developed across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota as cold arctic air moved in behind an area of low pressure. With temperatures falling well below zero and northwest winds increasing to 20 to 35 mph, wind chills were lowered to 40 to 70 below throughout the night of the 28th and into the evening of the 29th. Two to five inches of snow had fallen across the area. The strong northwest winds caused areas of blowing snow, significantly reducing visibilities. Big Stone and Traverse counties experienced a blizzard for about six hours on the 29th.

January 28, 2013: A low-pressure system moving slowly across the region produced a moderate to heavy band of snow across much of central and northeastern South Dakota. Snowfall rates exceeded than one inch per hour in some locations. Several area schools and businesses were either closed or opened late on the 29th.

1887: Snowflakes "as large as milk pans" fell at Fort Keogh of Montana. The flakes, which were said to measure 15 inches across and 8 inches thick, hold the unofficial size record!

1986: The Space Shuttle Challenger exploded at 11:39 am EST; 73 seconds after liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, on a frigid morning. Starting in the 20s, the ground temperature at takeoff was 36 degrees. Morton Thiokol recommended not launching if the liftoff temperature was below 53 degrees. The cold was blamed for causing the O-rings on the Shuttle's external booster to fail, leading to the explosion.

1922 - The "Knickerbocker" storm immobilized the city of Washington D.C. The storm produced 28 inches of snow in 32 hours, and the heavy snow caused the roof of the Knickerbocker movie theatre to collapse killing 96 persons. (David Ludlum)

1963 - The low of -34 degrees at Cynthiana, KY, equalled the state record established just four days earlier at Bonnieville. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm moving out of the Central Rockies into the Northern Plains Region produced up to a foot of snow in the Colorado Rockies, and wind gusts to 99 mph at Boulder CO. High winds in Colorado caused 5.6 million dollars damage. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Barometric pressure readings of 30.55 inches at Miami FL, 30.66 inches at Tampa FL, and 30.72 inches at Apalachicola FL were all-time record high readings for those locations. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Nome, AK, reported an all-time record low reading of 54 degrees below zero, and the temperature at Fairwell AK dipped to 69 degrees below zero. Deadhorse AK reported a morning low of 49 degrees below zero, and with a wind chill reading of 114 degrees below zero. In the Lower Forty-eight States, a winter storm over Colorado produced up to 15 inches of snow around Denver. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Strong and gusty winds prevailed across the northwestern U.S., and heavy snow continued over the mountains of Washington State and Oregon. In Idaho, Mullan received seven inches of snow, and winds gusted to 65 mph southeast of Burley. Heavy rain soaked coastal sections of western Oregon. Rainfall totals of 1.20 inches at Portland and 1.57 inches at Eugene were records for the date. Winds in Oregon gusting to 60 mph downed power lines in Umatilla County knocking out power to more than 13,000 homes, just prior to the kick-off of the "Super Bowl" game. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

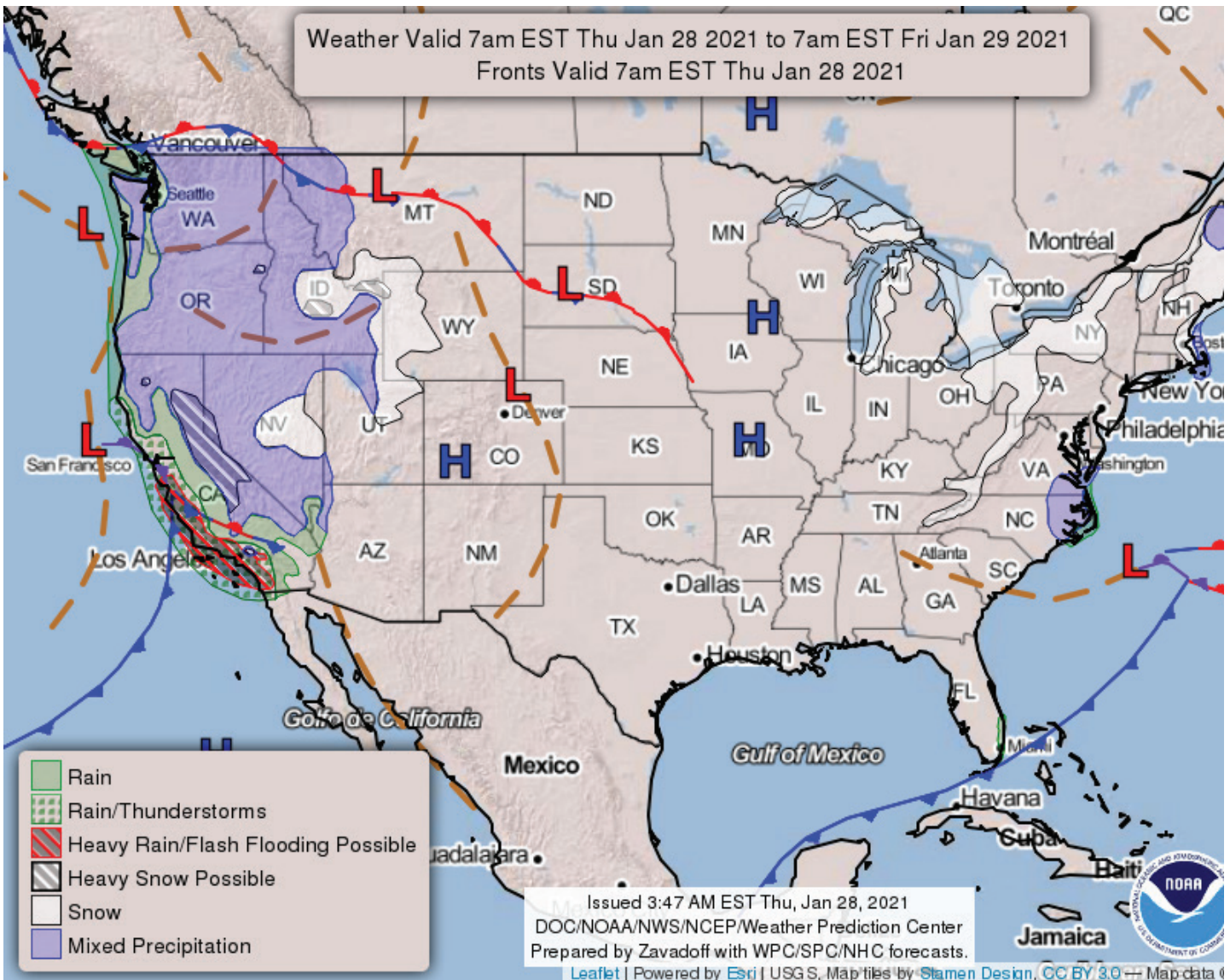
Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 25 of 95

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 20.6 °F
Low Temp: 3.6 °F
Wind: 13 mph
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 58° in 1931, 1908
Record Low: -31° in 1915, 1902
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.42
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.14
Average Precip to date: 0.42
Precip Year to Date: 0.14
Sunset Tonight: 5:35 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:58 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 26 of 95



HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST

We are all grateful for our "first responders." They save lives, bind wounds, bring food, give clothing, provide shelter, and restore power. They have become our "rescuers." And, they certainly fulfill a critical, essential role.

But as Christians, when we face a time of trial or tragedy, we have One who has been waiting for us to call upon Him when we need help. He is always waiting for an opportunity to prove His power whenever we face a difficult situation.

One morning, about four o'clock, Peter was in serious trouble. He and a few of his friends were in a small boat far from shore when a fierce storm arose out of nowhere. Fearing for their lives they became even more frightened when they saw what they thought was a ghost. They screamed in horror. And over the howling wind came a stern voice that said, "Stop being afraid." It was Jesus assuring them that there was no reason for them to fear for their lives because He was there to save them when they needed Him the most.

"If it is you," said Peter, "tell me to come to You – let me walk on the water!" "Certainly," said Jesus, "come on. You've nothing to fear!" He got out of the boat, felt the wind on his face and the waves beneath his feet but then lost his faith, and began to sink. He shouted, "Save me, Lord," and He did.

It is never the eloquence of our words or length of our prayer that counts, but our simplicity and sincerity. It is never a formula but our faith. He will always come to our rescue if we call on Him in a faith that believes in Him.

Prayer: Lord, we do indeed believe in Your power and Your promises. Yet, when it counts most, we doubt. Increase our faith whenever we doubt. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. Psalm 12:1

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 27 of 95

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

03-04-17-24-28

(three, four, seventeen, twenty-four, twenty-eight)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

01-10-36-37-38, Star Ball: 5, ASB: 2

(one, ten, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight; Star Ball: five; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.7 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$25 million

Powerball

17-33-35-42-52, Powerball: 9, Power Play: 3

(seventeen, thirty-three, thirty-five, forty-two, fifty-two; Powerball: nine; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Wednesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Marty Indian 82, Omaha Nation, Neb. 55

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Marty Indian 67, Omaha Nation, Neb. 35

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

South Dakota judge hears arguments on marijuana amendment

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota judge in Pierre heard nearly three hours of arguments from attorneys on Wednesday in a lawsuit that will ultimately decide the fate of an amendment to the state constitution legalizing recreational marijuana, medical marijuana and hemp.

Voters approved the amendment in November with 54% of the vote. But two law enforcement officers, Highway Patrol Superintendent Col. Rick Miller and Pennington County Sheriff Kevin Thom, have tried to halt the state from legalizing pot by challenging its constitutionality. A lawyer representing Miller made it clear the head of the highway patrol was acting at the behest of Gov. Kristi Noem, who opposed the marijuana legalization measure.

Lisa Postrollo, the lawyer representing Miller, argued the amendment creates an "unprecedented problem" for the state's constitution by giving the Department of Revenue the power to tax and regulate marijuana, elevating the Department of Revenue to a fourth branch of government.

Lawyers for the law enforcement officers also argued the amendment violated a rule that constitutional amendments must only address one subject and should have been treated as a wide-sweeping revision to the constitution, which requires a convention to finalize changes before it is presented to voters.

But lawyers defending the amendment said that designating authority to a state agency is something that happens all the time and cast the lawsuit as an effort to overturn the results of a fair election. They

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 28 of 95

argued that the public's ability to enact laws is a foundational aspect of South Dakota law, which would be spurned if the courts overturn the amendment.

"The people spoke. The people won," said Brendan Johnson, an attorney for the groups supporting marijuana. "You can't now reverse it because there are people in Pierre who disagree with the decision made."

Both lawyers for the attorney general and marijuana groups said the amendment addresses the single subject of cannabis.

Klinger, who was appointed as a circuit court judge by Noem in 2019, asked lawyers one question throughout the proceedings — why cannabis was not included in the title of the amendment that appeared on ballots.

The judge said she would issue a written ruling, but did not give an expected timeline. The lawsuit is expected to ultimately be decided by the state Supreme Court, but the amendment is set to take effect July 1.

State lawmakers, meeting several blocks away from the courthouse, are closely watching the court proceedings as they prepare for the potential of pot legalization. Several bills to address the issue have already been filed, covering prohibitions on smoking in vehicles, allotting \$4 million to implement the program, as well as a handful of empty bills that may have language added later in the legislative session.

South Dakota awaits weekly bump of 1,700 virus vaccine doses

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials said Wednesday they expect to receive more doses of COVID-19 vaccine in the coming weeks, after President Biden's pledge to deliver more medicine to states.

The state should start to receive an additional 1,700 doses, which would up the weekly number of doses to about 12,800, state Department of Health secretary Kim Malsam-Rysdon said.

State epidemiologist Joshua Clayton said 117,725 vaccine doses have been sent to the state so far, including everything that was "just recently received."

The latest figures show that about 82,000 doses had been administered and just over 60,000 people had received at least one dose. About 24,000 people have received both shots, officials said.

Health officials on Wednesday reported 34 new deaths due to the coronavirus, following back-to-back days of zero fatalities. There have been 1,739 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

The update showed 230 positive virus tests in the last day, increasing the total number of cases of 107,608. Hospitalizations, which fell by nine on Tuesday, were back up nine on Wednesday, to 161.

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.

Judge: Corps must decide next move on Dakota Access pipeline

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must outline its plans for the Dakota Access oil pipeline after an appeals court confirmed the line is operating without a key permit, a federal judge said Wednesday.

U.S. District Judge James Boasberg has set a status hearing for Feb. 10 to discuss the impact of Tuesday's opinion by the D.C. Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals that upheld Boasberg's ruling ordering the Corps to conduct a full environmental impact review. Opponents of the pipeline want it shut down immediately.

Boasberg said in his one-sentence order that the Corps needs to show how it "expects to proceed" without a federal permit granting easement for the \$3.8 billion, 1,172-mile (1,886 kilometer) pipeline to cross beneath Lake Oahe, a reservoir along the Missouri River, which is maintained by the Corps.

The location of the crossing is just north of the the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation that straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota border. The tribe, which draws its water from the river, says it fears pollution. Texas-based pipeline owner Energy Transfer maintains that it is safe.

Boasberg said in an April 2020 order that the Corps has not adequately considered how an oil spill under

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 29 of 95

the Missouri River might affect Standing Rock's fishing and hunting rights, or whether it might disproportionately affect the tribal community.

Bill would disclose Noem's security costs for Trump travel

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A House bill endorsed by both parties seeks to disclose the security costs for Gov. Kristi Noem's travel on behalf of former President Donald Trump's campaign last year.

Requests for the information by The Associated Press and other media outlets have been rejected with officials citing security concerns.

Republican Rep. Taffy Howard says the proposed legislation would not only require future costs to be disclosed, but would be applied retroactively to Noem's security costs during her travel across the country on behalf of Trump and other Republicans.

Howard says the governor's office has told her the Trump campaign covered Noem's travel costs, but officials would not disclose the cost of security provided by the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

"This should be disclosed to every citizen," Howard told the Rapid City Journal Tuesday. "We've asked several times and keep getting stonewalled. Taxpayers have a right to know. This governor wants to be the most transparent administration, and this bill is all about transparency."

Noem's deputy general counsel, Katie Hruska, has said she can't provide the cost of Noem's security detail, citing a law that says "public safety information that would create a substantial likelihood of endangering public safety or property, if disclosed" can't be shared.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Rapid City Journal. January 21, 2021.
Editorial: HB 1050 needs to pass

House Bill 1050 gets its first hearing in the House Local Government Committee on Thursday morning. This bill needs to pass to help hold local governments accountable and maintain as much transparency as possible.

The South Dakota Newspaper Association is working with all 120 legal newspapers in the state to create and maintain a website where all legal notices in the state may be found. House Bill 1050 helps make that happen.

Local governments would like to stop printing legal notices and simply place these public notices on their own websites. A fox would also like to guard your hen house.

Without printed notices in legal newspapers or on this independent, third-party website, governmental bodies could place and edit these notices however they choose. The printed record is hard-copy proof that a notice ran. Once it is on newsprint, it can't be erased, edited or manipulated in any way. Using an independent third party for publication is a guarantee to citizens that the information was provided and published as required - both in print and on the new website HB 1050 would help create.

The arguments from lobbyists who want to remove the protection of printed notices from the public is that prices will dramatically increase. That's just not true. Written into the bill is the initial price increase between 3 and 5% and the annual increase in prices is held under 2% by that same statute.

That increase helps cover the cost of maintaining a statewide public notice website in addition to the printed notices. That new website will be managed and maintained by the South Dakota Newspaper Association. If governmental bodies want to publish on their own websites in addition to printed notices and the SDNA website, that would be a great addition to the access citizens have to important information.

The fact is everyone in the state doesn't have access to the internet. Even some who do have access don't have the skills to find legal notices buried in a governmental website. A searchable statewide website with all notices would make that process easier. Obviously, everyone can find a printed copy of a newspaper and it takes no time to find public notices once that purchase is made.

Make sure your lawmakers aren't fooled by lobbyists who distort the facts. House Bill 1050 maintains

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 30 of 95

independent control of public notices while increasing access by creating a statewide website where those notices can be found.

Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan. January 18, 2021.

Editorial: Civic Education: What Really Makes Us Unique

Among all the extraordinary things South Dakotans had on their radar heading into 2021, few of us probably would have guessed that a debate over civic education would show up less than two weeks into the New Year.

But show up it did in Gov. Kristi Noem's State of the State address last week. She proposed a \$900,000 program to revamp South Dakota's civic curriculum, in part because, as she explained in an op-ed piece that appears on this page today, poor civic education was a "root cause" in the Capitol insurrection of Jan. 6. This apparently suggests that, if Americans had access to better educational training in history and government, people like the head-dress guy, the Confederate flag guy, the zip-tie guy and all the others we saw sacking the Capitol would have instead stayed home with a better understanding of how our government really works. Well ... OK.

But the idea of instructing students in why America is "the most unique nation in the history of the world," as she put it, didn't materialize out of nowhere.

The day after the insurrection, Noem spoke at a Republican national meeting in Florida (her speech was also reprinted in *The Federalist*) in which she complained that "the left's indoctrination takes place (in schools) every day with kids all across America. ..." (Looking at the voter registration numbers and election trends in South Dakota, if teachers have been engaged in left-wing indoctrinating, they've done a terrible job.)

It also sprang from the so-called 1776 Commission that President Donald Trump proposed last year that would offer "patriotic education" because, as one Trump advisor put it, "many of our students are now taught in schools to hate their own country."

Today, a lot of South Dakota educators are skeptical of Noem's proposal, and rightfully so.

First, let's acknowledge that the general idea of boosting civic education isn't a bad one. South Dakota State University professor David Wiltse told the *Rapid City Journal* there are "serious issues with civic education" and that he sees "large holes" in school curricula on topics of history and the governmental process. So, an upgrade could be in order.

However, he said he would "caution policy makers in making an ideological response to a problem that isn't rooted in ideology."

Noem's framing of this issue in her Florida speech, which was no doubt geared to boost her future political aspirations, seems to do precisely that.

There is the danger, for instance, of whitewashing (perhaps literally) our history and taking out things that might be deemed as contrary to our "most unique" image. Slavery jumps to mind, as do the Jim Crow laws and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. In South Dakota, the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee and Native American land rights (or the lack thereof) might also fall in this category. So, for instance, does Wounded Knee go back to being cast as a "battle," as it was once taught to many generations of South Dakota students?

We can all agree that America is one of the "most unique" countries in the world — but here's why.

We're a nation that has long grappled with our own flaws and mistakes. We have not purged critical analyses of our past, for such self-assessments can serve us as we move forward. America doesn't simply self-correct; instead, we strive mightily to right its flaws and resolve its issues. That's how this nation evolves and thrives in the ages to come.

So, that kind of serious, blunt introspection is needed after the Jan. 6 insurrection debacle.

It's needed as we prepare kids today to deal with the world tomorrow.

It's needed to make America even stronger and better for everyone.

And to do that, we must understand it and have it presented in honest terms.

That must be the priority in any re-examination of our civic curriculum, for that's how this nation remains a special place.

Pakistani court: Release man accused in Daniel Pearl's death

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered the release Thursday of a Pakistani-British man convicted and later acquitted in the beheading of American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002.

The court also dismissed an appeal of Ahmad Saeed Omar Sheikh's acquittal by Pearl's family and the Pakistani government. It wasn't immediately clear when Sheikh would be freed; the government of the Sindh province where he is being held has previously refused to honor such release orders.

"The Pearl family is in complete shock by the majority decision of the Supreme Court of Pakistan to acquit and release Ahmed Omer Sheikh and the other accused persons who kidnapped and killed Daniel Pearl," the Pearl family said in a statement released by their lawyer, Faisal Siddiqi.

The brutality of the Wall Street Journal reporter's killing shocked many in 2002, years before the Islamic State group regularly began releasing videos of their beheadings of journalists. An autopsy report told of the gruesome details of Pearl's killing and dismemberment.

Sheikh was convicted of helping lure Pearl to a meeting in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi, during which he was kidnapped. Pearl had been investigating the link between Pakistani militants and Richard C. Reid, dubbed the "shoe bomber" after his attempt to blow up a flight from Paris to Miami with explosives hidden in his shoes.

Pearl's body was discovered in a shallow grave soon after a gruesome video of his beheading was delivered to the U.S. consulate in Karachi.

Sheikh long denied any involvement in Pearl's death, but the Supreme Court on Wednesday heard that he acknowledged writing a letter in 2019 admitting a minor role — raising hopes for some that he might remain behind bars.

Sheikh has been on death row since his conviction in Pearl's death. He is currently being held in a Karachi jail, but a three-judge Supreme Court ruled 2 to 1 to uphold Sheikh's acquittal and ordered him released, said Siddiqi.

A lawyer for Sheikh said the court also ordered the release of three other Pakistanis who had been sentenced to life in prison for their part in Pearl's kidnapping and death.

"These people should not have been in prison even for one day," Mehmood A. Sheikh, who is not related to his client, said.

He warned the government of southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital, against delaying their release, as it has done in the past with his client, even after being slapped with a contempt charge.

"I expect the Sindh government will not make a mockery of justice by continuing ... to not release them for no good reason whatsoever," he said.

Washington previously said it would seek Sheikh's extradition to the United States to be tried there, if the acquittal was upheld. It's not clear whether Pakistan would support his extradition or even under what grounds it could go ahead.

The case seems certain to test the new Biden administration's skill in dealing with Pakistan, considered a key ally in getting peace in neighboring Afghanistan. There was no immediate reaction from the U.S. Embassy to the court order upholding the appeal.

The Pearl family urged both the U.S. and Pakistani governments to take action to "correct this injustice."

"Today's decision is a complete travesty of justice and the release of these killers puts in danger journalists everywhere and the people of Pakistan," the family's statement said.

Siddiqi, the Pearl family lawyer, said the only legal avenue available now is to ask for a review of the court's decision to uphold Sheikh's acquittal. However, he said the review would be conducted by the same court that made that decision. "In practical terms," that means the case is closed in Pakistan, he said.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court heard Sheikh admit to a minor role in Pearl's kidnapping — a dramatic turn of events after he had denied any involvement for 18 years. Siddiqi, the Pearl family lawyer, had expected it would advance his case.

Still, Siddiqi had previously said winning was an uphill battle because the prosecutor in the original case tried four men — including Sheikh — together, with the same charges against all even though each played a different role.

All four were acquitted in April by the Sindh High Court on the grounds that the initial prosecution's evidence was insufficient. During the appeal of that acquittal, Siddiqi tried to convince the Supreme Court of Sheikh's guilt on at least one of the three charges he faced, specifically the kidnapping charge, which also carries the death penalty in Pakistan.

The court is expected to release a detailed explanation for Thursday's decision in the coming days.

The Latest: Israel extends virus shots to those 35 and older

By The Associated Press undefined

JERUSALEM — Israel on Thursday said it was extending coronavirus vaccinations to adults age 35 and older, an expansion of its world-leading drive to vanquish COVID-19.

Health Ministry Director General Hezi Levy said shots would be available to the new age group starting Friday.

The change reflects Israel's aggressive drive to inoculate its entire population by the spring and the country is on track to do so. More than a quarter of Israel's 9.3 million people have been vaccinated so far.

But Israel also is home to one of the developing world's highest rate of infections, driven by ultra-Orthodox towns that are flouting safety rules and clashing with police trying to enforce them. Some 8,000 new cases are detected each day.

The country is in its third lockdown to contain the virus' spread. This week it tightened the closures by shuttering its international airport to nearly all flights.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

— EU sends experts to inspect vaccine plant in Belgium amid public dispute with AstraZeneca over production of vaccine doses

— 'Take every shift as it comes:' No respite for UK hospital workers facing record number of patients

— WHO team in Wuhan departs quarantine for COVID origins study

— EXPLAINER: Why it's hard to make vaccines and boost supplies

— The \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package tests strength of Biden's new administration and Democratic control of Congress

— Pandemic brings drama on and off screen at the Sundance film festival

Follow all of AP's pandemic 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 — Belgian health authorities announced Thursday they have inspected a pharmaceutical factory in Belgium to find out whether expected delays in the deliveries of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine are due to production issues.

The European Commission had asked the Belgian government to inspect the factory amid a heated public dispute between the 27-nation bloc and the Anglo-Swedish drugmaker. EU officials are under tremendous political pressures because the bloc's vaccine rollout has been much slower than that of Israel or Britain.

The Novasep's factory in the town of Seneffe is part of the European production chain for the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine.

AstraZeneca said last week that it planned to cut initial deliveries in the EU to 31 million doses from the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 33 of 95

80 million it had planned due to reduced yields from its manufacturing plants in Europe. The EU claimed Wednesday that it will receive even less than that.

Stella Kyriakides, the European Commissioner for health and food safety, said AstraZeneca should provide vaccines from its U.K. facilities if it is unable to meet commitments from factories in the EU.

WASHINGTON — More than a 100 economists and policymakers are signing a letter in support of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion economic rescue and coronavirus relief package.

The letter provided exclusively to The Associated Press says the \$900 billion approved in December before Biden took office was "too little and too late to address the enormity of the deteriorating situation" as employers shed workers in December, retail sales have slumped and COVID-19 deaths kept rising.

Among the 124 people signing the letter are: Gene Sperling, former director of the National Economic Council; Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, and former Federal Reserve vice chairman Alan Blinder. All three have previously worked in Democratic administrations.

The letter describes the Biden proposal as "robust," saying Congress should put aside partisanship to meet the scale of the crisis.

MADRID — Official statistics in Spain show that the coronavirus pandemic destroyed 622,600 jobs in 2020, pushing the jobless rate to 16.1% of the working population.

That was a 2.3% increase from the previous year, the highest since 2012, when Spain suffered the worst effects of the financial crisis.

Thursday's INE figures showed that despite a better-than-expected performance in the last three months of 2020, the year ended with 3.7 million jobless people and 19.3 million employed, including some 600,000 furloughed workers whose salaries are paid by the state while their business remain closed or affected by the pandemic.

Spain's left-wing ruling coalition this week extended the jobs furlough system until the end of May.

Another worrying piece of the data was that the number of households with all members unemployed shot up from 183,900 to nearly 1.2 million in 2020, although over one third are households with one member.

PARIS — At least two dozen French police officials are facing internal punishment for holding a party inside a police station where they were filmed dancing the Macarena and violating multiple virus protection rules.

A police headquarters spokesperson said Thursday that those involved in the party in the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers were ordered to file reports on their actions and that "sanctions are planned."

In a video of the event posted by online media Loopsider, several people are seen dancing closely together without masks in a crowded room.

The video prompted criticism at a time when French police are out every night enforcing a 6 p.m.-6 a.m. virus curfew, and are under scrutiny for abuses during violent protests and identity checks.

BERLIN — Germany's interior minister says the country is planning to implement a ban on travel from so-called "mutation areas" where variants of the coronavirus that spread more rapidly have been detected.

Horst Seehofer told reporters Thursday that the government hoped to decide by Friday on restrictions on travel from Portugal, Britain, South Africa, Brazil and possibly other areas in the coming weeks.

He suggested there could be exceptions made for the flow of goods, but said exceptions for things like tourism were out of the question.

The country's disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, would determine which countries should be determined "mutation areas," Seehofer said. He refused to speculate on how long the restrictions could be kept in place.

Seehofer added that Germany was in talks in Brussels with other countries about Europe-wide travel restrictions, but that the ban being considered would be a national decision.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 34 of 95

AMSTERDAM — The crippling economic effects of the coronavirus lockdown have forced Amsterdam's zoo to move its three lions to France.

Artis zoo announced Thursday that the two lionesses and a male lion will be moved next month to a zoo in France because plans to build them a bigger enclosure in Amsterdam have been shelved due to a lack of funds.

The zoo's director, Rembrandt Sutorius, says it was a difficult decision, "because the lions are part of the identity of Artis."

Ticket sales at the zoo in a leafy Amsterdam neighborhood plummeted by 63% in 2020 amid government lockdowns to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Feeding the animals and maintaining the zoo's buildings costs 60,000 euros (\$73,000) per day.

The zoo launched a national appeal for donations Thursday to help it weather the financial storm.

BERLIN — Germany's health minister says there are at least "10 hard weeks" ahead amid difficulties in getting large quantities of vaccines.

Health Minister Jens Spahn, who faces political pressure over the slow start to Germany's vaccination campaign, wrote on Twitter Thursday that Chancellor Angela Merkel and the country's 16 state governors should hold a special meeting to discuss vaccine strategy.

Spahn said vaccine manufacturers also should be invited to "explain how complex production is." He stressed that "the quality must be very good" in order to protect people.

Spahn wrote that "we will go through at least another 10 hard weeks with the scarcity of vaccine."

Germany's current lockdown, its second, was extended until Feb. 14. New infections are falling, but officials are worried about the impact of coronavirus variants such as the one first detected in Britain.

Some 1.67 million people in Germany have received the first dose of the vaccine.

BERLIN — Countries with the least corruption have been best positioned to weather the health and economic challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a closely-watched annual study released Thursday by an anti-graft organization.

Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures the perception of public sector corruption according to experts and businesspeople, concluded that countries that performed well invested more in health care, were "better able to provide universal health coverage and are less likely to violate democratic norms."

"COVID-19 is not just a health and economic crisis," said Transparency head Delia Ferreira Rubio. "It is a corruption crisis - and one that we are currently failing to manage."

This year's index showed the United States hitting a new low amid a steady decline under the presidency of Donald Trump, with a score of 67 on a scale where 0 is "highly corrupt" and 100 is "very clean."

NAIROBI, Kenya — The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says another 400 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been secured for the continent through the Serum Institute of India.

Africa CDC Director John Nkengasong told reporters that with the new doses, on top of the 270 million doses announced earlier, "I think we're beginning to make very good progress."

As with many vaccine deals, there are no immediate details on cost or how much people might pay per dose.

Parts of the African continent are now seeing a strong second surge in coronavirus infections, which Nkengasong calls "very aggressive now." He warned the wave has not yet peaked.

The continent of 1.3 billion people is racing to obtain enough vaccines for the goal of vaccinating 60% of its population to achieve herd immunity, and officials have repeatedly urged rich countries that have stockpiled vaccine doses to take an equitable approach and share.

Africa has more than 3.4 million confirmed virus cases including more than 87,000 deaths.

HANOI, Vietnam — Vietnam reported 82 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, hours after confirming the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 35 of 95

first two infections in nearly two months.

Seventy-two of the cases came from an electronic company in Hai Duong province, where a 34-year-old female employee tested positive after her colleague was found to carry the virus from Osaka, Japan, several days earlier, the Health Ministry said.

It said the woman tested in Japan carried the more contagious U.K. variant.

The company with over 2,200 workers was closed for disinfection and the provincial authority locked down surrounding communities to curb the outbreak. The ministry said over 3,000 people in the area will be tested.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Quang Ninh province, 10 people tested positive after a man working at Van Don International Airport was infected.

ISLAMABAD — Pakistani authorities are planning to start the country's COVID-19 vaccination campaign next week.

Asad Umar, the minister in charge of Pakistan's virus response, said frontline health workers will be the initial recipients.

Umar did not say which vaccine will be used, but the announcement comes days after Beijing promised to give Pakistan 500,000 doses of a Chinese vaccine before Jan. 31. It was expected to get the vaccine made by the Chinese firm SinoPharm.

Pakistan is negotiating with different vaccine manufacturers to get enough doses to protect its population.

Pakistan also Thursday reported another 64 deaths from COVID-19, increasing its total fatalities to 11,514.

BEIJING — Efforts to dissuade Chinese from traveling for the Lunar New Year appeared to be working as Beijing's main train station was largely quiet and estimates of passenger totals were smaller than in past years.

Thursday started the roughly two-week travel rush ahead of the holiday that falls this year on Feb. 12.

At the Beijing train station, only about a third of the security gates were open, ticket windows had no lines and no passengers were camped on the central plaza. Authorities have offered free refunds on plane tickets and extra pay for workers who stay put. People who do travel must have a negative coronavirus test and may still face local quarantines.

Authorities' failure to restrict Lunar New Year travel last year was blamed for fueling the spread of the virus, especially since Wuhan, the city where the illness was first detected, is a key travel hub.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Travelers returning to New Zealand will face stricter rules at quarantine hotels as health authorities investigate how up to three people got infected with the coronavirus while isolating at Auckland's Pullman Hotel.

The people were released before testing positive and were potentially contagious, but so far testing has shown no evidence the virus has spread in the community. Health authorities believe they caught the virus from another quarantined traveler. New Zealand has managed to stamp out community transmission of the virus.

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said Thursday that as an interim measure, travelers need to stay in their hotel rooms for the final days of their 14-day mandatory quarantine, and would also face stricter controls around leaving their rooms at other times.

Meanwhile, Australia has extended its suspension on quarantine-free travel from New Zealand for another three days. Australia is requiring New Zealanders to quarantine for 14 days in hotels upon arrival.

BOGOTA, Colombia — Colombia will ban flights from Brazil effective Friday over concerns of a variant of the coronavirus that is circulating in that country.

Colombia President Ivan Duque on Wednesday announced the 30-day measure. No flights will take off from Colombia to Brazil either.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 36 of 95

In addition, anyone who arrived from Brazil to Colombia between Jan. 18 and Wednesday will have to quarantine for 14 days.

The Brazil variant was first identified in four travelers who were tested at an airport outside Tokyo. It contains mutations that may affect its ability to be recognized by antibodies, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The emergence of variants is linked to ongoing surges since infections give viruses the chance to mutate and spread. It's another reason experts stress the importance of mask wearing and social distancing.

Colombia has recorded more than 2 million cases and over 52,100 deaths of COVID-19.

TORONTO — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says the head of the European Commission has reassured him that any vaccine export controls the EU enacts won't impact shipments of Canada's doses from Europe.

Trudeau says commission President Ursula von der Leyen told him that transparency measures taken by the EU will not affect Canada's Pfizer and Moderna vaccine deliveries from Europe.

The EU has threatened to impose export controls on vaccines produced within its borders, and warned pharmaceutical companies that have developed coronavirus vaccines with EU aid that it must get its shots on schedule. All of Canada's Pfizer and Moderna vaccines come from Europe.

Canada isn't getting any deliveries of the Pfizer vaccine made in Europe this week due to an upgrade at a Pfizer plant in Belgium. Shipments are set to resume next week.

WHO team in Wuhan departs quarantine for COVID origins study

By EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA Associated Press

WUHAN, China (AP) — A World Health Organization team emerged from quarantine in the Chinese city of Wuhan on Thursday to start field work in a fact-finding mission on the origins of the virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researchers, who were required to isolate for 14 days after arriving in China, left their quarantine hotel with their luggage — including at least four yoga mats — in the midafternoon and headed to another hotel.

The mission has become politically charged, as China seeks to avoid blame for alleged missteps in its early response to the outbreak. A major question is where the Chinese side will allow the researchers to go and whom they will be able to talk to.

Yellow barriers blocked the entrance to the hotel, keeping the media at a distance. Before the researchers boarded their bus, workers wearing protective outfits and face shields could be seen loading their luggage, including two musical instruments and a dumbbell.

Hotel staff waved goodbye to the researchers, who were wearing face masks. The bus driver wore a full-body white protective suit. They drove about 30 minutes to a lakeside Hilton resort-like hotel.

Former WHO official Keiji Fukuda, who is not part of the team in Wuhan, has cautioned against expecting any breakthroughs, saying it may take years before any firm conclusions can be made about the virus's origin.

"This is now well over a year past when it all started," he said earlier this month. "So much of the physical evidence is going to be gone. The memories of people are imprecise and probably the physical layouts of many places are going to be different than they were."

Among the places they might visit are the Huanan Seafood Market, which was linked to many of the first cases, as well as research institutes and hospitals that treated patients at the height of the outbreak.

It hasn't been disclosed whether they will leave Wuhan. One possible source of the virus is bats in caves in rural Yunnan province, about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) southwest of Wuhan.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said the experts would have talks, visits and inspections in China to carry out virus-tracing exchanges and cooperation. He did not provide any details.

The mission only came about after considerable wrangling between the two sides that led to a rare complaint from the WHO that China was taking too long to make the final arrangements.

China, which has strongly opposed an independent investigation it could not fully control, said the matter was complicated and that Chinese medical staff were preoccupied with new virus clusters in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities.

While the WHO was criticized early on, especially by the U.S., for not being critical enough of the Chinese response, it recently accused China and other countries of moving too slowly at the start of the outbreak, drawing a rare admission from the Chinese side that it could have done better.

Overall, though, China has staunchly defended its response, possibly out of concern over the reputational or even financial costs if it were found lacking.

Chinese officials and state media have also tried to cast doubt on whether the virus even started in China. Most experts believe it came from bats, possibly in southwest China or neighboring areas of Southeast Asia, before being passed to another animal and then to humans.

The origins search will try to determine where and exactly how that happened.

White House Press Secretary Zen Psaki expressed concern Wednesday about what she called "misinformation" coming out of China, adding that the U.S. supports a robust international investigation.

"It's imperative that we get to the bottom of the early days of the pandemic in China," she said.

Zhao responded that any negative speculation and politicized interpretation of the mission is inappropriate.

"We hope the U.S. can work with the Chinese side in a responsible manner, respect facts and science, and respect the hard work of the international expert team in tracing the origin of the virus," he said, "so that they can conduct scientific research on the virus tracing without any political interference."

Associated Press photographer Ng Han Guan contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: How experts will hunt for COVID origins in China

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — After a two-week quarantine, the real work can begin. Maybe.

A World Health Organization team of researchers emerged from their hotel Thursday for the first time since their arrival in the central Chinese city of Wuhan to start searching for clues into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The visit has been shrouded in secrecy: Details of their itinerary have not been released, and it's unknown how much access China will give the researchers to the sites they want to visit and the people they want to talk to.

WHY IS THE TEAM IN CHINA?

Scientists hope that information on the earliest known cases of the new coronavirus — which was first identified in Wuhan — will help them better understand where it came from and prevent similar pandemics in the future.

Researchers around the world are eager for access to samples taken from the Huanan Seafood Market, which had an early outbreak, and Wuhan hospital records.

The team may visit the market itself as well as the locations of other early cases.

It could also go to a laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology that was built after the 2003 SARS pandemic and maintains an extensive archive of genetic sequences of bat coronaviruses. U.S. officials in the previous Trump administration suggested without offering evidence that the virus could have escaped from the institute.

Experts say it's unlikely that the new coronavirus emerged from the lab in Wuhan and overwhelmingly say analysis of the new coronavirus's genome rules out the possibility that it was engineered by humans.

The researchers might also visit the hospitals that were overwhelmed at the height of the pandemic in China and the local branch of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

The seafood market and other places where early cases emerged remain important because the virus is constantly changing, as the new strain found in the United Kingdom shows.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 38 of 95

WHAT DO RESEARCHERS HOPE TO LEARN?

Wuhan is where COVID-19 cases were first detected, but it is highly possible that the virus came to the industrial city of 11 million people from elsewhere.

Genetic sequencing shows that the coronavirus started in bats and likely jumped to another animal before infecting humans. The closest known relative of the virus can be found nearly 1000 miles (1,600 kilometers) southwest of Wuhan, near China's border with Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam — at a site The Associated Press was blocked from visiting.

People began falling ill in Wuhan in December 2019, and many had links to the seafood market. Scientists initially suspected the virus came from wild animals sold at the market, prompting China to crackdown on the wildlife trade.

But the subsequent discovery of earlier cases challenged that theory. China's CDC said that samples taken from the market indicate it was likely a place where the virus spread, not where it started. The WHO team's ability to further our understanding of the virus — and its credibility — could hinge in part on getting access to those samples.

Studying the genes of the earliest known cases in Wuhan could provide clues to how it got from bats to people and whether it was through a mammal such as a bamboo rat or a civet.

WHAT OBSTACLES DOES THE TEAM FACE?

The big question is what China will allow the researchers see and do. The ruling Communist Party is concerned the research could shed light on its handling of the virus that could open it up to international criticism — and even demands for financial compensation if it is found to have been negligent.

China has stifled independent reports about the outbreak at home and published little information on its research into the origins of the virus. An AP investigation found that the government has strictly controlled all COVID-19-related research and forbids researchers from speaking to the media.

Another AP investigation found WHO officials privately complained that China had dragged its feet on sharing critical information about the outbreak, including the new virus's genetic sequence, even as the U.N. health agency publicly praised China for what it called a speedy response.

China, stung by complaints it allowed the disease to spread, has suggested the virus could have come from abroad. A government spokesperson has said the origins hunt will require work beyond China's borders, including in bat habitats in neighboring Southeast Asia. An expert on the WHO team has suggested the same thing, and this is a possibility researchers are exploring.

WHEN WILL WE KNOW THE ANSWERS?

The search for the origins of COVID-19 is likely to take years. It took more than a decade to find the origins of SARS, and the origins of Ebola, first identified in the 1970s, remain elusive. But knowing where the virus came from could help prevent future outbreaks of viruses from wild animals.

EXPLAINER: Executive orders can be swift but fleeting

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden arrived at the White House ready to wield his pen to dismantle Donald Trump's legacy and begin pushing his own priorities.

Presidents Trump and Barack Obama both relied on executive orders and other presidential directives to get some of their most controversial policies around a deadlocked Congress. But no president has come out of the gate as eager to use the authority as Biden.

A primer on how the presidential power works and its often fleeting impact:

EXECUTIVE ORDERS: THE BASICS

An executive order is a signed, written and published directive from the president that manages operations of the federal government.

Congress can't just pass legislation to overturn an order, but it can use legislative action — such as cutting

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 39 of 95

off funding — to gum up the president's intentions. A new president may overturn a predecessor's order by issuing another executive order effectively canceling it. Biden has done that repeatedly during his first days in office as he looks to chip away at Trump policies over a gamut of issues, including environmental regulations, immigration policies and the government response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Presidents going back to George Washington have issued thousands of directives to manage federal government business, according to data collected by the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Many are innocuous, such as giving federal employees the day after Christmas off. But executive orders — and their policy sausage-making siblings, the proclamation and political memorandum — can also be used by a president to push policy objectives that the leader can't get through Congress.

WINDING BACK THE CLOCK

Time is of the essence for Biden, who vowed as a candidate to act quickly to get the coronavirus pandemic under control and undo what he considers the damage done by Trump's policies.

Many of Biden's orders during his first days in office are directly related to the pandemic — a mask mandate on federal property, an executive order providing guidance on safely reopening schools and stopgaps intended to increase food aid and protect job seekers on unemployment because of the virus.

But Biden has also used executive action to try to wind the clock back more than four years to the Obama presidency.

For example, Biden issued an order reversing a Trump-era Pentagon policy that largely barred transgender people from serving in the military. Trump himself had issued an order reversing an Obama action that laid the groundwork for transgender people to serve openly.

Biden also signed a memorandum to preserve Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the Obama-era program that has shielded hundreds of thousands of people who came to the U.S. illegally as children from deportation since it was created in 2012 through an Obama directive. Trump issued his own executive order to undo DACA in 2017.

Other orders targeting foundational policies of the last administration include a Biden directive to reverse Trump's ban on travelers from several predominantly Muslim countries, executive action to rejoin the Paris climate accord and a proclamation stopping construction of his predecessor's border wall.

BOTH SIDES DO IT; BOTH SIDES COMPLAIN

To be sure, modern presidents from both parties have been heavy users of executive orders — and have been criticized by the opposition party. Bill Clinton had 364 orders over two terms, George W. Bush signed 291 over his eight years in office and Barack Obama issued 276. Trump in his one term signed 220 orders.

Not surprisingly, some Republicans have complained about Biden's early reliance on executive orders. Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee scoffed in a tweet, "@POTUS, you can't govern with a pen and a phone."

Democrats have, by and large, welcomed Biden's orders as a necessary salve to deal with some of Trump's most divisive policies. But the president has also faced substantive criticism from both the left and right about some of the early orders.

Republicans have complained that Biden is wasting taxpayer dollars by halting construction on the U.S. border wall since signed contracts related to construction will still have to be paid out. On the left, some racial justice and civil liberty groups were underwhelmed by a series of orders that Biden issued in what White House officials said was an opening effort to address equity and racial injustice.

Biden sold himself to voters as the antidote Washington needs: the deeply experienced statesman who could bring bipartisan comity to Washington. As his presidency plays out, an overreliance on executive orders could undercut that argument.

LIMITING A PRESIDENT'S ORDER

The courts and Congress can both check a president's power to govern by executive fiat.

Already, Biden saw his attempt to order a 100-day deportation moratorium hamstrung by a federal judge. U.S. District Judge Drew Tipton found the Biden administration had failed "to provide any concrete, reasonable justification" for a pause in deportations and ordered a restraining order blocking Biden's

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 40 of 95

order from going into effect.

President Harry Truman saw his attempt to seize steel production facilities in the midst of the Korean War thwarted by the U.S. Supreme Court, which found that the president lacked authority to seize private property without authorization from Congress.

Obama tried to use executive authority to fulfill his campaign pledge to close the U.S. military detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that over the years has held many high-profile international terror suspects. Congress stymied him by voting to block funding to pay for the transfer of prisoners from Guantanamo to the U.S., including for prosecution or medical care.

HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

The experiences of both Trump and Obama underscore the fleeting nature of executive orders.

Both Trump and Obama saw their most durable policy legacies come through congressional legislation — for Trump, the 2017 tax cuts, and for Obama, his signature Affordable Care Act.

Trump tried mightily but failed to push a Republican-controlled Congress to repeal “Obamacare.” He did, however, diminish a key aspect of the health care law when his own tax overhaul legislation reduced the penalty for not having insurance to \$0.

Now Trump is seeing many of his own orders, proclamations and memoranda shredded by Biden. And Biden could very well see many of his executive actions undone by whoever follows him into office.

Biden economic adviser Brian Deese acknowledged that some of the president’s executive actions — such as directives retooling government calculations on food assistance for Americans living in poverty and another extending moratoriums on evictions for Americans whose lives have been upended by the pandemic — were merely stopgaps as the president tries to win bipartisan support for a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package.

In the end, Deese said, the orders, while helpful, are pale substitutes for comprehensive legislative action passed by Congress.

‘Take every shift as it comes’: No respite for UK hospitals

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When the U.K. surpassed 100,000 coronavirus dead this week, it was much more than just a number to Justin Fleming.

Lying in a hospital bed with COVID-19, he knew how easily he could have become one of them, were it not for the medics and other staff who worked to save his life.

“I thought I might not see my partner again, my mum — be a dead friend, be just a stat,” said 47-year-old Fleming, who was rushed to King’s College Hospital in mid-January struggling for breath. His condition improved after two weeks of receiving oxygen on an acute care ward.

The scale of Britain’s coronavirus outbreak can seem overwhelming, with tens of thousands of new infections and more than 1,000 deaths added each day. But on hospitals’ COVID-19 wards, the pandemic feels both epic and intimate, as staff fight the virus one patient at a time, and with no end in sight.

Fleming says he was amazed by the diversity of the “incredible” staff — including recently qualified medics, a nurse newly arrived from the Philippines and staff drafted from dental wards and brain injury teams — who eased his isolation and saved him from joining the roster of the dead.

“Because you have to be isolated (with COVID-19), you feel like you’ve just vanished,” he said. “It’s almost like you can become a non-person within a week.”

Fleming is one of more than 37,000 coronavirus patients being treated in Britain’s hospitals, almost double the number of the spring surge. King’s College Hospital, which sits in a diverse, densely populated area of south London, had almost 800 COVID-19 patients earlier this winter. A new national lockdown has seen the number fall to a still-challenging 630.

Critical care consultant Dr. Jenny Townsend works on a 16-bed intensive care ward that currently has 30 patients, with two beds squeezed into each bay designed for one. In normal times, one intensive care nurse looks after one patient. The ratio is now as high as one to four.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 41 of 95

"We all feel very stretched and everyone's mucking in to help each other with each of the roles that is required," Townsend said.

"We're doing the best we can, and we're doing it in very difficult circumstances. We try and deliver as close to what we do normally, but occasionally because of the number of patients, we have to prioritize what we can and can't do," she said.

That is especially difficult because coronavirus care is labor-intensive. It takes a village of people and skills to treat each critically ill patient.

One recent day on the ward, Townsend oversaw a tracheostomy, inserting a small tube into a patient's windpipe to help him breathe without a ventilator — a small step toward possible recovery. Down the hall, family liaison officer Berenice Page held a video call to relatives from a patient's bedside. More than half a dozen staff worked to "prone" another patient, carefully flipping them onto their stomach to help them breathe more easily.

Like others, this hospital had to adapt fast when COVID-19 first struck in early 2020, finding room for more patients and redeploying medical staff to work in unaccustomed roles. Wards were converted, staff were drafted in from other departments to the new COVID wards and expanded intensive care units.

Then, after a summer respite when cases plummeted, the hospital had to do it all over again when the virus came roaring back in the fall. Many staff find the struggle harder the second time around.

"In the first wave, people's energy levels were better because we were dealing with the unknown and we learned as we went along," said Felicia Kwaku, the hospital's associate director of nursing. "In this second wave it's worse, because the patients are much sicker, the numbers are higher, the wave feels longer."

Coronavirus patient Fleming, having seen the pandemic up close, says Britain's overburdened medics "need credit now — and help and support."

"This is a significant historical moment and they protected the country," he said.

While the number of patients being admitted to London hospitals with COVID-19 is gradually diminishing, pressure on medics will only ease slowly because of the time lag between infections, hospitalizations and — for the sickest patients — transfers to intensive care.

That means ongoing challenges for staff like family liaison officer Page. Each day she phones patients' relatives to update them on their condition, then takes a tablet computer around the ward, so that family members, barred from visiting, can at least see their unconscious loved ones.

"I find it a real privilege to be able to talk to them," said Page, whose usual job is as a resuscitation coordinator.

"You get a glimpse of the patient's life when you're doing the video calls, and you see (the relatives) sitting in their homes and some of them have got young children. And, yes, I do feel their despair. But I also I also know what a difference it makes," she said.

"We're often talking to people whose relatives are going to die. It's a very difficult situation. ... I think that when they speak to us. I can say that they find some there's some peace for them," she added.

Kwaku said the pace of patients being admitted remains "relentless," and implored lockdown-weary Britons to keep following social distancing rules.

She said hospital workers take heart from the U.K.'s rapid rollout of coronavirus vaccines. More than 7 million people have received the first of two doses.

Kwaku says staff also get a boost from the patients who recover and go home, and take some comfort from those they offer "a good death," free from struggle and fear.

"You take every shift as it comes, you take every day as it comes," she said. "You may fall down, and you get yourself up. You may feel low, you pick yourself up. You may have a cry. ... But we're here to care for patients and care for each other."

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

Far-right extremist convicted of murdering German politician

BERLIN (AP) — A far-right extremist in Germany was convicted Thursday and sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a regional politician in a brazen killing that shocked the country.

In its verdict against 47-year-old Stephan Ernst, the Frankfurt state court noted the “particular severity” of the crime, meaning that he will likely not be eligible for release after 15 years as is typical under German law, the dpa news agency reported.

During his trial, Ernst admitted to the June 1, 2019 slaying of Walter Luebcke, a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s party who led the regional administration in the Kassel area of central Germany.

Luebcke was targeted because he had been outspoken in favor of helping refugees. Prosecutors said Ernst had attended a 2015 town hall event where the politician had defended the German government’s decision to allow hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers into the country.

Ernst shot Luebcke on the politician’s porch and he died hours later.

The German government warned after Luebcke killing and other attacks that year that far-right extremism posed a significant security threat in the country.

An accomplice, who prosecutors alleged was with Ernst at the scene of the crime, identified only as Markus H. due to German privacy laws, was convicted of weapons violations and sentenced to 18 months probation.

H. had been charged with accessory to murder, but his attorney argued he was not involved and he was only found guilty of the lesser charge.

New Biden health care orders begin to unspool Trump policies

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is set to take his first steps to reverse Trump administration health care policies. The White House said Biden plans on Thursday to sign orders on a range of issues including getting more Americans covered and removing curbs on abortion counseling.

The most concrete short-term impact will come from Biden reopening HealthCare.gov insurance markets as coverage has shrunk in the economic turmoil of the coronavirus pandemic. Created under the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, also called “Obamacare,” the marketplaces offer taxpayer-subsidized coverage regardless of a person’s medical history, or preexisting conditions, including COVID-19.

That new three-month “special enrollment period” could begin as soon as Feb. 15, according to a White House summary.

Biden will also immediately reverse a federal policy that bars taxpayer funding for international health care nonprofits offering abortion counseling or referrals. Known as the Mexico City Policy, it can get switched on and off depending on whether Democrats or Republicans control the White House.

Other directives Biden plans to issue Thursday could take months to carry out. Among them, he’ll instruct the Department of Health and Human Services to:

— Consider whether to rescind Trump regulations that bar federally funded family planning clinics from referring women for abortions. The ban on referrals led to Planned Parenthood clinics leaving the program.

— Reexamine a Trump administration policy that allows states to impose work requirements as a condition for low-income people to get Medicaid health insurance. Work requirements have been blocked by federal judges, and the Supreme Court has agreed to hear the issue.

— Review policies that could undermine protections for people with health problems, such as a Trump administration rule that facilitated the sale of short-term health insurance plans that don’t have to cover preexisting medical conditions.

The abortion-related actions will bring Biden immediate praise from women’s rights groups, as well as condemnation from social and religious conservatives. Under President Donald Trump, abortion opponents got free rein to try to rewrite federal policy, and now the political pendulum is swinging back.

Biden also campaigned on repealing longstanding federal prohibitions against taxpayer funding for abortion, but a change of that magnitude to a group of laws known as the Hyde Amendment would require

congressional approval.

The regulatory changes Biden is asking federal health officials to undertake aren't likely to happen overnight because hastily written rules are more easily overturned in court, as the Trump administration found out. Time and again, federal judges ruled that Trump officials ran roughshod over legal requirements for regulators, such as demonstrating they've considered all sides of an issue.

The idea of reopening Obamacare's health insurance markets has broad support, including from consumer groups, professional medical associations, insurers and business organizations.

Although the number of uninsured Americans has grown because of job losses in the coronavirus economy, the Trump administration resisted calls to reopen HealthCare.gov. Failure to repeal and replace Obamacare as he repeatedly vowed to do was one of the former president's most bitter disappointments. His administration continued trying to find ways to limit the program or unravel it entirely. A Supreme Court decision on Trump's final legal challenge to the Affordable Care Act is expected this year.

The Obama-era health care law covers more than 23 million people through a mix of subsidized private insurance sold in all states, and expanded Medicaid adopted by 38 states, with Southern states being the major exception. Coverage is available to people who don't have job-based health insurance, with the Medicaid expansion geared to those with low incomes.

Of some 28 million uninsured Americans before the pandemic, the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation has estimated that more than 16 million were eligible for some form of subsidized coverage through the health law.

Experts agree that number of uninsured people has risen because of layoffs in the coronavirus economy, perhaps by 5 million to 10 million, but authoritative estimates await government studies due later this year.

The special sign-up opportunity is only a down payment on health insurance for Biden, who has promised to build on former President Barack Obama's health law to push the U.S. toward coverage for all. For that he'd need congressional approval, and opposition to the health law still runs deep among Republicans.

Vaccine factory inspected amid EU dispute with AstraZeneca

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN and RAF CASERT undefined

BRUSSELS (AP) — Belgian health authorities announced Thursday they have inspected a pharmaceutical factory in Belgium to find out whether expected delays in the deliveries of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine are due to production issues.

The European Commission had asked the Belgian government to inspect the factory amid a heated public dispute between the 27-nation bloc and the Anglo-Swedish drugmaker. EU officials are under tremendous political pressures because the bloc's vaccine rollout has been much slower than that of Israel or Britain.

The Novasep's factory in the town of Seneffe is part of the European production chain for the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine.

AstraZeneca said last week that it planned to cut initial deliveries in the EU to 31 million doses from the 80 million it had planned due to reduced yields from its manufacturing plants in Europe. The EU claimed Wednesday that it will receive even less than that — just one quarter of the doses that member nations were supposed to get during January-March 2021.

According to the EU, the Belgian factory is one of four AstraZeneca sites included in the contract sealed by the European Commission and the company to produce vaccines for the EU market.

"The Novasep teams worked hard to meet its obligations to AstraZeneca with unprecedented speed and commitment," Novasep said in a statement to The Associated Press. "Manufacturing the COVID-19 vaccine is a pioneering process in terms of scale, complexity and quantity. We have worked closely with AstraZeneca and conducted regular and coordinated reviews of the production processes to ensure the active drug substance was delivered on time and met the highest standards for quality and stability."

France Dammel, a spokesperson for Belgium's health minister, said experts from the federal medicine agency inspected the Novasep site. They will now work with Dutch, Italian and Spanish experts before delivering a report in the coming days.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 44 of 95

The EU said it expects to deliver the full amount on time and has threatened to put export inspections on all vaccines made in its territory. Stella Kyriakides, the European Commissioner for health and food safety, said AstraZeneca should provide vaccines from its U.K. facilities if it is unable to meet commitments from factories in the EU.

After a third round of talks with AstraZeneca aimed at resolving the dispute on Wednesday evening, Kyriakides regretted the "continued lack of clarity on the delivery schedule" and urged AstraZeneca to come up with a clear plan for a quick delivery of the doses reserved by the EU for the first quarter.

A spokesman for AstraZeneca said after the meeting that the company has "committed to even closer coordination to jointly chart a path for the delivery of our vaccine over the coming months as we continue our efforts to bring this vaccine to millions of Europeans at no profit during the pandemic."

The EU, which has 450 million people, has signed deals for six different vaccines, but so far regulators have only authorized the use of two, one made by Pfizer and another by Moderna. The EU's drug regulator will consider the AstraZeneca vaccine on Friday.

Sylvain Plazy contributed to this story.

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Russia detains Navalny's allies, warns social networks

By DARIA LITVINOVA and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian authorities on Thursday detained several allies of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and issued warnings to social media giants after tens of thousands of people took to the streets in over 100 Russian cities last weekend to demand his release.

The detention of Navalny's brother Oleg, his top ally Lyubov Sobol, Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva from the Navalny-backed Alliance of Doctors and Maria Alyokhina from the Pussy Riot punk collective comes as authorities try to stem another wave of protests set for Sunday.

All four were detained for 48 hours as part of a criminal probe into alleged violations of coronavirus regulations during the weekend's protests.

The 44-year-old Navalny, the most well-known critic of President Vladimir Putin's government, was arrested Jan. 17 upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusations.

A court in Moscow is to consider his appeal against the arrest later on Thursday.

The overnight detentions came after more than a dozen searches of apartments and offices of Navalny's family, associates and supporters in connection to the probe. Those sites included Navalny's apartment, where police detained his brother, and a rented apartment where Navalny's wife, Yulia, has been living.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the searches and detentions were a legitimate part of police efforts to investigate the alleged violations during Saturday's rallies.

"Law enforcement agencies are doing their job," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters. "There were numerous violations of Russian laws, and law enforcement agencies are at work."

Russian prosecutors on Thursday also issued warnings to Facebook, Google, Twitter, TikTok and Russian social networks demanding that they block calls for more protests.

"The state doesn't want the social networks to become a platform for promoting such illegal actions," Peskov said.

Asked if their refusal to remove such content could prompt Russian authorities to block them, Peskov responded it would be up to relevant government agencies to consider a response.

"All pros and cons will be weighed and, if necessary, measures envisaged by the law will be taken," he

said.

Earlier this week, Russia's state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said it would fine Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and two Russian social networks for their failure to block calls on minors to join Saturday's protests.

Also Thursday, Russia's Investigative Committee said it opened a criminal probe against Navalny's top strategist Leonid Volkov, accusing him of encouraging minors to participate in unauthorized rallies. Volkov, who lives in Germany, rejected the charges.

In a challenge to Putin two days after Navalny's arrest, his organization released an extensive video report on a palatial seaside compound allegedly built for the president. It has been viewed over 98 million times, further stoking discontent.

Demonstrations calling for Navalny's release took place in more than 100 cities across the nation last Saturday, a strong show of rising anger toward the Kremlin. Nearly 4,000 people were reported detained at those protests and some were handed fines and jail terms.

Navalny fell into a coma while aboard a domestic flight from Siberia to Moscow on Aug. 20. He was transferred from a hospital in Siberia to a Berlin hospital two days later. Labs in Germany, France and Sweden, and tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established that he was exposed to the Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent.

Russian authorities have refused to open a full-fledged criminal inquiry, citing a lack of evidence that Navalny was poisoned.

Navalny's arrest and the harsh police actions at the protests have brought wide criticism from the West and calls for his release.

Ruling brings kosher slaughterhouse new business, old fears

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

CSENGELE, Hungary (AP) — In a small room lined with religious texts, a Jewish rabbi demonstrates how knives are sharpened and inspected before they are put to use slitting the throats of chickens, geese and other poultry at a kosher slaughterhouse in Hungary.

A shochet, someone trained and certified to slaughter animals according to Jewish tradition, whets a knife on increasingly fine stones before drawing the blade across a fingernail to feel for any imperfections in the steel that might inhibit a smooth, clean cut and cause unnecessary pain.

"One of the most important things in kosher is that the animal doesn't suffer," said Rabbi Jacob Werchow, who oversees production at Quality Poultry, a 3 1/2-year-old slaughterhouse that supplies nearly 40% of Europe's kosher poultry market and a large portion of the foie gras sold in Israel.

The methods employed at the facility in the village of Csengele are based on ancient Judaic principles commanding the humane treatment of living creatures. They also are at the center of a debate about how to balance animal rights and religious rights as parts of Europe limit or effectively ban the ritual slaughter practices of Jews and Muslims.

Companies like Quality Poultry have found new export markets since the European Union's highest court last month upheld a law in Belgium's Flanders region that prohibited slaughtering animals without first stunning them into unconsciousness. But the European Court of Justice ruling also has provoked fears of eventual EU-wide prohibitions on ritual slaughter, and aroused memories of periods when Europe's Jews faced cruel persecution.

"This decision doesn't only affect the Belgian Jewish community, it affects all of us," said Rabbi Slomo Koves of the Association of Hungarian Jewish Communities, which owns the Csengele slaughterhouse. "If this is the case in Belgium and the court has given it moral approval, that might start a process on a larger scale. If you go down this logic, the next step is you also cannot not sell meat like this in these countries."

The EU has required the pre-stunning of animals since 1979, but allows member states to make religion-based exceptions. Most do, but along with Flanders and the Wallonia region of Belgium, Slovenia, Denmark and Sweden, as well as non-EU members Switzerland, Iceland and Norway, have done away with religious

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 46 of 95

exemptions, meaning kosher and halal meat must be imported.

Animal rights groups say that slitting the throats of livestock and poultry birds while they are conscious causes suffering that amounts to animal cruelty. Stunning methods vary, but the procedure most often is performed through electric shock or a bolt pistol to the animal's skull.

"Reversible stunning is the bare minimum we can do to protect animals," said Reineke Hameleers, CEO of the Brussels-based Eurogroup for Animals. "They should be rendered unconscious before being killed."

The situation is not so cut-and-dried for religious observers. Jewish law forbids injury or damage to animal tissues before slaughter, and modern stunning practices can cause death or irreparable injuries that would render meat and poultry non-kosher, according to Koves.

Although some Muslim religious authorities consider pre-slaughter stunning permissible, local Muslim groups argued that the stunning requirements in Flanders and Wallonia grew out of efforts by Belgium's Islamophobic far-right to harass their communities.

Rabbi Koves and Werchow said they believe the kosher slaughter method, known as shechita, is no less humane than the methods used in conventional meat production. In addition to the intensive process of sharpening and inspecting the knives, the shochet is trained to make the cut in a single smooth motion, severing the animal's nerves and draining the blood from the brain in seconds.

"Whatever you think about...whether kosher slaughter is better for the animal than regular slaughter, you are basically putting animal rights ahead of human rights," Koves said. "If people are going to ban our rights to have kosher food, that means that they are limiting our human rights. And this, especially in a place like Europe, brings very bad memories to us."

Laws requiring the pre-slaughter stunning of animals appeared in some European countries as early as the late 19th century. Adolf Hitler mandated the practice in 1933 just after becoming chancellor of Germany, one of the first laws imposed by the Nazis.

Jewish and Muslim groups challenged the Flanders law in Belgium's Constitutional Court, which referred it to the European Court of Justice for a ruling on its compatibility with EU law.

The Court of Justice's advocate general advised the court to strike the Flanders law down, arguing it violated the rights of certain faiths to preserve their essential religious rites. But the court disagreed, finding the law "allow(s) a fair balance to be struck between the importance attached to animal welfare and the freedom of Jewish and Muslim believers to manifest their religion."

The animal welfare minister for the Brussels region of Belgium, where stunning is not mandatory, said the ruling would breathe new life into the mandatory stunning debate there. The Brussels chapter of the New Flemish Alliance, a center-right party whose members led the push for the law in Flanders, said it would now submit a proposal for an ordinance to ban slaughter without stunning in the capital region.

The Hungarian government helped finance the slaughterhouse in Csengele, and Prime Minister Viktor Orban joined Jewish groups in condemning the court's decision as an assault on religious freedom. In a January letter to the U.S.-based Jewish Agency for Israel, Orban wrote that his government would "spare no effort to raise our voice against (the decision) in every possible international forum."

Koves and other chief rabbis in Europe are looking into ways to appeal the EU court's decision.

Watchdog: Least corrupt nations produce best virus response

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Countries with the least corruption have been best positioned to weather the health and economic challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a closely-watched annual study released Thursday by an anti-graft organization.

Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures the perception of public sector corruption according to experts and businesspeople, concluded that countries that performed well invested more in health care, were "better able to provide universal health coverage and are less likely to violate democratic norms."

"COVID-19 is not just a health and economic crisis," said Transparency head Delia Ferreira Rubio. "It is

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 47 of 95

a corruption crisis - and one that we are currently failing to manage.”

This year’s index showed the United States hitting a new low amid a steady decline under the presidency of Donald Trump, with a score of 67 on a scale where 0 is “highly corrupt” and 100 is “very clean.”

That still put the U.S. 25th on the list in a tie with Chile, but behind many other western democracies. It dropped from scores of 69 in 2019, 71 in 2018 and 75 in 2017, and was down to the lowest level since figures for comparison have been available.

“In addition to alleged conflicts of interest and abuse of office at the highest level, in 2020 weak oversight of the \$1 trillion COVID-19 relief package raised serious concerns and marked a retreat from longstanding democratic norms promoting accountable government,” said the report by Transparency, which is based in Berlin.

The link between corruption and coronavirus response could be widely seen around the world, according to the report’s analysis.

For example, Uruguay scored 71 — putting it at 21st place on the list. It invests heavily in health care and has a strong epidemiological surveillance system, which has helped not only with COVID-19 but also other diseases like yellow fever and Zika, Transparency said.

By contrast, Bangladesh, which scored 26 and placed 146th on the list, “invests little in health care while corruption flourishes during COVID-19, ranging from bribery in health clinics to misappropriated aid,” Transparency wrote. “Corruption is also pervasive in the procurement of medical supplies.”

Even in New Zealand, which placed No. 1 as the least corrupt nation with a score of 88 and has been lauded for its pandemic response, there was room for improvement, Transparency noted.

“While the government communicates openly about the measures and policies it puts in place, more transparency is needed around public procurement for COVID-19 recovery,” the organization wrote.

Overall, of 180 countries surveyed, two thirds scored below 50 out of 100 and the average score was 43.

Denmark and New Zealand tied in first place as the countries seen as least corrupt, with scores of 88, followed by Finland, Singapore, Switzerland and Sweden with scores of 85, Norway at 84, the Netherlands at 82, and Germany and Luxembourg at 80 to round out the top 10.

Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and the Britain all scored 77 in 11th place.

Somalia and South Sudan fared the worst with scores of 12 to put them at 179th place, behind Syria with a score of 14, Yemen and Venezuela at 15, Sudan and Equatorial Guinea with 16, Libya with 17, and North Korea, Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 18.

Since 2012, the earliest point of comparison available using the current methodology, 26 countries have significantly improved, including Greece, which increased by 14 points to 50, Myanmar, which rose 13 points to 28, and Ecuador, which rose 7 points to 39.

At the same time, 22 countries have significantly decreased, including Lebanon, which dropped 5 points to 25, Malawi and Bosnia & Herzegovina which both dropped 7 points to 30 and 35 respectively.

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At Sundance, pandemic dramas unfold on screen and off

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Peter Nicks had for months been documenting the students of Oakland High School, in California, when the pandemic hit.

“It’s in the Bay,” says one student of the virus as he and others mill together in a classroom, excitedly contemplating the cancellation of school.

Soon, the principal is heard over the loudspeaker — an announcement that would signal not just the scuttling of prom and graduation ceremonies, but, potentially, Nicks’ film. After chronicling other Oakland institutions, Nicks had set out to document a year in the life of the multicultural teenagers of Oakland.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 48 of 95

"Something like 'The Breakfast Club' with kids of color," he says.

But how do you make an intimate, observation documentary about school life when the hallways are suddenly emptied, the school musical canceled and your third act turns virtual?

"The first order of business was just capturing that moment," Nicks says, speaking by Zoom from Oakland. "Then shortly after that it was: What are we going to do? How are we possibly going to finish this movie?"

"Homeroom," Nicks' fittingly titled — and ultimately completed — documentary, is one of the 74 feature films that will debut at the Sundance Film Festival beginning Thursday. The pandemic has transformed the annual Park City, Utah, festival into a largely virtual event, but it has also reshaped many of the films that will unspool there.

No festival more represents an annual cinematic rebirth — a fresh crop, a new wave — than Sundance. But given the constraints on gatherings since last March, how could filmmakers get their movies made, edited and delivered to Sundance?

The majority of films showing this year were shot before the arrival of COVID-19 — many of them edited during quarantine. But there are numerous filmmakers at the festival who managed the seemingly impossible feat of making a movie in 2020.

A handful of high-profile films made during the pandemic have recently hit streaming platforms, including the heist comedy "Locked Down" and the romance "Malcolm & Marie." But Sundance will supply the fullest look yet of moviemaking under the pandemic. Even in an independent film world predicated on a can-do spirit, the results — including "Homeroom," "How It Ends" and "In the Same Breath" — are often striking for their resourcefulness.

With school closed, Nicks sifted through his footage and realized he had a rich thread. The students, responding to a history of police brutality, had been pushing to eradicate officers from the high-school campus. Nicks decided to continue production, relying on a mix of the students' own cell phone footage and more selective shooting opportunities. "Homeroom" morphed into a coming-of-age tale, riven with activism and George Floyd protests, that reflected a larger awakening.

"We started to recognize that we had a powerful narrative that began in the beginning, we just didn't realize it," says Nicks. "That's part of why I love documentaries — how and why things are revealed. You just have to be open to make those adjustments and see it."

The writer-directors Zoe Lister-Jones and Daryl Wein, who are married, were also trying to adapt to the pandemic normal in Los Angeles.

"That adjustment was bringing up so many intense emotions," says Lister-Jones, the actress-filmmaker of "The Craft: Legacy" and "Band Aid." "A lot of fear and vulnerability and a lot of uncertainty not just about the world but what our future as filmmakers was going to look like."

Drawing from their own anxieties and therapy sessions, they began outlining a film about a woman (Lister-Jones) walking around a desolate Los Angeles with her newly visible younger self (Cailee Spaeny), on the eve of an impending asteroid apocalypse. The movie isn't about the pandemic, but it's clearly a product of the kind of self-reflection it brought on.

"It was sort of experimental in nature because the world was in an experimental place," says Lister-Jones.

They called up actor friends — Olivia Wilde, Fred Armisen, Helen Hunt, Nick Kroll — for cameos, and shot scenes mostly on patios, backyards and doorsteps.

"Some people weren't ready," says Wein. "Some people were super eager, like: 'Yes, I'm dying to do something.' And some people were kind of in the middle, a little bit scared, 'This is going to my first thing. I haven't even left the house.'"

Given the always fluctuating emotional rollercoaster of daily life in the pandemic, making a comedy was frequently difficult — not just logistically but emotionally.

"It takes a huge amount of energy to produce a film. To do so when we were in such a raw emotional state did really terrify me," says Lister-Jones. "Many days when we went out to shoot before I would say quietly or aloud, 'I can't do it.' By the end of that day, it was so incredible to see the ways in which it nourished me."

Sundance's slate is down from the usual 120 features, but it's not for lack of submissions. More than

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 49 of 95

3,500 feature films were sent in. Some were made in a pandemic sprint.

British filmmaker Ben Wheatley made "In the Earth," a horror film set in the pandemic, over the summer. Carlson Young shot her fantasy-horror thriller "The Blazing World" with a skeletal crew last August in Texas, with the cast quarantining together at a wedding resort. Most films made in 2020 are time capsules but that's explicitly the purpose of Kevin Macdonald's "Life in a Day 2020." It's composed of 15,000 hours of YouTube footage shot worldwide in a single day.

Nanfu Wang, the China-born documentarian based in New Jersey whose Sundance prize-winning 2019 documentary "One Child Nation" analyzed the personal and widespread toll of China's one-child policy, didn't realize she was starting a film when she did. At first, she just kept taking screen shots and recording social-media posts she saw coming out of China in January.

"I was seeing the information about the virus, about the outbreak being censored in real time," says Wang. "I would see something and then ten minutes later it would be deleted. That compelled me to archive them."

Wang was in the midst of several other projects. At first, she tried handing off what she had gathered to news outlets. Then she started planning a short film. Then the scope of the outbreak necessitated a feature film. HBO came on board. And Wang started working with 10 cinematographers in China to capture the yawning gap between party propaganda and reality.

But more twists, of course, followed. The outbreak spread beyond China, and in the U.S. response, Wang saw a different but comparable virus response from another regime. Soon, she was organizing film crews in America, too. The scope of "In the Same Breath" grew.

"The outbreak in the U.S. shocked me even more than it originally starting in China. I had this notion that America is a more advanced society and things like that shouldn't be happening in the same way or worse. It changed the film," says Wang. "In March, April, I started thinking: OK, now what is the film about?"

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Ultra-Orthodox unrest threatens Netanyahu re-election hopes

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As he seeks reelection, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has turned to a straightforward strategy: Count on the rock-solid support of his ultra-Orthodox political allies and stamp out the coronavirus pandemic with one of the world's most aggressive vaccination campaigns.

But with ultra-Orthodox communities openly flouting safety guidelines and violently clashing with police trying to enforce them, this marriage of convenience is turning into a burden. Netanyahu has watched his political partners undermine the country's war against the virus and spark a public backlash that threatens him at the ballot box.

"Netanyahu's hope is that Israel will be the first country in the world to be vaccinated, that he will be able to open the economy to everyone, ultra-Orthodox and secular, and then the problem will be forgotten," said Moshe Klughaft, a campaign strategist who has advised Netanyahu in the past. If the current troubles persist, he said, "Netanyahu will be in big trouble."

Less than two months before the March 23 election, Israel finds itself in a paradoxical situation. In just one month, it has vaccinated over a quarter of its 9.3 million people and is on pace to inoculate the entire adult population by election day. At the same time, it has one of the developing world's highest rates of infection, with some 8,000 new cases detected each day. This week it tightened a month-old lockdown by closing its international airport to nearly all flights.

There are a number of reasons for the ongoing outbreak. Before the airport was shuttered, Israelis returning from abroad brought back with them fast-spreading variants of the coronavirus. Other segments of the population have also failed to comply with lockdown provisions that have closed stores, schools and restaurants.

But there is little question that the ultra-Orthodox sector — where schools remain open, synagogues

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 50 of 95

are full and mass weddings and funerals continue to take place — has been a driving force in the spiking numbers.

Experts estimate that the sector, making up about 12% of Israel's population, accounts for 40% of new COVID-19 cases. Official data also shows that vaccination rates in ultra-Orthodox towns, where science often takes a back seat to faith, are well below the rest of the country.

The ultra-Orthodox have long wielded disproportionate influence in Israel, using their kingmaker status in parliament to extract concessions from the nation's leaders. Ultra-Orthodox males are exempt from otherwise mandatory military service. The community's schools receive generous subsidies while providing subpar educations that focus almost entirely on religious studies and ignore critical subjects like math, English and science. As adults, many males shirk the workforce, collecting welfare payments while studying in religious seminars.

The system has long bred resentment among Israel's secular majority, and economists have repeatedly warned that it is unsustainable. But political leaders have rarely been willing to challenge the system.

Netanyahu is no exception. By keeping the money flowing, he has found a reliable ally for most of his 12 years in office. Ultra-Orthodox support is critical as Netanyahu tries to form a majority coalition in favor of granting him immunity from corruption charges.

But the skyrocketing infection rate, combined with the violent protests, has brought unwelcome attention. In recent days, large crowds of ultra-Orthodox protesters, many of them unmasked, have attacked police sent to enforce closure orders and journalists who covered the unrest. In the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, a policeman fired his pistol into the air to fend off a hostile crowd. That night, protesters torched a bus in the city.

"Israel's facing a Haredi insurrection that's making it impossible to fight COVID," wrote Yaakov Katz, editor of the Jerusalem Post, using the Hebrew word for the ultra-Orthodox.

Ultra-Orthodox leaders say their communities are being unfairly singled out and that a small minority is responsible for the troubles. They say that crowded living conditions and large families are the main reason for high infection rates, and that society does not understand the importance of prayer and learning in the ultra-Orthodox world.

After Bnei Brak's mayor, Avraham Rubenstein, was attacked by a crowd of protesters this week, he accused police of inflaming the situation and said authorities should let the community solve its own problems.

But Dov Habertal, a prominent ultra-Orthodox lawyer and commentator, said it was time for introspection. He said violations are widespread, and that ultra-Orthodox politicians, rabbis and a subservient media were all complicit.

"There is no lockdown. It's a big lie," he told Channel 13 television. "Synagogues are open, ritual baths, rabbinic lectures, weddings, and Netanyahu cooperates with them," he said.

Netanyahu, counting on the vaccination program to propel him to victory, has appeared unwilling or unable to take on his ultra-Orthodox allies. Asked about the unrest, Netanyahu told reporters this week that he had attempted to call Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, one of the country's most influential spiritual leaders. The 93-year-old Kanievsky "was unavailable," Netanyahu lamented, saying he left a message with the rabbi's grandson.

This perceived weakness has begun to play into the hands of Netanyahu's rivals. Yair Lapid, leader of the centrist Yesh Atid party, which appeals to middle-class, secular voters, has seen his popularity shoot up.

"We will put an end to this madness," Lapid wrote on Twitter. "With us, there will be one law for everyone."

Opinion polls this week projected Yesh Atid finishing second in elections behind Netanyahu's Likud, but in a potentially better position to form a coalition than Netanyahu. Another poll by Channel 12 found over 60% of respondents do not want any ultra-Orthodox parties in the next government.

Dr. Nadav Davidovitch, director of the school of public health at Israel's Ben-Gurion University and a government adviser on the coronavirus, said the ultra-Orthodox community has posed numerous challenges for policy makers.

He cited the sector's autonomy, distrust of the government, fragmented leadership, communal lifestyle and densely populated neighborhoods. "All of this together creates a very fertile ground for infection," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 51 of 95

Davidovitch said sending in police often makes the situation worse. Instead, he said experts are working with community leaders on outreach programs to improve compliance with lockdown measures and assure the public the vaccine is safe. He said there has been improvement on both fronts, a trend he expects to continue.

But with infections still raging and the mass vaccinations requiring weeks to take effect, it is unclear how much the situation will improve by election day.

"I think that we have all the tools in the coming weeks to open very gradually," Davidovitch said. "We already have improvement. But we have to be cautious about it and patient."

EXPLAINER: Why it's hard to make vaccines and boost supplies

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

With demand for COVID-19 vaccines outpacing the world's supplies, a frustrated public and policymakers want to know: How can we get more? A lot more. Right away.

The problem: "It's not like adding more water to the soup," said vaccine specialist Maria Elena Bottazzi of Baylor College of Medicine.

Makers of COVID-19 vaccines need everything to go right as they scale up production to hundreds of millions of doses — and any little hiccup could cause a delay. Some of their ingredients have never before been produced at the sheer volume needed.

And seemingly simple suggestions that other factories switch to brewing new kinds of vaccines can't happen overnight. Just this week, French drugmaker Sanofi took the unusual step of announcing it would help bottle and package some vaccine produced by competitor Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech. But those doses won't start arriving until summer — and Sanofi has the space in a factory in Germany only because its own vaccine is delayed, bad news for the world's overall supply.

"We think, well, OK, it's like men's shirts, right, I'll just have another place to make it," said Dr. Paul Offit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, a vaccine adviser to the U.S. government. "It's just not that easy."

DIFFERENT VACCINES, DIFFERENT RECIPES

The multiple types of COVID-19 vaccines being used in different countries all train the body to recognize the new coronavirus, mostly the spike protein that coats it. But they require different technologies, raw materials, equipment and expertise to do so.

The two vaccines authorized in the U.S. so far, from Pfizer and Moderna, are made by putting a piece of genetic code called mRNA — the instructions for that spike protein — inside a little ball of fat.

Making small amounts of mRNA in a research lab is easy but "prior to this, nobody made a billion doses or 100 million or even a million doses of mRNA," said Dr. Drew Weissman of the University of Pennsylvania, who helped pioneer mRNA technology.

Scaling up doesn't just mean multiplying ingredients to fit a bigger vat. Creating mRNA involves a chemical reaction between genetic building blocks and enzymes, and Weissman said the enzymes don't work as efficiently in larger volumes.

AstraZeneca's vaccine, already used in Britain and several other countries, and one expected soon from Johnson & Johnson, are made with a cold virus that sneaks the spike protein gene into the body. It's a very different form of manufacturing: living cells in giant bioreactors grow that cold virus, which is extracted and purified.

"If the cells get old or tired or start changing, you might get less," Weissman said. "There's a lot more variability and a lot more things you have to check."

An old-fashioned variety — "inactivated" vaccines like one made by China's Sinovac — require even more steps and stiffer biosecurity because they're made with killed coronavirus.

One thing all vaccines have in common: They must be made under strict rules that require specially inspected facilities and frequent testing of each step, a time-consuming necessity to be confident in the quality of each batch.

WHAT ABOUT THE SUPPLY CHAIN?

Production depends on enough raw materials. Pfizer and Moderna insist they have reliable suppliers.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 52 of 95

Even so, a U.S. government spokesman said logistics experts are working directly with vaccine makers to anticipate and solve any bottlenecks that arise.

Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel acknowledges that challenges remain.

With shifts running 24/7, if on any given day "there's one raw material missing, we cannot start making products and that capacity will be lost forever because we cannot make it up," he recently told investors.

Pfizer has temporarily slowed deliveries in Europe for several weeks, so it could upgrade its factory in Belgium to handle more production.

And sometimes the batches fall short. AstraZeneca told an outraged European Union that it, too, will deliver fewer doses than originally promised right away. The reason cited: Lower than expected "yields," or output, at some European manufacturing sites.

More than in other industries, when brewing with biological ingredients, "there are things that can go wrong and will go wrong," said Norman Baylor, a former Food and Drug Administration vaccine chief who called yield variability common.

HOW MUCH IS ON THE WAY?

That varies by country. Moderna and Pfizer each are on track to deliver 100 million doses to the U.S. by the end of March and another 100 million in the second quarter of the year. Looking even further ahead, President Joe Biden has announced plans to buy still more over the summer, reaching enough to eventually vaccinate 300 million Americans.

Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla told a Bloomberg conference this week that his company will actually wind up providing 120 million doses by the end of March — not by speedier production but because health workers now are allowed to squeeze an extra dose out of every vial.

But getting six doses instead of five requires using specialized syringes, and there are questions about the global supply. A Health and Human Services spokesman said the U.S. is sending kits that include the special syringes with each Pfizer shipment.

Pfizer also said its factory upgrade in Belgium is short-term pain for longer-term gain, as the changes will help increase worldwide production to 2 billion doses this year instead of the originally anticipated 1.3 billion.

Moderna likewise recently announced it will be able to supply 600 million doses of vaccine in 2021, up from 500 million, and that it was expanding capacity in hopes of getting to 1 billion.

But possibly the easiest way to get more doses is if other vaccines in the pipeline are proven to work. U.S. data on whether Johnson & Johnson's one-dose shot protects is expected soon, and another company, Novavax, also is in final-stage testing.

OTHER OPTIONS

For months, the chief vaccine companies lined up "contract manufacturers" in the U.S. and Europe to help them crank out doses and then undergo the final bottling steps. Moderna, for example, is working with Switzerland's Lonza.

Beyond rich nations, the Serum Institute of India has a contract to manufacture a billion doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine. It's the world's largest vaccine maker and is expected to be a key supplier for developing countries.

But some homegrown efforts to boost supplies appear hobbled. Two Brazilian research institutes plan to make millions of doses of the AstraZeneca and Sinovac vaccines but have been set back by unexplained delays in shipments of key ingredients from China.

And Bottazzi said the world simultaneously has to keep up production of vaccines against polio, measles, meningitis and other diseases that still threaten even in the midst of the pandemic.

Penn's Weissman urged patience, saying that as each vaccine maker gets more experience, "I think every month they're going to be making more vaccine than the prior month."

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89 foreigners arrested at Thai bar flouting COVID-19 rules

By CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Police raided a party at a bar on a popular resort island in southern Thailand and arrested 89 foreigners for violating coronavirus regulations, officials said Wednesday.

The Tuesday night raid on the Three Sixty Bar on Koh Phangan also netted 22 Thais, including one identified as the bar's owner and another who sold drinks there, said police Col. Suparerk Pankosol, superintendent of the provincial immigration office.

He said the gathering was illegal under a national state of emergency declared last March to combat the coronavirus.

Those arrested were from more than 10 countries, including the U.S., Britain, Switzerland and Denmark, Suparerk said. Photos of the raid distributed by police showed a dark, crowded room with casually dressed partygoers, almost all wearing face masks.

Koh Phangan in Surat Thani province is a popular destination for young backpacking travelers and is known especially for its all-night Full Moon beach parties. However, Thailand has barred virtually all tourists from entering the country since last April.

There have been 29 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Surat Thani out of a national total of 15,465. However, 11 of the 29 cases have been found in the last month as Thailand experienced a resurgence of the disease.

The penalty for violating the state of emergency is up to two years' imprisonment and a fine of up to 40,000 baht (\$1,330). The bar owner and worker could also be charged with violating the Communicable Disease Act, punishable by a one-year prison term and a fine of up to 100,000 baht (\$3,330).

Suparerk said the arrested people were being held at the Koh Phangan police station, where investigators were preparing documents to charge them.

He said police had tracked the party plans on social media, where the bar was promoting the event to celebrate its fifth anniversary. Entry tickets were 100 baht (\$3.30), with food and drink extra.

Biden: 'We can't wait any longer' to address climate crisis

By MATTHEW DALY and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the most ambitious U.S. effort to stave off the worst of climate change, President Joe Biden signed executive orders to transform the nation's heavily fossil-fuel powered economy into a clean-burning one, pausing oil and gas leasing on federal land and targeting subsidies for those industries.

The directives aim to conserve 30 percent of the country's lands and waters in the next 10 years, double the nation's offshore wind energy, and move to an all-electric federal vehicle fleet, among other changes. Biden's sweeping plan is aimed at staving off the worst of global warming caused by burning fossil fuels.

But his effort it also carries political risk for the president and Democrats as oil- and coal-producing states face job losses from moves to sharply increase U.S. reliance on clean energy such as wind and solar power.

"We can't wait any longer" to address the climate crisis, Biden said Wednesday at the White House. "We see with our own eyes. We know it in our bones. It is time to act."

He said his orders will "supercharge our administration's ambitious plan to confront the existential threat of climate change."

Biden has set a goal of eliminating pollution from fossil fuel in the power sector by 2035 and from the U.S. economy overall by 2050, speeding what is already a market-driven growth of solar and wind energy and lessening the country's dependence on oil and gas. The aggressive plan is aimed at slowing human-caused global warming that is magnifying extreme weather events such as deadly wildfires in the West and drenching rains and hurricanes in the East.

Biden acknowledged the political risk, repeatedly stating his approach would create jobs in the renewable energy and automotive sectors to offset any losses in oil, coal or natural gas.

"When I think of climate change and the answers to it, I think of jobs," Biden said. "These aren't pie-in-the-sky dreams. These are concrete actionable solutions. And we know how to do this."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 54 of 95

In a change from previous administrations of both parties, Biden also is directing agencies to focus help and investment on the low-income and minority communities that live closest to polluting refineries and other hazards, and the oil- and coal-patch towns that face job losses as the U.S. moves to sharply increase its reliance on wind, solar and other other energy sources that do not emit climate-warming greenhouse gases.

Biden pledged to create "millions of good-paying, union jobs" building electric cars, installing solar panels and wind turbines, and performing specialized work to cap abandoned wells, restore mine-scarred land and turn old industrial sites "into the new hubs of economic growth."

Even so, Republicans immediately criticized the plan as a job killer.

"Pie-in-the-sky government mandates and directives that restrict our mining, oil, and gas industries adversely impact our energy security and independence," said Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington state, the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Biden also is elevating the warming climate to a national security priority, directing intelligence agencies, the military and others to do more to prepare for the heightened risks. The conservation plan would set aside millions of acres for recreation, wildlife and climate efforts by 2030 as part of Biden's campaign pledge for a \$2 trillion program to slow global warming.

President Donald Trump, who ridiculed the science of climate change, withdrew the U.S. from the Paris global climate accord, opened more public lands to coal, gas and oil production and weakened regulation on fossil fuel emissions. Experts say these emissions are heating the Earth's climate dangerously and worsening floods, droughts and other natural disasters.

Currently, 61% of the nation's electric power comes from natural gas and coal, 20% from nuclear and 17% from wind, solar and other renewable energy, the U.S. Energy Information Administration says.

Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb said that "if this Day 7 momentum is representative of this administration's 4-year term, there is every reason to believe that we might achieve carbon neutrality sooner than 2050," even as key roadblocks lie ahead.

Biden's actions came as his nominee for energy secretary, former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, faced deep skepticism from Republicans as she tried to pitch the president's vision for a green economy.

"The last Democratic administration went on a regulatory rampage to slow or stop energy production," said Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, a leading Republican on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "I'm not going to sit idly by ... if the Biden administration enforces policies that threaten Wyoming's economy."

Granholm, whose state was devastated by the 2008 recession, promoted emerging clean energy technologies, such as battery manufacturing, as an answer for jobs that will be lost as the U.S. transitions away from fossil fuels.

Former Secretary of State John Kerry, now Biden's climate envoy, said oil, gas and coal workers "have been fed a false narrative" that "somehow, dealing with climate is coming at their expense. No, it's not. What's happening to them is happening because of other market forces already taking place."

Instead of possible black lung disease, a miner would have a brighter future as a solar power technician, Kerry said. "The same people can do those jobs, but the choice of doing the solar power one now is a better choice."

The oil industry said curtailing domestic production will lead to an increase in imported oil.

"I don't think any American wants to go back to the days of being held hostage to foreign entities that don't have America's best interest at heart as we lose American energy leadership," said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute.

Sommers and other industry leaders warned that states could lose hundreds of thousands of jobs and critical funding. Nearly one-third of New Mexico's state budget comes from oil and gas, said Ryan Flynn, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association.

Biden's directive to double energy production from offshore wind comes after the Trump administration slowed permit review of some giant offshore wind turbine projects. Significantly, he is directing agencies

to eliminate spending that acts as subsidies for fossil fuel industries.

The pause in onshore leasing is limited to federal lands and does not affect drilling on private lands, which is largely regulated by states. It also will not affect existing leases and could be further blunted by companies that stockpiled enough drilling permits in Trump's final months to allow them to keep pumping oil and gas for years.

The order exempts tribal lands, mainly in the West, that are used for energy production.

Biden also directed U.S. agencies to use science and evidence-based decision-making in federal rules and announced a U.S.-hosted climate leaders summit on Earth Day, April 22.

Associated Press writers Alexandra Jaffe and Brian Slodysko in Washington and Cathy Bussewitz in New York contributed to this report.

Virus aid package tests whether Biden, Congress can deliver

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than a sweeping national rescue plan, President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package presents a first political test — of his new administration, of Democratic control of Congress and of the role of Republicans in a post-Trump political landscape.

For Biden, the outcome will test the strength of his presidency, his "unity" agenda and whether, after decades of deal-making, he can still negotiate a hard bargain and drive it into law.

For House and Senate Democrats with the full sweep of power for the first time in a decade, drafting, amending and passing a recovery package will show Americans if they can lead the government through crisis.

And for Republicans, the final roll-call vote will indicate whether they plan to be constructive advocates of the minority party or just-say-no obstructionists without former President Donald Trump.

"This is an opportunity for the Democrats to put forward the things that people went to the polls, put them in office to do," said Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, an advocacy organization.

"It's just really hard to speculate about failure," he said. "It's something that I think, you know, we really can't face. So many of our communities are in dire straits."

The immediate challenge is whether Biden will be able to muscle bipartisan support in Congress, achieving a type of unifying moment he aspired to in his inaugural address, or if opposition from Republicans or even some from his own party will leave him few options but to jam it into law on a party-line vote.

The days and weeks ahead, against the backdrop of Trump's impeachment trial on a charge of inciting an insurrection with the U.S. Capitol siege, will set the tone, tenor and parameters of what will be possible in Washington.

Success would give Biden a signature accomplishment in his first 100 days in office, unleashing \$400 billion to expand vaccinations and to reopen schools, \$1,400 direct payments to households, and other priorities, including a gradual increase in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. It would establish his presidency as a force to be reckoned with.

Failure to deliver a deal that has widespread political and popular support would show the limits of Democrats' reach, despite unified party control, and the power of Republicans poised to capitalize on any early stumbles in their efforts to regain control.

"What the president has proposed and what we are working on in support is to robustly and quickly help everyone," said Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, a member of party leadership.

"Everybody's lives have been turned upside-down, let's face it," she said. "We're going to work our hearts out to get that done."

With an evenly divided Senate and a slim majority in the House, Democrats are operating as if they know they are borrowed time, rushing into the Biden era as if there is not a minute to waste.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., is pushing ahead next week, laying the groundwork for a go-it-alone approach that could allow passage with a simple 51-vote majority, rather than the 60-vote

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 56 of 95

threshold that's typically needed to advance legislation, under a reconciliation package that is being prepared by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., the incoming Budget Committee chair.

In the House, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., announced abrupt schedule changes to work on the COVID-19 package before the March expiration of vital lifelines for Americans, including unemployment assistance and an eviction moratorium.

There's a bit of a carrot-stick strategy at work — the White House meeting privately with bipartisan groups of lawmakers to develop a compromise proposal that could win robust support, while congressional Democrats warn they will proceed with or without Republicans.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, who is leading a bipartisan group with Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., is talking to the White House about an alternative package that even some Democrats would prefer.

"I think any talk of budget reconciliation as a tool at this stage is off the mark," said Rep. Jared Golden, D-Maine, who is part of a similar bipartisan effort in the House.

The White House has launched a full push deploying Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and other top officials to talk with lawmakers while trying to gather public support in talks with a wide range of civic and economic leaders.

"This isn't just about speaking to elected officials — it's about speaking to the country," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki.

The first 100 days of a new administration and Congress are peak opportunities for legislating and precious moments to accomplish big things before midterm elections and campaigns draw partisan battle lines.

The Democrats' hold on the Senate, split 50-50 with Harris able to cast a tie-breaking vote, is particularly fragile. The reality hit home when 80-year-old Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., was taken to a hospital late Tuesday after presiding over the start of the impeachment trial. He returned to work Wednesday, but for several hours, the Democrats' brand-new Senate majority looked to be at stake.

Biden was just coming into office as vice president amid the 2009 financial crisis, and the battles from that political era are all too familiar.

The Obama administration and a Democratic-held Congress swiftly proposed the nearly \$800 billion American Recovery and Relief Act.

Around that time, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., vowed to make President Barack Obama a one-term president, and House Republicans privately decided to unanimously oppose the recovery bill. It ended up passing with hardly any GOP votes.

The Republicans later campaigned against the aid, deriding it as big-government overreach, though many economists estimated the package should have been bigger as economic conditions worsened.

"Nobody thinks our bipartisan work fighting this pandemic is completely finished," McConnell said this week.

But McConnell said Biden's sweeping plan "misses the mark." Instead, he said, "Any further action should be smart and targeted, not just an imprecise deluge of borrowed money that would direct huge sums toward those who don't need it."

Democrats appear willing to negotiate but unwilling to spend precious political capital waiting to broker deals with Republicans that may or may not happen.

Just as McConnell used the budget tool to pass the Trump tax cuts on a simple 51-vote procedure, Democrats are poised to do the same for Biden's first legislative priority.

"We must not repeat the mistakes of 2008-2009," Schumer said Wednesday.

"We want to work with our Republican colleagues if we can," he said. "But if our Republican colleagues decide to oppose the necessary, robust COVID-relief, we will have to move forward without them."

Associated Press writer Josh Boak contributed to this report.

GOP tested anew by Georgia congresswoman's Facebook activity

By WILL WEISSERT and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 57 of 95

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans have a Marjorie Taylor Greene problem. Again.

Before she joined the House this month, Greene supported Facebook posts that advocated violence against Democrats and the FBI. One suggested shooting House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the head. In response to a post raising the prospect of hanging former President Barack Obama, Greene responded that the “stage is being set.”

While some Republicans condemned the activity, it was hardly a surprise. The Georgia Republican has expressed support for QAnon conspiracy theories, which focus on the debunked belief that top Democrats are involved in child sex trafficking, Satan worship and cannibalism. Facebook videos surfaced last year showing she’d expressed racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim views. Top Republicans denounced her at the time, hoping to block her from capturing the GOP nomination for her reliably red congressional district in northwest Georgia.

The opposition faded, however, when Greene won the primary and was essentially guaranteed a seat in Congress. By the time she was sworn into office, Greene had ridden with President Donald Trump on Air Force One during his final days in office.

Republican leaders are now confronting a conundrum of their own making. The party largely embraced Greene after she won the primary, making it harder for them to distance themselves from her, especially when many of her views were already well known.

The dynamic raises questions about the GOP’s ability — or interest — in moving past Trump-style politics after the former president spent years advancing conspiracy theories of his own.

“Trump didn’t hijack the party, the party became Donald Trump,” said Stuart Stevens, co-founder of the Lincoln Project, a conservative group that staunchly opposes Trump. “They’re radicals.”

CNN reported on Greene’s Facebook posts, which have since been deleted. She tweeted responses before the story was posted that didn’t dispute their authenticity or disavow them, saying instead: “Many posts have been liked. Many posts have been shared. Some did not represent my views.”

Still, there’s greater pressure on political leaders to address extremism after a pro-Trump mob staged a deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. California Democratic Rep. Jimmy Gomez announced Wednesday night that he was readying a resolution to expel Greene from Congress because of her past social media activity.

In a statement to Axios, a spokesman for House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy called the posts “deeply disturbing and Leader McCarthy plans to have a conversation with the Congresswoman about them.”

It’s unclear when that conversation may happen. McCarthy plans to fly to Florida on Thursday to meet with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel called the posts “disgusting,” adding that they have “no place in our party” and “should be looked into.”

But McDaniel also spoke to a QAnon issue that goes beyond Greene.

“I think it’s really important, after what’s just happened in our country, that we have some self reflection on the violence that’s continuing to erupt,” McDaniel said in an interview. “I think QAnon is beyond fringe. I think it’s dangerous. We should be looking at that and making sure we don’t mince words and when we say that we can’t support groups that are initiating violence.”

The FBI has called QAnon a domestic terrorism threat and the Department of Homeland Security issued a national terrorism bulletin Wednesday warning of the potential for lingering violence from extremists enraged by President Joe Biden’s election and emboldened by the attack on the Capitol.

Greene’s situation is somewhat reminiscent of former Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, who was stripped of all his committee assignments by his own party’s House leadership after expressing support for white supremacists in 2019. National GOP groups shunned King in the party’s Iowa primary and he was defeated, but he steadfastly maintained that he was adhering to his constituents’ beliefs more than most of the rest of his party.

“I’ve always told you the truth,” King said in an online message to his district’s voters the day of the primary. “Whatever they might say about Steve King, I have never let you down.”

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 58 of 95

Greene was named this week to the House Education and Labor Committee. There was no immediate word on whether she will face a similar sanction as King.

Greene's online agitation, meanwhile, goes beyond past Facebook posts — including making a video that falsely suggested the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting that killed 58 people was staged to advance gun control legislation.

Since winning her congressional seat, Greene has sought to capitalize on her growing national notoriety with conservatives, spending more than \$206,000 to lure in new donors through Parler, a social media site favored by Trump supporters and right-wing extremists.

The site was effectively booted from the internet following the mayhem at the Capitol after Amazon, which hosted the site, decided Parler wasn't doing enough to police users who incited violence. Before its removal, Greene's spending super-charged her presence on Parler, with some of her posts reaching millions of users, according to an analysis of data by The Associated Press.

She frequently attacked Democrats and railed against coronavirus pandemic safety measures, like mask-wearing. Greene also called on Congress to overturn the results of Biden's election.

"I'm tired of seeing weak-kneed Republicans play defense. I will go on the attack," Greene said in a Nov. 18 post. "It's our 1776 moment!" she posted the day before the mob overran the Capitol.

"You have members of Congress who do not feel safe at work right now because of the violent attempted coup," said Melissa Ryan, CEO of consultancy group Card Strategies, which researches online disinformation and right-wing extremism. "And then you have politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene who are not just stoking the fear, but using it as a fundraising tool."

Greene is now texting supporters, seeking to raise money for her attempt to "impeach Biden." The fine print of her solicitations, however, shows that any funds she takes in will instead be routed to her campaign account.

Associated Press writers Steve Peoples and Jill Colvin and data journalist Larry Fenn contributed to this report.

Oregon puts debate over race in vaccine rollout to test

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — The role that race should play in deciding who gets priority for the COVID-19 vaccine in the next phase of the rollout is being put to the test in Oregon as tensions around equity and access to the shots emerge nationwide.

An advisory committee that provides recommendations to Oregon's governor and public health authorities will vote Thursday on whether to prioritize people of color, target those with chronic medical conditions or focus on some combination of groups at higher risk from the coronavirus. Others, such as essential workers, refugees, inmates and people under 65 living in group settings, are also being considered.

The 27-member committee in Oregon, a Democratic-led state that's overwhelmingly white, was formed with the goal of keeping fairness at the heart of its vaccine rollout. Its members were selected to include racial minorities and ethnic groups, from Somalian refugees to Pacific Islanders to tribes. The committee's recommendations are not binding but provide critical input for Gov. Kate Brown and guide health authorities crafting the rollout.

"It's about revealing the structural racism that remains hidden. It influences the disparities we experienced before the pandemic and exacerbated the disparities we experienced during the pandemic," said Kelly Gonzales, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and a health disparity expert on the committee.

The virus has disproportionately affected people of color. Last week, the Biden administration reemphasized the importance of including "social vulnerability" in state vaccination plans — with race, ethnicity and the rural-urban divide at the forefront — and asked states to identify "pharmacy deserts" where getting shots into arms will be difficult.

Overall, 18 states included ways to measure equity in their original vaccine distribution plans last fall —

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 59 of 95

and more have likely done so since the shots started arriving, said Harald Schmidt, a medical ethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who has studied vaccine fairness extensively.

Some, such as Tennessee, proposed reserving 5% of its allocation for "high-disadvantage areas," while states like Ohio plan to use social vulnerability factors to decide where to distribute vaccine, he said. California has developed its own metrics for assessing a community's level of need, and Oregon is doing the same.

"We've been telling a fairly simple story: 'Vaccines are here.' Now we have to tell a more complicated story," said Nancy Berlinger, who studies bioethics at The Hastings Center, a nonpartisan and independent research institute in Garrison, New York. "We have to think about all the different overlapping areas of risk, rather than just the group we belong to and our personal network."

Attempts to address inequities in vaccine access have already prompted backlashes in some places. Dallas authorities recently reversed a decision to prioritize the most vulnerable ZIP codes — primarily communities of color — after Texas threatened to reduce the city's vaccine supply. That kind of pushback is likely to become more pronounced as states move deeper into the rollout and wrestle with difficult questions about need and short supply.

To avoid legal challenges, almost all states looking at race and ethnicity in their vaccine plans are turning to a tool called a "social vulnerability index" or a "disadvantage index." Such an index includes more than a dozen data points — everything from income to education level to health outcomes to car ownership — to target disadvantaged populations without specifically citing race or ethnicity.

By doing so, the index includes many minority groups because of the impact of generations of systemic racism while also scooping up socioeconomically disadvantaged people who are not people of color and avoiding "very, very difficult and toxic questions" on race, Schmidt said.

"The point is not, 'We want to make sure that the Obama family gets the vaccine before the Clinton family.' We don't care. They can both safely wait," he said. "We do care that the person who works in a meatpacking plant in a crowded living situation does get it first. It's not about race, it's about race and disadvantage."

In Oregon, health leaders are working on a social vulnerability index, including looking at U.S. census data and then layering on things like occupational status and income levels, said Rachael Banks, public health division director at the Oregon Health Authority.

That approach "gets beyond an individual perspective and to more of a community perspective" and is better than asking a person to prove "how they fit into any demographic," she said.

The committee's recommendations also will undergo a legal analysis, Banks said.

That makes sense to Roberto Orellana, a social work professor at Portland State University who launched a program to train his students to do contact tracing in Hispanic communities. Data shows that Hispanic people have roughly a 300% higher risk of contracting COVID-19 than their white counterparts in Oregon.

Orellana hopes his students, who are interning at state agencies and organizations, can put their knowledge to use both in contact tracing and in advocating for vaccines in migrant and farmworker communities. Vaccinating essential workers, prisoners and those in multigenerational households will reach people of color and put them at the heart of the vaccine plan, he said.

"I don't want to take away from any other group. It's a hard, hard question, and every group has valid needs and valid concerns. We shouldn't be going through this," Orellana said. "We should have vaccines for everybody — but we're not there."

Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative corps member Sara Cline contributed to this report. Follow Flaccus on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/gflaccus>.

Biden: 'We can't wait any longer' to address climate crisis

By MATTHEW DALY and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the most ambitious U.S. effort to stave off the worst of climate change, President Joe Biden signed executive orders Wednesday to transform the nation's heavily fossil-fuel powered

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 60 of 95

economy into a clean-burning one, pausing oil and gas leasing on federal land and targeting subsidies for those industries.

The directives aim to conserve 30 percent of the country's lands and waters in the next 10 years, double the nation's offshore wind energy, and move to an all-electric federal vehicle fleet, among other changes. Biden's sweeping plan is aimed at staving off the worst of global warming caused by burning fossil fuels.

But his effort it also carries political risk for the president and Democrats as oil- and coal-producing states face job losses from moves to sharply increase U.S. reliance on clean energy such as wind and solar power.

"We can't wait any longer" to address the climate crisis, Biden said at the White House. "We see with our own eyes. We know it in our bones. It is time to act."

He said his orders will "supercharge our administration's ambitious plan to confront the existential threat of climate change."

Biden has set a goal of eliminating pollution from fossil fuel in the power sector by 2035 and from the U.S. economy overall by 2050, speeding what is already a market-driven growth of solar and wind energy and lessening the country's dependence on oil and gas. The aggressive plan is aimed at slowing human-caused global warming that is magnifying extreme weather events such as deadly wildfires in the West and drenching rains and hurricanes in the East.

Biden acknowledged the political risk, repeatedly stating his approach would create jobs in the renewable energy and automotive sectors to offset any losses in oil, coal or natural gas.

"When I think of climate change and the answers to it, I think of jobs," Biden said. "These aren't pie-in-the-sky dreams. These are concrete actionable solutions. And we know how to do this."

In a change from previous administrations of both parties, Biden also is directing agencies to focus help and investment on the low-income and minority communities that live closest to polluting refineries and other hazards, and the oil- and coal-patch towns that face job losses as the U.S. moves to sharply increase its reliance on wind, solar and other other energy sources that do not emit climate-warming greenhouse gases.

Biden pledged to create "millions of good-paying, union jobs" building electric cars, installing solar panels and wind turbines, and performing specialized work to cap abandoned wells, restore mine-scarred land and turn old industrial sites "into the new hubs of economic growth."

Even so, Republicans immediately criticized the plan as a job killer.

"Pie-in-the-sky government mandates and directives that restrict our mining, oil, and gas industries adversely impact our energy security and independence," said Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington state, the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Biden also is elevating the warming climate to a national security priority, directing intelligence agencies, the military and others to do more to prepare for the heightened risks. The conservation plan would set aside millions of acres for recreation, wildlife and climate efforts by 2030 as part of Biden's campaign pledge for a \$2 trillion program to slow global warming.

President Donald Trump, who ridiculed the science of climate change, withdrew the U.S. from the Paris global climate accord, opened more public lands to coal, gas and oil production and weakened regulation on fossil fuel emissions. Experts say these emissions are heating the Earth's climate dangerously and worsening floods, droughts and other natural disasters.

Currently, 61% of the nation's electric power comes from natural gas and coal, 20% from nuclear and 17% from wind, solar and other renewable energy, the U.S. Energy Information Administration says.

Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb said that "if this Day 7 momentum is representative of this administration's 4-year term, there is every reason to believe that we might achieve carbon neutrality sooner than 2050," even as key roadblocks lie ahead.

Biden's actions came as his nominee for energy secretary, former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, faced deep skepticism from Republicans as she tried to pitch the president's vision for a green economy.

"The last Democratic administration went on a regulatory rampage to slow or stop energy production," said Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, a leading Republican on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "I'm not going to sit idly by ... if the Biden administration enforces policies that threaten Wyo-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 61 of 95

ming's economy."

Granholm, whose state was devastated by the 2008 recession, promoted emerging clean energy technologies, such as battery manufacturing, as an answer for jobs that will be lost as the U.S. transitions away from fossil fuels.

Former Secretary of State John Kerry, now Biden's climate envoy, said oil, gas and coal workers "have been fed a false narrative" that "somehow, dealing with climate is coming at their expense. No, it's not. What's happening to them is happening because of other market forces already taking place."

Instead of possible black lung disease, a miner would have a brighter future as a solar power technician, Kerry said. "The same people can do those jobs, but the choice of doing the solar power one now is a better choice."

The oil industry said curtailing domestic production will lead to an increase in imported oil.

"I don't think any American wants to go back to the days of being held hostage to foreign entities that don't have America's best interest at heart as we lose American energy leadership," said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute.

Sommers and other industry leaders warned that states could lose hundreds of thousands of jobs and critical funding. Nearly one-third of New Mexico's state budget comes from oil and gas, said Ryan Flynn, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association.

Biden's directive to double energy production from offshore wind comes after the Trump administration slowed permit review of some giant offshore wind turbine projects. Significantly, he is directing agencies to eliminate spending that acts as subsidies for fossil fuel industries.

The pause in onshore leasing is limited to federal lands and does not affect drilling on private lands, which is largely regulated by states. It also will not affect existing leases and could be further blunted by companies that stockpiled enough drilling permits in Trump's final months to allow them to keep pumping oil and gas for years.

The order exempts tribal lands, mainly in the West, that are used for energy production.

Biden also directed U.S. agencies to use science and evidence-based decision-making in federal rules and announced a U.S.-hosted climate leaders summit on Earth Day, April 22.

Associated Press writers Alexandra Jaffe and Brian Slodysko in Washington and Cathy Bussewitz in New York contributed to this report.

Oscar-winning, 'irreplaceable' Cloris Leachman dies at 94

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Cloris Leachman, an Oscar-winner for her portrayal of a lonely housewife in "The Last Picture Show" and a comedic delight as the fearsome Frau Blücher in "Young Frankenstein" and self-absorbed neighbor Phyllis on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," has died. She was 94.

Leachman died in her sleep of natural causes at her home in Encinitas, California, publicist Monique Moss said Wednesday. Her daughter Dinah Englund was at her side, Moss said.

A character actor of extraordinary range, Leachman defied typecasting. In her early television career, she appeared as Timmy's mother on the "Lassie" series. She played a frontier prostitute in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," a crime spree family member in "Crazy Mama," and Blücher in Mel Brooks' "Young Frankenstein," in which the very mention of her name drew equine commentary.

"Every time I hear a horse whinny I will forever think of Cloris' unforgettable Frau Blücher," Brooks tweeted, calling Leachman "insanely talented" and "irreplaceable."

Salutes from other admiring colleagues poured in on social media. Steve Martin said Leachman "brought comedy's mysteries to the big and small screen." "Nothing I could say would top the enormity of my love for you," posted Ed Asner of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." "Applause on every entrance and exit," said Rosie O'Donnell.

"There was no one like Cloris. With a single look she had the ability to break your heart or make you

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 62 of 95

laugh 'till the tears ran down your face," Juliet Green, her longtime manager, said in a statement.

In 1989, Leachman toured in "Grandma Moses," a play in which she aged from 45 to 101. For three years in the 1990s she appeared in major cities as the captain's wife in the revival of "Show Boat." In the 1993 movie version of "The Beverly Hillbillies," she assumed the Irene Ryan role as Granny Clampett.

She also had an occasional role as Ida on "Malcolm in the Middle," winning Emmys in 2002 and 2006 for that show. Her Emmy haul over the years totaled eight, including two trophies for Moore's sitcom, tying her with Julia Louis-Dreyfus as the top Emmy winners among performers.

In 2008, Leachman joined the ranks of contestants in "Dancing With the Stars," not lasting long in the competition but pleasing the crowds with her sparkly dance costumes, perching herself on judges' laps and cussing during the live broadcast.

She started out as Miss Chicago in the Miss America Pageant and willingly accepted unglamorous screen roles.

"Basically I don't care how I look, ugly or beautiful," she told an interviewer in 1973. "I don't think that's what beauty is. On a single day, any of us is ugly or beautiful. I'm heartbroken I can't be the witch in 'The Wizard of Oz.' But I'd also like to be the good witch. Phyllis combines them both.

"I'm kind of like that in life. I'm magic, and I believe in magic. There's supposed to be a point in life when you aren't supposed to stay believing that. I haven't reached it yet."

During the 1950s, Leachman became busy in live TV drama, demonstrating her versatility, including in roles that represented casting standards of that era.

"One week I'd be on as a Chinese girl, the next as a blond cockney and weeks later as a dark-haired someone else," she recalled. In 1955, she made her film debut in a hard-boiled Mickey Spillane saga, "Kiss Me Deadly" — "I was the naked blonde that Mike Hammer picked up on that dark highway."

She followed with Rod Serling's court-martial drama, "The Rack," and a season on "Lassie." She continued in supporting roles on Broadway and in movies, then achieved her triumph with Peter Bogdanovich's "The Last Picture Show," based on the Larry McMurtry novel.

When Leachman received the Oscar as best supporting actress of 1971, she delivered a rambling speech in which she thanked her piano and dancing teachers and concluded: "This is for Buck Leachman, who paid the bills." Her father ran a lumber mill.

Despite her photogenic looks, she continued to be cast in character parts. Her most indelible role was Phyllis Lindstrom on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Phyllis often visited Mary's apartment, bringing laments about her husband Lars and caustic remarks about Mary and especially about her adversary, another tenant, Rhoda Morgenstern (Valerie Harper). Phyllis was so unexpectedly engaging that Leachman starred in a spinoff series of her own, "Phyllis," which ran on CBS from 1975 to 1977.

With "Young Frankenstein," Leachman became a member of "the Mel Brooks stock company," also appearing in "High Anxiety" and "History of the World, Part I." Her other films included Bogdanovich's "Daisy Miller," and "Texasville," repeating her role in "The Last Picture Show." In 2009, she released her autobiography, "Cloris," which made tabloid headlines for her recounting of a "wild" one-night stand with Gene Hackman.

Cloris Leachman grew up on the outskirts of Des Moines, Iowa, where she was born in 1926. The large family lived in an isolated wooden house with no running water, but the mother had ambitious ideas for her children. Cloris took piano lessons at the age of 5; since the family could not afford a piano, she practiced on a cardboard drawing of the keys.

"I'm going to be a concert pianist," the girl announced, and her mother encouraged her with bookings at churches and civic clubs. She arranged for Cloris to ride on a coal truck to Des Moines for an audition for a Drake University student play. She was given the role and appeared in other plays at a local theater. After high school, she won a scholarship to study drama at Northwestern University.

Admittedly a poor student, Leachman lasted only a year. As a lark while in the Chicago area, she tried out for a Miss Chicago beauty contest and was chosen. She competed in the 1946 Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, qualifying as a finalist. Her consolation prize: a \$1,000 talent scholarship.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 63 of 95

With new ambition, she went directly to New York, where she worked as an extra in a movie and understudied Nina Foch in the hit play "John Loves Mary."

More understudy jobs followed, and she enrolled at the Actors Studio to hone her craft. "I finally quit because of the smoking," she said later. "I couldn't stand that blue haze."

In 1953, Leachman married George Englund, later a film director and producer, and they had five children: Adam, Bryan, George, Morgan and Dinah. The couple divorced in 1979. Son Bryan Englund was found dead in 1986 at age 30.

AP writers Beth Harris in Los Angeles and Hillel Italie in New York contributed to this report.

The late AP Entertainment Writer Bob Thomas contributed biographical material to this story.

US terrorism alert warns of politically motivated violence

By BEN FOX and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Department of Homeland Security issued a national terrorism bulletin Wednesday warning of the lingering potential for violence from people motivated by antigovernment sentiment after President Joe Biden's election, suggesting the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol may embolden extremists and set the stage for additional attacks.

The department did not cite any specific plots, but pointed to "a heightened threat environment across the United States" that it believes "will persist" for weeks after Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration.

It is not uncommon for the federal government to warn local law enforcement through bulletins about the prospect for violence tied to a particular event or date, such as July 4.

But this particular bulletin, issued through the department's National Terrorism Advisory System, is notable because it effectively places the Biden administration into the politically charged debate over how to describe or characterize acts motivated by political ideology, and suggests it regards violence like the kind that overwhelmed the Capitol as akin to terrorism.

The bulletin is an indication that national security officials see a connective thread between different episodes of violence in the last year motivated by anti-government grievances, including over COVID-19 restrictions, the 2020 election results and police use of force. The document singles out crimes motivated by racial or ethnic hatred, such as the 2019 rampage targeting Hispanics in El Paso, Texas, as well as the threat posed by extremists motivated by foreign terror groups.

A DHS statement that accompanied the bulletin noted the potential for violence from "a broad range of ideologically-motivated actors."

"Information suggests that some ideologically-motivated violent extremists with objections to the exercise of governmental authority and the presidential transition, as well as other perceived grievances fueled by false narratives, could continue to mobilize to incite or commit violence," the bulletin said.

The alert comes at a tense time following the riot at the Capitol by supporters of then-President Donald Trump seeking to overturn the presidential election. Authorities are concerned that extremists may attack other symbols of government or people whose political views they oppose.

"The domestic terrorism attack on our Capitol earlier this month shined a light on a threat that has been right in front of our faces for years," said Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat and chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. "I am glad to see that DHS fully recognizes the threat posed by violent, right-wing extremists and is taking efforts to communicate that threat to the American people."

The alert was issued by acting Homeland Security Secretary David Pekoske. Biden's nominee for the Cabinet post, Alejandro Mayorkas, has not been confirmed by the Senate.

Two former homeland security secretaries, Michael Chertoff and Janet Napolitano, called on the Senate to confirm Mayorkas so he can start working with the FBI and other agencies and deal with the threat posed by domestic extremists, among other issues.

Chertoff, who served under President George W. Bush, said attacks by far-right, domestic extremists are not new but that deaths attributed to them in recent years in the U.S. have exceeded those linked to

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 64 of 95

jihadists such as al-Qaida. "We have to be candid and face what the real risk is," he said in a conference call with reporters.

Federal authorities have charged more than 150 people in the Capitol siege, including some with links to right-wing extremist groups such as the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers.

The Justice Department announced charges Wednesday against 43-year Ian Rogers, a California man found with five pipe bombs during a search of his business this month who had a sticker associated with the Three Percenters on his vehicle. His lawyer told his hometown newspaper, The Napa Valley Register, that he is a "very well-respected small business owner, father, and family man" who does not belong to any violent organizations.

AP Exclusive: GOP to stay neutral should Trump run again

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The head of the Republican National Committee on Wednesday declined to encourage former President Donald Trump to run for the White House in 2024, saying the GOP would stay "neutral" in its next presidential primary.

In an interview, RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel also described the pro-Trump conspiracy theory group known as QAnon as "dangerous."

The national GOP, under McDaniel's leadership, spent the past four years almost singularly focused on Trump's 2020 reelection. But should he run again in 2024 — and he has publicly and privately suggested he wants to — the national party infrastructure would not support his ambitions over those of other prospective candidates, in accordance with party rules, she said.

"The party has to stay neutral. I'm not telling anybody to run or not to run in 2024," McDaniel told The Associated Press when asked whether she wanted to see Trump run again in the next presidential election. "That's going to be up to those candidates going forward. What I really do want to see him do, though, is help us win back majorities in 2022."

Just months removed from the last presidential election, several Republican prospects have already begun jockeying for position for the 2024 contest. McDaniel is far more focused on the 2022 midterms, when Republicans have an opportunity to break the Democrats' monopoly on Congress.

McDaniel is in a difficult political position as she begins her new term as the national GOP chair.

She has been a devoted Trump loyalist, but as the RNC leader, she is also tasked with helping her party recover from its painful 2020 election season in which Republicans lost the Senate and the White House and failed to win back the House. Trump's fervent base continues to demand loyalty to the former president, even as some party officials acknowledge that Trump's norm-shattering behavior alienated elements of the coalition the GOP needs to win future elections.

Tensions are especially high within the party as the Senate prepares for Trump's second impeachment trial.

Ten House Republicans voted earlier in the month to impeach the former president for inciting the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, and on Tuesday, five Senate Republicans voted to move forward with a trial that could ultimately ban him from holding public office ever again.

McDaniel acknowledged the frustration of Trump's base, which remains a powerful voice in the party and has little tolerance for Republican officials unwilling to stand behind the former president and his achievements in office.

But she repeatedly called for party unity and discouraged elected officials from attacking other Republicans — even those who voted to impeach Trump.

She declined to single out any specific Republicans when pressed, however, including Trump loyalist Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., who is traveling to Wyoming this week to campaign against Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, the highest-ranking House Republican who voted for Trump's impeachment.

"If we're fighting each other every day and attacking each other and brandishing party purism, we're not going to accomplish what we need to to win back the House and take back the Senate, and that's my priority," McDaniel said.

She also forcefully condemned the pro-Trump QAnon movement, a large group of conspiracy theorists who were a visible presence at the Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6. Trump repeatedly declined to denounce the group while in the White House.

"I think it's really important after what's just happened in our country that we have some self-reflection on the violence that's continuing to erupt in our country," McDaniel said, pointing to violence across the political spectrum. "I think QAnon is beyond fringe. I think it's dangerous."

Moving forward, she said that voters, not Trump, are the head of the Republican Party, though Trump continues to maintain "a huge, huge presence" with his base.

McDaniel said she's expecting several Republican leaders to play a significant role in the party's future, mentioning former Vice President Mike Pence and Nikki Haley, the former ambassador to the United Nations. Both are also considered potential 2024 presidential contenders.

She also downplayed reports that Trump is considering leaving the GOP and starting a new party, warning that such a move would divide Republicans and "guarantee Democrat wins up and down the ticket.

"It would be basically a rubber stamp on Democrats getting elected. And I think that's the last thing that any Republican wants," she said. "It's clear that he understands that."

The Hammer makes one last trip to spot where he hit No. 715

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — The Hammer made one last trip to the spot where he hit No. 715.

After a nearly three-hour funeral service Wednesday that featured two former presidents, a long-time baseball commissioner and a civil rights icon, the hearse carrying Hank Aaron's body detoured off the road bearing his name to swing through the former site of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

That's where Aaron broke an iconic record on April 8, 1974, eclipsing the home run mark established by Babe Ruth.

The stadium was imploded in 1997 after the Braves moved across the street to Turner Field, replaced by a parking lot for the new ballpark. But the outer retaining wall of the old stadium remains, along with a modest display in the midst of the nondescript lot that marks the exact location where the record-breaking homer cleared the left-field fence.

A steady stream of baseball fans have been stopping by the site — comprised of a small section of fence, a wall and a baseball-shaped sign that says "Hank Aaron Home Run 715" — since "Hammerin' Hank" died Friday at the age of 86. The fence is now covered with flowers, notes and baseball memorabilia.

Fittingly, Aaron's funeral procession went by the display on the way to his burial at South-View Cemetery, the oldest Black burial ground in Atlanta and resting place for prominent civil rights leaders such as John Lewis and Julian Bond.

The police-escorted line of cars passed near the gold-domed Georgia state capitol, went under the tower that displayed the Olympic torch during the 1996 Atlanta Summer Games, and headed down Hank Aaron Drive.

At the bottom of a hill, the procession took a sharp right turn toward the site of the former stadium. Aaron's flower-covered hearse and all the vehicles that followed did a loop through the circular parking lot, which covers the footprint of the cookie-cutter stadium that became home of the Braves after they moved from Milwaukee in 1966.

It was a touching tribute that capped off several days of remembrances for one of baseball's greatest players. The Braves held a memorial ceremony Tuesday at their current home, suburban Truist Park.

The funeral service touched as much on Aaron's life beyond the field as it did his unparalleled baseball accomplishments, honoring his business acumen, charitable donations, and steadfast determination to provide educational opportunities for the underprivileged.

"His whole life was a home run," former President Bill Clinton said. "Now he has rounded the bases."

Clinton said the two became close friends after Aaron endorsed him during the 1992 presidential campaign, helping him pull out a narrow victory in Georgia. Clinton had been the last Democrat to win the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 66 of 95

state until Joe Biden edged Donald Trump in November.

"For the rest of his life, he never let me forget who was responsible for winning," Clinton quipped, drawing a few chuckles during the mostly somber ceremony. "Hank Aaron never bragged about anything — except carrying Georgia for me in 1992."

Bud Selig, who was commissioner of Major League Baseball for more than two decades and another close friend of Aaron's, said one of his fondest memories was being at Milwaukee's County Stadium as a fan for the pennant-clinching homer that sent the Braves to the 1957 World Series.

"The only ticket I could get was an obstructed-view seat in the bleachers behind a big, metal post," the 86-year-old Selig said. "The image of the great Aaron, deliriously happy, being hoisted on the shoulders of his teammates and carried off the field is indelibly imprinted in my memory."

Andrew Young, a top lieutenant of Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil right movement and a former Atlanta mayor, said Aaron helped transform his adopted hometown into one of America's most influential cities.

The Braves moved to the Deep South during an era of intense racial strife, Young pointed out, but having one of the game's greatest Black players helped ease some of the tensions.

Atlanta continued its explosive growth, eventually landing such major sporting events as the Olympics, multiple Super Bowls and World Series, as well as numerous college sports championships.

"Just his presence, before he hit a hit, changed this city," the 88-year-old Young said. "We've never been the same."

Only about 50 people attended the funeral service at Friendship Baptist Church because of COVID-19 restrictions. Others sent videotaped messages, including another former president, Jimmy Carter.

Remembering his tenure as governor of Georgia, the 96-year-old Carter joked that after the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce gave Aaron a new Cadillac, he followed up with "a \$10 tag" to go on the vehicle. It said "HLA 715," a nod to the initials for Henry Louis Aaron.

The two became close friends and even took vacation trips to Colorado with their wives. In one pursuit, at least, Carter was the better athlete.

"Hank and I both learned how to ski together," Carter said. "He skied fairly well. I was a little bit better than that on skis."

A longtime Braves fan, Carter noted he was at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium the night Aaron hit his iconic home run.

On Wednesday, the Hammer went there for the final time.

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In duel with small investors over GameStop, big funds blink

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN and STAN CHOE AP Business Writers

Across most of America, GameStop is just a place to buy a video game. On Wall Street, though, it's become a battleground where swarms of smaller investors see themselves making an epic stand against the 1%.

The funds serving the financial elite are starting to walk away in defeat. Big bets they made that GameStop's stock would fall went wrong, leaving them facing billions of dollars in collective losses. All the wild action pushed GameStop's stock as high as \$380 on Wednesday, up from \$18 just a few weeks ago.

The stunning seizure of power gives some validation to smaller-pocketed investors, many of whom are encouraging each other on Reddit and are trading stocks for the first time thanks to brokerages offering free-trading apps. It's also left more investors on Wall Street asking if the stock market is in a dangerous bubble about to pop, as AMC Entertainment, Bed Bath & Beyond and other downtrodden stocks suddenly

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 67 of 95

soar as well. The S&P 500 set a record high earlier this week, though it fell Wednesday.

Two investment firms that had placed bets for money-losing GameStop's stock to fall have essentially thrown in the towel. One, Citron Research, acknowledged Wednesday in a YouTube video that it unwound the majority of its bet and took "a loss, 100%" to do so. But Andrew Left, who runs Citron, said that does not change his view that GameStop's stock will eventually go down.

"We move on," Left said. "Nothing has changed with GameStop except the stock price," He also said he has "respect for the market," which can run stock prices up much higher than where critics say they should be, at least for a while.

Melvin Capital is also exiting GameStop, with manager Gabe Plotkin telling CNBC that the hedge fund was taking a significant loss. He denied rumors that the hedge fund will fail. The size of the losses taken by Citron and Melvin are unknown.

Before its recent explosion, GameStop's stock had been struggling for a long time. The company has been losing money for years as sales of video games increasingly go online, and its stock fell for six straight years before rebounding in 2020.

That pushed many professional investors to make bets that GameStop's stock will decline even further. In such bets, called "short sales," investors borrow a share and sell it in hopes of buying it back later at a lower price and pocketing the difference. GameStop is one of the most shorted stocks on Wall Street.

But its stock began rising sharply earlier this month after a co-founder of Chewy, the online seller of pet supplies, joined the company's board. The thought is that he could help in the company's transformation as it focuses more on digital sales and closes brick-and-mortar stores. Its shares jumped to \$19.94 from less than \$18 on Jan. 11. At the time, it seemed like a huge move for the stock.

Smaller investors were meanwhile exhorting each other online to keep GameStop's stock rolling higher.

The raucous discussions are full of sarcasm, self deprecation and emojis of rocket ships signifying belief that GameStop's stock will fly to the moon.

"WHAT IS AN ACTUAL RATIONAL SELLING POINT, (ABOVE 200? 500?) SO I DONT HAVE TO WATCH THIS TICKER EVERY SECOND UNTIL FRIDAY/MONDAY?????" one user wrote in a Reddit discussion Tuesday afternoon as GameStop soared. "I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'M DOING," adding that they had other things to do.

There is no overriding reason why GameStop has attracted this cavalcade of smaller and first-time investors, but there is a distinct component of revenge against Wall Street in communications online.

"The same rich people that caused the market crash in 2007/08 are still in power and continue to manipulate the market to get even richer, we are just taking back our fair share," one user wrote on Reddit.

"hey mom i can't come up for dinner," another user wrote. "i'm bankrupting a 10 figure hedge fund with the boys."

Beyond personal attacks, the battle has also created big financial losses for Wall Street players who shorted GameStop's stock.

As GameStop's gains grew and short sellers scrambled to get out of their bets, they had to buy shares to do so. That accelerated the momentum even more, creating a feedback loop. As of Tuesday, short sellers of GameStop were already down more than \$5 billion in 2021, according to S3 Partners.

Much of professional Wall Street remains pessimistic that GameStop's stock can hold onto its immense gains. The company is unlikely to start making big enough profits to justify its \$22.2 billion market valuation anytime soon, analysts say. The stock closed Wednesday at \$347.51. Analysts at BofA Global Research raised their price target Wednesday — to \$10.

All the mania is raising some concern that investors are taking excessive risks, and reporters asked Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell on Wednesday whether the Fed's moves to support markets through the pandemic is helping to push stock prices too high.

Powell downplayed the role of low interest rates and pointed to investors' expectations for COVID-19 vaccines and more stimulus from Washington for the economy as drivers for record stock prices.

The Securities and Exchange Commission said Wednesday that it's noticed all the volatility in the market,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 68 of 95

though it did not name GameStop specifically. The agency said it's "working with our fellow regulators to assess the situation and review the activities" of investors in the market.

Later Wednesday, the Reddit discussion group where much of the GameStop stock push has taken place, called r/WallStreetBets, was taken private, making it inaccessible to outsiders. Some longtime users also took to Twitter to say they could no longer access it. A Reddit representative confirmed that the group's moderators took it private but gave no other comment.

In addition, the gamer-friendly platform Discord shut down a text and audio chat group also called r/WallStreetBets for "continuing to allow hateful and discriminatory content after repeated warnings," the company said in a statement.

Discord said it has been monitoring that group — called a "server" for historical reasons — for "some time" due to repeated violations of its rules, including hate speech, glorifying violence and spreading misinformation and issued multiple warnings to its administrator.

"To be clear, we did not ban this server due to financial fraud related to GameStop or other stocks," Discord said. "We are monitoring this situation and in the event there are allegations of illegal activities, we will cooperate with authorities as appropriate."

AP Business Writers Alex Veiga and Barbara Ortutay contributed.

Asian shares drop after US stocks' worst day since October

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Asian shares skidded on Thursday as a reality check set in about longtime economic damage from the coronavirus pandemic, giving Wall Street its worst day since October.

Benchmarks in Japan, South Korea, Australia and China declined Thursday. The region is looking ahead to earnings season for a read on how companies are faring amid COVID-19 infections, which have been relatively low in some nations such as New Zealand, compared to other global regions.

Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 fell nearly 1.1% in morning trading to 28,321.89. Australia's S&P/ASX 200 slipped 1.9% to 6,651.90. South Korea's Kосpi sank 0.8% to 3,097.38. Hong Kong's Hang Seng dropped 1.1% to 28,975.69, while the Shanghai Composite shed 0.8% to 3,544.59.

The slow majority held by Democrats in the Senate has raised doubts over how soon the economy will get an infusion of fresh support after President Joe Biden proposed a \$1.9 trillion COVID-relief package. The plan might also be scaled back.

"Investors will likely focus on the pace of vaccinations around the globe while also keeping an eye on the progress of President Biden's fiscal rescue plan that may be facing some roadblocks in the U.S. Senate," Prakash Sakpal and Nicholas Mapa, senior economists at ING, said in a report.

Vaccine rollouts have not progressed in Asia as quickly as they have in the West, and worries are growing about a tug-of-war for the products from Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. Aside from China, which has its own vaccine, inoculations have not started on a mass scale in Asia, although approvals have either been granted or are on their way in most places, including Australia and Japan.

Outbreaks persist and have grown in some places such as Japan, where a third wave is claiming more lives at a much faster pace than last year, at more than 5,000 so far. Daily deaths had been mostly in single-digit figures until recently, but are now surpassing 100 people a day.

Adding to caution, the Federal Reserve said Wednesday it would keep its low interest rate policies in place, but it also released a sobering assessment of the gradual recovery ahead.

On Wall Street, a sell-off in technology companies sent shares tumbling in a reversal from the market's recent moves to record highs.

The S&P 500 fell 2.6% to 3,750.77. The Dow lost 2%, to 30,303.17. The Nasdaq slid 2.6%, to 13,270.60. The Russell 2000 index of smaller companies gave up 1.9%, to 2,108.70.

Facebook, Netflix and Google's parent company Alphabet led the pullback, which started early in the day as investors sized up the latest batch of company earnings reports. The market's skid accelerated toward

the end of the day.

Traders were also focused on the eye-popping surge in GameStop, a money-losing video game seller that has become the focus of a battle between small investors bidding it higher and big hedge funds betting it will fall.

Some analysts said the selling was at least partly a reaction to the outsized moves in GameStop, AMC Entertainment and select other previously beaten-down stocks that have notched massive gains in recent days after gaining favor with an online community of individual investors.

The volatile trading caught the attention of officials in the highest levels of government. The White House said the Biden administration, including the Treasury Department, are monitoring the situation. The Securities and Exchange Commission said it was keeping an eye on the stock and options markets. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell was asked about the GameStop trading frenzy at a news conference but declined to comment about it.

The surge in volatility was reflected in the VIX, a measure of fear in the U.S. stock market, which surged more than 60% to its highest level since October 30. Treasury yields moved lower, another sign of caution in the market.

Investors are also focusing on company earnings. More than 100 companies in the S&P 500 are scheduled to tell investors this week how they fared during the last three months of 2020. As a whole, analysts expect S&P 500 companies to say their fourth-quarter profit fell 5% from a year earlier. That's a milder drop than the 9.4% they were forecasting earlier this month, according to FactSet.

Boeing dropped 4% after the aircraft manufacturer posted its largest annual loss in the company's history, mostly due to the grounding of Boeing's 737-MAX fleet.

Markets had been meandering near record highs since last week as investors weighed solid corporate earnings results against renewed worries that troubles with COVID-19 vaccine rollouts and the spread of new variants of coronavirus might delay a recovery from the pandemic.

"The real economy isn't reflective of what's happening in financial markets and there really is a disconnect there," said Charlie Ripley, senior investment strategist for Allianz Investment Management.

In energy trading, benchmark U.S. crude lost 14 cents to \$52.71 a barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It picked up 24 cents to \$52.85 per barrel overnight. Brent crude, the international standard, fell 20 cents to \$55.61 a barrel.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar edged up to 104.26 Japanese yen from 104.12 yen. The euro cost \$1.2104, inching down from \$1.2112.

AP Business Writers Damian J. Troise, Ken Sweet and Alex Veiga contributed.

States lift restrictions gradually amid fears of new variant

By DAVID EGGERT and DON BABWIN Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — States are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving gradually and cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S.

While the easing could cause case rates to rise, health experts say it can work if done in a measured way and if the public remains vigilant about masks and social distancing.

"If the frequency goes up, you tighten it up. If the frequency goes down, you loosen up. Getting it just right is almost impossible," said Dr. Arnold Monto, a public health professor at the University of Michigan. "There's no perfect way to do this."

As Michigan's coronavirus rate dropped to the nation's fifth-lowest over the last two weeks, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said bars and restaurants can welcome indoor customers next week for the first time in 2 1/2 months. But they will be under a 10 p.m. curfew and will be limited to 25% of capacity, or half of what was allowed the last time she loosened their restrictions, in June.

The state previously authorized the resumption of in-person classes at high schools and the partial

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 70 of 95

reopening of movie theaters.

"We're in a stronger position because we've taken this pause," Whitmer said. "But we are also very mindful of the fact that this variant is now here in Michigan. It poses a real threat."

The COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. has climbed past 425,000, with the number of dead running at close to all-time highs at nearly 3,350 a day on average.

But newly confirmed cases have dropped over the past two weeks from an average of about 248,000 per day to around 166,000. And the number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 has fallen by tens of thousands to 109,000.

At the same time, health experts have warned that the more contagious and possibly more lethal variant sweeping Britain will probably become the dominant source of infection in the U.S. by March. It has been reported in over 20 states.

Other mutant versions are circulating in South Africa and Brazil. The Brazil variant has been detected for the first time in the U.S., in Minnesota.

Chicago and surrounding suburbs allowed indoor dining over the weekend for the first time since October. Major cultural attractions including the Field Museum and Shedd Aquarium reopened with crowd limits.

Steve Lombardo III, an owner of a Chicago-area restaurant group, called being able to seat customers indoors a "huge boost." One of its most famous restaurants, Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse, has been using hospital-grade air filtration systems in the hopes of staying afloat, he said.

"Will we be making money? Probably not," Lombardo said. "But we won't be hemorrhaging money like we have the last three months."

Washington, D.C., also recently ended its monthlong ban on indoor dining, but one in New York City remains in effect.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom this week lifted stay-at-home orders he imposed last month when hospitals were so overwhelmed with virus patients that they were on the verge of rationing lifesaving care. Restaurants and places of worship will be able to operate outdoors, and many stores will be able to have more shoppers inside.

Jen Diaz, a 38-year-old technical writer from Santa Clarita, California, who works remotely and has not left her home since a trip to the supermarket in March, said she was "horrified" when she heard the governor's announcement. She has rheumatoid arthritis, and her treatments suppress her immune system, but she has yet to receive a vaccination because she is under 65.

"I was really, really proud of California's response at first" in the early months of the pandemic, she said. "Suddenly we're just opening everything. 'Let's go to the mall!'"

She added: "The government doesn't seem to be taking this as seriously as it once did, on a state level."

In Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown announced that some indoor operations such as gyms and movie theaters can reopen Friday with limited capacity. Indoor dining is still banned in the hardest-hit counties.

Not all places are taking as cautious an approach.

After North Dakota dropped to the nation's second-lowest case rate, Republican Gov. Doug Burgum this month not only relaxed limits on the number of people who can gather at restaurants and bars but also allowed a statewide mask mandate to expire last week.

"The fight is far from over, but we can certainly see the light of the end of the tunnel from here," Burgum said.

Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean for public health practice and community engagement at Johns Hopkins University and Maryland's former health department chief, cautioned such a step can carry heavy risk.

"I don't think it's unreasonable to start to reopen, but if people think that's the green light to pretend the virus doesn't exist, then we're going to be right back to where we were," Sharfstein said. "If you do restrictions, the virus goes down. You can open up and see how it goes. But if the variants really take hold, that may not be so easy."

Many restaurants say they cannot survive offering only takeout during the winter, when the cold makes it difficult if not impossible to offer outdoor dining.

Rick Bayless, one of the most decorated chefs in the U.S., said allowing indoor dining at his Mexican

restaurants in Chicago may buy him some time.

"With 25% indoor we might be able to make it to the spring, when people will want to go outdoors," he said.

Bayless said the business survived a previous shutdown only because his landlord allowed him to stay rent-free for three months. The uncertainty has taken a toll on his workers, he said.

"It's been touch-and-go. When they allowed us to open up on Saturday, we had staff in here that were literally in tears," Bayless said.

Babwin reported from Chicago. Associated Press writer Sophia Tareen in Chicago contributed to this report.

Proud Boys leader was government informant, records show

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

The leader of the Proud Boys, who was arrested in Washington shortly before the Capitol riot, previously worked undercover and cooperated with investigators after he was accused of fraud in 2012, court documents show.

Henry "Enrique" Tarrío helped law enforcement in a variety of investigations nearly a decade ago by providing information and going undercover, the records show.

The Proud Boys is a far-right, male chauvinist extremist group that seized on the Trump administration's policies and was a major agitator during earlier protests and the Capitol riot on Jan. 6. The Proud Boys have railed against a "deep state" and work to break down the current government system, and so the revelations of Tarrío as a federal informant came as quite a surprise.

The details of Tarrío's cooperation, which was first reported Wednesday by Reuters, were found in a transcript of a 2014 hearing in federal court in Florida regarding his sentence for participating in a scheme involving the resale of diabetic test strips.

The prosecutor and Tarrío's defense attorney both cited Tarrío's extensive cooperation in arguing that his sentence of 30 months should be cut. The judge agreed to reduce his sentence to 16 months, the records show.

"Your Honor, frankly, in all the years, which is now more than 30 that I've been doing this, I've never had a client as prolific in terms of cooperating in any respect," said Tarrío's lawyer at the time, Jeffrey Feiler, according to the transcript.

An email seeking comment was not immediately returned from a lawyer representing Tarrío in his current case. In an interview with Reuters, Tarrío denied ever cooperating with authorities.

After Tarrío's 2012 indictment, he helped the government prosecute more than a dozen other people, the federal prosecutor told the judge, according to the transcript. Tarrío's lawyer said he was the first defendant to cooperate in the case and was also involved in a variety of police undercover operations involving things like anabolic steroids and prescription narcotics.

"From day one, he was the one who wanted to talk to law enforcement, wanted to clear his name, wanted to straighten this out so that he could move on with his life. And he has in fact cooperated in a significant way," the prosecutor said, according to the transcript.

Tarrío was arrested in Washington on Jan. 4, two days before the pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol in a bid to overturn President Joe Biden's victory.

He was accused of vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church during an earlier protest in the nation's capital. The banner was ripped from Asbury United Methodist Church property, torn and set aflame in December.

Tarrío was seen with the sign in video of the incident posted on YouTube, according to a police report. When police pulled Tarrío over, officers found two unloaded magazines emblazoned with the Proud Boys logo in his bag that had a capacity of 30 rounds each, authorities said.

Richer reported from Boston. Associated Press reporter Curt Anderson in St. Petersburg, Florida, contributed to this report.

Facebook Q4 results soar; Zuckerberg hits Apple over privacy

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Facebook capped a tumultuous 2020 with soaring earnings in the final quarter, but the company forecast challenges in 2021 that include a coming privacy update by Apple that could limit the social network's ad targeting capabilities.

The Apple move drew a rare public rebuke from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who during a conference call accused Apple of favoring its own interests and not those of users.

Facebook said its already enormous user base grew in the fourth quarter as people stayed home during the pandemic and reported revenues buoyed by a shift to digital advertising amid coronavirus-related economic uncertainty.

But the company predicted uncertainty for 2021 and said its revenue in the latter half of the year could face significant pressure. Because revenue grew so quickly in the second half of 2020, the social network could have trouble keeping up that pace.

"Clearly the pandemic has also continued to help Facebook's monthly active user growth to remain strong in many regions, including in the U.S. and Canada, where prior to the pandemic, user gains had slowed to a crawl," said eMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson. But she noted that the number of daily users in this region declined, suggesting that people in the U.S. and Canada are moving elsewhere — probably TikTok, which grew quickly in 2020.

In the conference call with analysts, Zuckerberg came out swinging, saying Apple is fast becoming one of Facebook's "biggest competitors" due in part to its dominance in messaging on the iPhone. Apple, he said, "has every incentive" to use its own mobile platform to interfere with how rival apps work.

Apple will soon require apps to ask users for permission to collect data on what devices they are using and to let ads follow them around on the internet. Facebook has been pushing back against the changes, saying those rules could reduce what apps can earn by advertising through Facebook's audience network.

Of course, the Apple move also threatens Facebook's own advertising revenue. Zuckerberg, though, focused on what he sees as Apple's motives.

"Apple may say that they are doing this to help people, but the moves clearly track their competitive interests," Zuckerberg said.

Apple, meanwhile, says people should be empowered to have more control of their data. Executives have dismissed arguments from advertisers and companies like Facebook who say the anti-tracking feature will hurt the online ad industry.

"When invasive tracking is your business model, you tend not to welcome transparency and customer choice," Apple's software chief Craig Federighi said in December.

Facebook earned \$11.22 billion, or \$3.88 per share, in the October-December period, well above the \$3.19 that analysts expected and up 53% from a year earlier. Revenue grew 22% to \$28.07 billion, higher than the \$26.36 billion analysts were predicting, according to a poll by FactSet.

Its monthly user base grew 12% to 2.8 billion. Facebook ended 2020 with 58,604 employees, a 30% increase from a year earlier.

While Facebook does not break out how much it makes from Instagram, which it owns, eMarketer estimates that the app accounted for 36% of Facebook's total advertising revenue and nearly half of its U.S. ad revenue.

Shares of the Menlo Park, California-based company climbed \$1.23 to \$273.37 in after-hours trading. The stock price rose 33% in 2020.

Democrat floats Trump censure as conviction grows unlikely

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine said Wednesday that he's discussing with colleagues whether a censure resolution to condemn former President Donald Trump for his role in the deadly Jan.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 73 of 95

A 6 attack on the Capitol could be an alternative to impeachment, even as the Senate proceeds with a trial. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., has said the impeachment trial will move forward. But Kaine's proposal is an acknowledgement that the Senate is unlikely to convict Trump of inciting the riot, a troubling prospect for many lawmakers who believe Trump must be held accountable in some way for the Capitol attack. If he were convicted, the Senate could then hold a second vote to ban him from office.

A censure would not hold the power of a conviction, but it would put the Senate on record as disapproving of Trump's role in the insurrection, which came as Congress was counting electoral votes to confirm Democrat Joe Biden's victory. Just before Trump's supporters broke through windows and busted through the Capitol's doors, he gave a fiery speech outside the White House urging them to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat.

Talk of finding a punishment that more senators could rally around flared a day after just five Republicans joined Democrats in a Senate test vote over the legitimacy of Trump's trial. It was unclear, though, whether other Democrats, or any Republicans, would sign on to Kaine's proposal. House Democrats are busy preparing their formal case against the former president for inciting an insurrection, with arguments starting the week of Feb. 8.

"Make no mistake — there will be a trial, and the evidence against the former president will be presented, in living color, for the nation and every one of us to see," Schumer said Wednesday.

An angry mob of Trump supporters wanting to stop Congress' confirmation of Biden's victory invaded the Capitol, ransacking hallways and offices and attempting to break into the House chamber with lawmakers hiding inside. They rifled through desks on the empty Senate floor and hunted for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then-Vice President Mike Pence, who was in the Capitol overseeing the certification of Biden's election victory.

A week later, on Jan. 13, the Democratic-led House impeached Trump with the backing of 10 Republicans. The case was sent to the Senate on Monday.

Kaine, a Virginia senator, told reporters Wednesday that he has been talking to a "handful" of his colleagues for the last two weeks about the likelihood that Democrats would fall short of convicting Trump. A conviction would need the support of two-thirds of the senators, or 67 votes. Getting there would require all Democrats and 17 Republicans.

Kaine noted that the Senate is spending time on impeachment when it could be working to advance coronavirus relief, a major priority for Democrats and Biden.

Tuesday's vote was "completely clarifying that we're not going to get near 67," Kaine said. "So, I think there's maybe a little more interest now and then could this be an alternative."

He added: "Obviously, we do a trial, maybe we can do it fast, but my top priority is COVID relief and getting the Biden Cabinet approved."

Later in the day, Kaine said on CNN that the resolution would say the attack "was an insurrection and that President Trump gave aid and comfort to the insurrectionists." He said it would also bar Trump from future office, though it is unclear if such a vote would be enforceable.

Sen. Susan Collins, one of the five Republicans who voted with Democrats on holding the trial, said she has been talking with Kaine about ways to hold Trump to account for his role in the riot.

"The question is, Is there another way to express condemnation of the president's activities?" Collins said. She said that five is probably "a high mark on what you're going to see for Republican support" for convicting Trump at trial.

While many Republicans criticized Trump after the riot, passions have cooled since then. Now a number of Republicans are rushing to his legal defense.

The procedural motion from Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, defeated on a 45-55 vote, sought to declare the trial unconstitutional because Trump is no longer in office. It's an argument that many legal scholars dispute but that most of the GOP caucus has leaned into, enabling Republicans to oppose the trial without directly defending Trump's behavior.

Some said the censure resolution was too late because Democrats had rejected GOP suggestions of censure before the House voted to impeach.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 74 of 95

Asked about Kaine's idea, Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said it would be a bad precedent to set. "I guess if we can censure former presidents, then when Republicans get in charge, we can censure Barack Obama or Democrats can censure George Bush."

Some Democrats also appear wary.

Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate, said doing censure after impeachment is "possible, but I don't know how much time that involves" and how it would work. He said there were "a lot of questions to be answered" about the idea.

Earlier Wednesday, on the Senate floor, Durbin criticized Republicans who want to dismiss the trial as he marked the three weeks that have passed since the attack.

"I'll never forget it," he said. "Do the 45 senators who voted against the impeachment trial last night still remember it? I certainly hope they do."

It's unclear if any Republicans who voted in favor of Paul's motion would now vote to convict Trump on the actual charge of incitement. Republican Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio voted for Paul's motion but said after the vote that he had not made up his mind about conviction and that constitutionality "is a totally different issue" than the charge itself.

Many others indicated that they believe the final vote on Trump's conviction will be similar to the 55-45 tally. Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a close Trump ally, said he thinks the vote was "a floor, not a ceiling."

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who has said Trump "provoked" the riots and who has indicated he is open to conviction, voted with Paul to move toward dismissing the trial.

Asked about his vote Wednesday, McConnell said the trial hasn't started yet. "And I intend to participate in that and listen to the evidence," he said.

US House data not ready until April, states' data after July

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The U.S. Census Bureau is aiming to deliver the long-delayed numbers used for divvying up congressional seats by the end of April, but a holdup on redistricting data could disrupt several states' abilities to redraw their own legislative maps ahead of upcoming elections, an agency official said Wednesday.

The new goal for finishing data processing for the apportionment numbers used for congressional seats is now April 30. But a separate set of data used for redrawing districts for states and local governments won't be ready until after July in the most likely scenario, Kathleen Styles, a top bureau official, said during a presentation for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The delay in the release of redistricting data could be problematic for states that have deadlines this year for redrawing their districts. New Jersey and Virginia also have elections this year.

"This is a subject of vigorous internal debate right now," said Styles, who added the statistical agency isn't saying for now when the redistricting data will be ready. "The worst thing we could do is deliver data that has question marks."

New Jersey was prepared for such a scenario, with voters last fall approving a constitutional amendment that would address late-arriving redistricting data. The constitutional amendment keeps the current legislative districts for this year's gubernatorial and legislative elections, provided a redistricting commission eventually redraws the districts by March 2022. New Jersey's primary elections are in June.

Virginia, which also has primary elections in June, is using a bipartisan commission for the first time this year to draw state districts. After a recent meeting, some commission members acknowledged the state would be unlikely to complete the process in time this year. What most likely will happen is candidates for the House of Delegates will run in the old districts this year, while state elections under the redrawn lines will be delayed until 2022 or 2023, said redistricting expert Brian Cannon.

Other states have already started working on backup plans, said Ben Williams, a redistricting expert at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Their options include asking courts to provide relief, passing new laws or constitutional amendments

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 75 of 95

changing the map-making deadlines and changing elections dates. One other option includes using other data sets for redistricting and then reconciling those data sets with the redistricting data the Census Bureau releases after July, Williams said.

The once-a-decade census is used to determine how many congressional seats and Electoral College votes each state gets. It also is used for redrawing state and local political districts and determining the distribution of \$1.5 trillion in federal spending each year.

The deadline for turning in the apportionment numbers used for congressional seats has been a moving, and litigated, target since the coronavirus pandemic upended the Census Bureau's once-a-decade head count of every U.S. resident. The numbers were supposed to be turned in at the end of last year, but the Census Bureau requested until the end of April after the virus outbreak caused the bureau to suspend operations.

The deadline switched back to Dec. 31 after President Donald Trump issued a directive seeking to exclude people in the U.S. illegally from the numbers used for divvying up congressional seats.

President Joe Biden rescinded Trump's order on his first day taking office last week. Government attorneys most recently said in a court case over census schedule and data quality that the numbers wouldn't be ready until early March because the Census Bureau needed to fix data irregularities.

"This April 30 schedule reflects the Census Bureau going back in and producing a realistic schedule," Styles said Wednesday.

Irregularities in the census data are nothing new, and other censuses from decades past have had them too, Styles said.

"We have found anomalies. We will likely find more anomalies, and we will fix them as we find them," Styles said.

The return to the original April 30 extension requested by the Census Bureau comes as the statistical agency has new leadership with the change of administrations last week.

Former Census Bureau director Steven Dillingham resigned last week after being criticized that he was acceding to Trump's demand to produce citizenship information at the expense of data quality, and the agency's deputy director was named interim chief.

Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo has been picked by Biden to be Secretary of the Department of Commerce, which oversees the Census Bureau. During a Senate hearing on Tuesday, Raimondo promised to give the bureau more time for crunching the data, and she pledged to take politics out of the census.

Mike Catalini in Trenton, New Jersey, and Matthew Barakat in Falls Church, Virginia, contributed to this report.

Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Foundations focus their attentions on saving democracy

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Democracy, as President Joe Biden declared in his inaugural speech, survived a barrage of misinformation and an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol to achieve a peaceful transfer of power.

Yet the threats to democracy remain alarming in the view of most experts. And many major U.S. nonprofits and philanthropies, which provided funding to help safeguard the 2020 elections, plan to keep the money flowing.

Philanthropic groups helped recruit roughly 500,000 potential poll workers last year, paid for election officials' protective equipment and helped dispel disinformation about where and when people could vote. One nonprofit, the Center for Tech and Civic Life, an advocacy group, provided funding at 2,500 polling places for recruitment and training in the midst of the viral pandemic and the additional equipment and supplies that were needed to process record-high mail-in ballots.

"It is impossible to overstate the significance of the philanthropic response to the difficulties of this elec-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 76 of 95

tion," the Biden campaign said in an election postmortem.

For all their success in helping ensure what Christopher Krebs, who tracked the voting as head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, called the most secure U.S. election ever, advocates see the need to keep putting their financial muscle behind the cause.

"In Georgia, there have been a slew of voter suppression laws introduced — that's happening right now," said Lisa Versaci, director of NEO Philanthropy's State Infrastructure Fund, which financed \$55 million in programs to foster election engagement and protect voting in historically underrepresented communities. "Don't be fooled. This isn't going away. It's going to be occurring in the states, and we're going to counter it. It doesn't end."

The financial support that gushed from philanthropic groups in 2020 had been building for years. Over the past decade, foundations donated nearly \$10 billion in the United States to try to boost civic participation, secure election reforms and educate the public, according to the philanthropy research organization Candid. The Ford Foundation, the largest donor in the sector, contributed \$635 million in the past four years — 33% more than it had donated in the entire previous decade.

Funding for protecting American democracy began to pick up after the 2013 Supreme Court ruling that invalidated a section of the Voting Rights Act and allowed states to make changes to the voting process without federal approval. Then, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, financial support accelerated as concerns about social injustice, potential voter suppression and public disinformation erupted into public view.

Maria Torres-Springer, the Ford Foundation's vice president of U.S. programs, noted that the organization has long supported groups who it felt were sometimes excluded from participating in democracy, especially women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. For 2020, the foundation doubled its democracy-related grants from 2019 levels to \$200 million.

"The events of the last year really compelled us to double-down on the funding for those groups," she said. "The multiple crises of the pandemic and then the murder of George Floyd — one in what seems to be an unbroken string of unjust deaths of Black people at the hands of law enforcement in this country — really compelled us as an institution to say we need to do more to really fortify the social justice organizations that are often underfunded."

Philanthropic groups that donated to 2020 election security say they were heartened by what looks to them like a successful outcome. Ultimately, despite intense pressure to overturn election results, state election officials and judges of both parties upheld election results across the country in light of no widespread evidence of irregularities or fraud.

"The system held," Versaci said. "That was a huge relief. And I feel like that didn't come because of some magic bullet. There was a lot of work on many, many different levels because this was a real threat."

In different times, the result might have been cause to exult. But the violent insurrection, led by pro-Trump rioters insisting that Biden's victory had been rigged, showcased the fragility of democracy and the spread of dangerous disinformation. The disinformation campaigns ranged from simple issues, like giving the wrong dates and times for early-voting or registration deadlines, to elaborate conspiracy theories about voting machines that were quickly debunked, nonprofit officials said.

Tammy Greer, an assistant professor of political science at Clark Atlanta University, said she felt the riot illustrated a disturbing lack of understanding about a process that is fundamental to U.S. presidential elections.

"The Electoral College is an example of representative democracy, and it worked the way it is designed to work," she said. "If (people) don't understand how it works, it becomes easy to say, 'It's a conspiracy' or 'They're trying to get us' or something like that."

Greer, whose research into voter engagement and civic education has traced Georgia's gradual shift toward the Democrats for more than a decade, suggested that philanthropists should consider supporting grassroots-level democracy-building efforts on an ongoing basis, not just in national election years.

"All of our lives are impacted by what happens on the state level, the local level and the federal level," Greer said. "When we don't pay attention to it, you get people who feel left out, and you get people feeling overwhelmed and emotional. Then you have protest, with a gateway to riot."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 77 of 95

This year, Torres-Springer said, the Ford Foundation plans to continue funding both large, established groups that protect democratic structures like voting rights and newer organizations that are building coalitions in individual communities.

"Business as usual is just not going to cut it these days," Torres-Springer said. "I think the work needs both a sense of urgency about it — because the democracy is at stake — but also uncommon patience. I think it's a responsibility of philanthropy to show up wearing those two hats when supporting these organizations."

There also appears to be a growing trend toward bipartisan cooperation among philanthropists. In October, more than 100 philanthropists across the political spectrum signed a letter stating that "repairing the fabric of our democracy will require extraordinary stewardship by leaders across society." Another letter after the violent riot at the U.S. Capitol drew nearly 300 signatories — including representatives from Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Open Society Foundations and Bloomberg Philanthropies — asking elected leaders to "repair our tattered social fabric and help our democracy live up to its ideals."

"You'll find a lot of different views about what constitutes good government," said Bradford Smith, president of Candid, the philanthropy research organization that developed the Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy analysis tool, which tracks the beneficiaries of money from donors of all political stripes. "They may disagree in terms of being conservative or progressive or in questions of degree. But what they have in common is that they do believe that a democracy can be made to function for the good of society."

At the same time, Greer of Clark Atlanta University said she thinks much more work is needed to rebuild confidence in secure elections and in democracy in general.

"Democracy is a muscle," Greer said. "It is like our brain. It is like our heart. It is a muscle. You have to work at it every single day in order for it to be strong."

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and non-profits. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Battling COVID-19 proving deadly for Peru's doctor corps

By REGINA GARCIA CANO and MAURICIO MUNOZ Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Black-and-white pictures of dozens of men and women, some in their 30s and others much older, line the perimeter of a bright yellow building overlooking the Pacific, a two-story-tall black ribbon covering part of the facade and a Peruvian flag at a half-staff near the door.

The makeshift memorial is for fallen "pandemic soldiers" — doctors who have died since the coronavirus struck this South American nation last year and unraveled the public health care system.

"Our country, like the other countries in the world, is not prepared for this pandemic. Even more so, the most affected are developing countries like ours," said Dr. Gerardo Campos, a spokesman for the Medical College of Peru.

The college represents physicians and its headquarters is the site of the memorial, where a cleaning worker wearing a face mask recently dusted off each photo and placed flowers in front of them.

"Peru has been deeply affected, and within population groups, those on the front line are the doctors — the first-line soldiers who have battled COVID," Campos added. "We have had great losses. ... The Medical College has been seen affected in its entirety."

More than 260 doctors have died from the virus in Peru. Their colleagues blame the deaths on a lack of proper personal protective equipment and what they say is the government's abandonment of the health care system. In January alone, the virus has killed at least 10 doctors, five of whom worked in the capital of Lima.

The Andean country was one of the worst-hit in the region by the pandemic during 2020 and is now experiencing a resurgence in cases. The country of 32.5 million people has recorded more than 1.1 million coronavirus cases and over 40,100 deaths related to COVID-19, according to data from Johns Hopkins University in the United States.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 78 of 95

A revolving door of patients, long work shifts, shortage of medical supplies, including oxygen, and lack of protective equipment at hospitals across the country has affected the mental health of doctors. Doctors now warn that Peru could face a crisis of physicians if the government does not take the appropriate steps.

"A healthy doctor will cure practically the majority of our population," Campos said. "I would ask the government to reconcile, to consider, to work together. I believe that we have valuable people — experts, epidemiologists, specialists in infections, specialists in intensive care, specialists in emergency medicine — who with adequate health policies can work together for the well-being of our general population."

Health care professionals have been mounting an open-ended national protest for weeks to press their complaints about inadequate salaries, poor benefits and other working conditions. On a recent afternoon, wearing scrubs, gowns, face masks and face shields, they marched in Lima surrounded by police in riot gear. They held signs asking for pay raises and expressed their demands through a megaphone.

"Second wave of COVID and there is no increase in the 2021 budget," read one sign that included a photo of a hospital hallway packed with patients.

More than a million health care workers have contracted COVID-19 across Latin America, according to the Pan American Health Organization. At least 4,000, most of them women, have died.

"They've worked harder — under more grueling circumstances — than ever before," Carissa Etienne, the organization's director, said Wednesday during a virtual news conference. "Many have risked their own lives and those of their families to care for those who are sick, and their heroic efforts have saved many COVID patients."

In an attempt to increase the pressure on the Peruvian government, at least four doctors began a hunger strike earlier this month outside the Ministry of Health. They are staying in tents on the sidewalk, and at least one of them has been hooked up to an IV with fluids.

"Doctors die every day. Dentists die every day. Nurses die every day. It is something that outrages us because we are really on the front line of this pandemic," said Dr. Teodoro Quiñones, who is among those on the hunger strike and is secretary general of the union that represents doctors who work in Peru's public hospitals. "We are really concerned about how the pandemic is being managed."

Lying on a mattress in a tent, Quiñones said doctors do not believe Peru can carry out a successful vaccination campaign when considering that officials have not been able to solve oxygen supply woes at hospitals for the past 10 months.

More than 120 nurses have died as a result of the pandemic in Peru, according to the union that represents them. It's unclear how many dentists and other health workers have died because of the public health emergency.

Experts say Peru's second wave of coronavirus cases was driven by the large protests in November that generated political chaos in Peru — and led to the naming of three presidents in a week — as well as holiday gatherings. The surge prompted officials to issue new lockdown measures that will go into effect Sunday.

Dr. Yesenia Ramos works at a hospital in a remote region in Peru's jungle that is accessible only by airplane. She said her hospital treats COVID-19 and non-COVID patients and has lost 23 doctors, most of them specialists.

"It's not fair," Ramos said. "We have the right to life, and we have the right to take good care of our insured patients as it should be."

Garcia Cano reported from Mexico City and Muñoz reported from Lima. Associated Press writer Gisela Salomon contributed to this report from Miami.

Virus will kill many more, WH projects as briefings resume

By ZEKE MILLER and RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration launched its new level-with-America health briefings Wednesday with a projection that as many as 90,000 more in the U.S. will die from the coronavirus in the next four weeks — a sobering warning as the government strains to improve delivery and injection

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 79 of 95

of vaccines.

The tone of the hourlong briefing was in line with President Joe Biden's promise to be straight with the nation about the state of the outbreak that has already claimed more than 425,000 U.S. lives. It marked a sharp contrast to what had become the Trump show in the past administration, when public health officials were repeatedly undermined by a president who shared his unproven ideas without hesitation.

The deaths projection wasn't much different from what Biden himself has said, but nonetheless served as a stark reminder of the brutal road ahead.

"I know this is not news we all want to hear, but this is something we must say so we are all aware," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the new director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "If we are united in action we can turn things around."

The new briefings, set for three times a week, are part of Biden's attempt to rebuild trust and mobilize Americans to follow health guidance on the coronavirus and to break down public resistance to the vaccine.

Wednesday's briefing was conducted virtually, with no shortage of technical glitches and audio gaps. Administration officials appeared on Zoom from separate locations, in keeping with the Biden administration's efforts to model best practices for safe work habits in the pandemic.

One by one, the officials laid out administration efforts to contain the virus, speed vaccinations and bring Americans along with the effort..

"The White House respects and will follow the science, and the scientists will speak independently," promised Andy Slavitt, a senior administration adviser on the pandemic.

Jeff Zients, the White House coronavirus coordinator, said the Biden administration was examining additional ways of speeding vaccine production, a day after the president announced the U.S. plans to provide states with enough doses for 300 million Americans by the end of summer.

But actually injecting those shots is another matter.

"Most states are getting better at putting needles in arms," Zients said. He called on Congress to swiftly pass Biden's "American Rescue Plan." The \$1.9 trillion bill, which has given lawmakers in both parties sticker shock, includes \$400 billion for measures aimed at controlling the virus, including dramatically increasing the pace of vaccination and ensuring more widespread testing.

Zients noted that the federal Department of Health and Human Services acted Wednesday to make more people available to administer vaccinations. The government will authorize retired nurses and doctors, and professionals licensed in one state will be able to give shots in other states.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said there was reason to be concerned about the impact of some coronavirus mutations on vaccines, but he also said scientists have plenty of options for adjustments to maintain effectiveness.

Fauci said there was particular concern about the so-called South African variant, because lab tests have shown it can diminish the protective power of the vaccines approved to date. He stressed that the level of protection provided was still well within what he called the "cushion" of vaccine effectiveness, but added that the government was working with pharmaceutical companies on potential "booster" shots for the new variants.

Walensky said her agency's latest forecast indicates the U.S. will reach between 479,000 and 514,000 deaths by Feb. 20.

The new briefings, beginning just a week into Biden's tenure, are meant as an explicit rejection of President Donald Trump's approach to the coronavirus outbreak.

"We're bringing back the pros to talk about COVID in an unvarnished way," Biden said Tuesday.

Trump had claimed center stage and muddled the message of the nation's top public health experts in the critical early days of the virus and eventually largely muzzled them as the pandemic's toll grew steeper.

As a presidential candidate Biden warned that the nation faced a surge of coronavirus cases in what would be a "dark winter"; Trump, by contrast, falsely claimed the worst of the virus was over.

Dr. David Hamer, a professor of global health and medicine at Boston University's School of Public Health, said having briefings from health officials that are "based on serious science" would go a long way toward

improving public perceptions of the vaccine.

"There's a certain amount of vaccine hesitancy, and so educating people about the vaccine, how it works, how safe it is and how it can protect against the disease but also slow transmission is really important," he said.

The stakes for Biden, whose presidency hinges at the start on his handling of the pandemic and the largest vaccination campaign in global history, could hardly be higher. He is pushing a weary populace to recommit to social distancing measures and mask wearing, pointing to scientific models that suggest the practices could save 50,000 lives over coming months.

Those messages found few champions in the former administration, as Trump openly flouted science-based guidance from his own administration. Face coverings were sparse at his reelection rallies and social distancing nearly nonexistent.

Asked by CNN last week if the lack of candor from the Trump administration about the virus had cost lives, Fauci replied, "You know, it very likely did."

The Trump administration ended the practice of regular scientific briefings early in the pandemic, after Trump expressed anger over dire warnings about the virus by Dr. Nancy Messonnier, the CDC's immunization and respiratory director who is leading the agency's COVID-19 efforts.

Associated Press writers Alexandra Jaffe contributed to this report.

VIRUS TODAY: Some states cautiously ease virus restrictions

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Wednesday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers. Most are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold. While the easing could cause case rates to rise, health experts say it can work if done in a measured way and if the public remains vigilant by wearing masks and taking other precautions. The COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. has climbed past 425,000, with the number of dead running at close to all-time highs at nearly 3,350 a day on average. But newly confirmed cases have dropped over the past two weeks.

— President Joe Biden is dispatching the nation's top scientists and public health experts to regularly brief the American public about the pandemic, which has claimed more than 425,000 U.S. lives. Beginning Wednesday, the experts will host briefings three times a week on the state of the outbreak and efforts to control it. Americans can expect a sharp contrast from the Trump administration's briefings, when public health officials were repeatedly undermined by a president who shared his unproven ideas without hesitation. Wednesday's briefing will feature the Biden administration's coordinator for pandemic response, as well as government scientists and public health officials.

— Oklahoma is attempting to return \$2 million worth of an anti-malaria drug once touted by former President Donald Trump as an effective treatment for the coronavirus. A spokesman for Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter confirmed Wednesday that Hunter is attempting to negotiate the return of the drug. Oklahoma acquired 1.2 million pills in April from California-based FFF Enterprises. A company spokeswoman didn't immediately return a message seeking comment. The drug has since been shown to have little or no effect on severe cases of COVID-19. A former state health official chalked up Oklahoma's purchase to "the fog of war."

THE NUMBERS: According to data from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. declined over the past two weeks, going from 248,202.3 on Jan. 12 to 166,384 on Tuesday. The seven-day rolling average for new daily deaths climbed slightly over the same period, going from 3,344.3 to 3,349.1.

QUOTABLE: "We're bringing back the pros to talk about COVID in an unvarnished way. Any questions

you have, that's how we'll handle them because we're letting science speak again," Biden told reporters on Tuesday while announcing regular briefings on the pandemic.

ICYMI: Biden says the U.S. is ramping up vaccine deliveries to hard-pressed states over the next three weeks and expects to provide enough doses to vaccinate 300 million Americans by the end of the summer or early fall. Biden is calling the push a "wartime effort." He said Tuesday that his administration is working to buy an additional 100 million doses of each of the two approved coronavirus vaccines. And he acknowledged that states in recent weeks have been left guessing how much vaccine they will have from one week to the next. He called that "unacceptable" and said "lives are at stake."

ON THE HORIZON: You just can't keep a good city down, especially when Mardi Gras is coming. All around New Orleans, thousands of houses are being decorated as floats because the coronavirus outbreak canceled the elaborate parades mobbed by crowds during the Carnival season and on Fat Tuesday. Some smaller groups announced no-parade plans before the city did. But the "house float" movement started almost as soon as a New Orleans spokesman announced in November that parades were off for the season. Megan Joy Boudreaux says it started as a joke on Twitter, but she began to like the idea and started a Facebook group called the Krewe of House Floats.

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

In CDC's backyard, school reopening debate divides experts

By KANTELE FRANKO Associated Press

Just down the road from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a community flush with resident health professionals, the Decatur, Georgia, school system had no shortage of expert input on whether to resume in-person classes amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Scores of public health and medical professionals from the affluent, politically liberal Atlanta suburb have weighed in about what's best for their own kids' schools.

One emergency medicine doctor said initial reopening plans for the district's 5,000-plus students weren't safe enough. A pediatrician doing epidemiology work for the CDC advocated delaying. Others, including a leader of the CDC's COVID-19 vaccine efforts, argued the district could get students back in classrooms safely — and that not doing so jeopardized their development and mental health.

"The challenge for me has been trying to weigh all of these things that I'm being told by experts and non-experts alike to try to make the best decision that we can," Superintendent David Dude said. "And that's what I, and I'm sure other superintendents, have been struggling with."

Each side argued data and science supported their view in a debate over reopening schools that sometimes veered into vitriol. The division in Decatur illustrates the challenges U.S. schools — many in communities without so much expertise — have faced in evaluating what's safe.

Health officials say there's growing evidence that children aren't the main drivers of community spread and that transmission is relatively low in schools if mask-wearing, social distancing and contact tracing is in effect. The CDC says that for schools to open safely, they and their surrounding communities must adopt prevention measures.

Without specific reopening instructions from federal and state leaders, school administrators have had to become amateur epidemiologists, Dude said.

When he first consulted privately with CDC and other professionals — who he said wouldn't speak out publicly at that point in the process because the pandemic response had been politicized — people accused him of not being transparent. When he rolled out fall reopening plans, some parents and teachers questioned whether it was safe and which virus metrics were used. When he hit the brakes on reopening, other parents got riled up, complaining about the abrupt change or how virtual schooling wasn't tenable.

Tiffany Tesfamichael, a single parent who stretched her budget to move to Decatur because of the well-regarded schools, was upset that her freshman daughter had to struggle through remote learning while neighbors citing concerns about virus spread protested against opening schools, but not against opening

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 82 of 95

businesses.

"Why aren't they out here with signs protesting restaurants if they really, really mean it?" she said.

Dude ended up asking a giant committee of volunteers — many with relevant expertise, though it wasn't required — to make recommendations, including parameters for reopening and protocols to limit virus spread in classes.

Then he decided a new plan for January: Students at the seven elementary schools could return, staying in cohorts of 15 or fewer and attending only in the mornings, to avert the logistical nightmare of an unmasked lunch crowd. Older students would stay remote because it was too difficult to arrange them in small cohorts.

Some CDC employees and other health professionals objected to that part, arguing in a letter to a community news website that safe, in-person learning was doable for older students using precautions other than cohorting, and that decision-makers were misreading evidence about virus transmission in schools. A hospital doctor treating COVID-19 patients countered with her own letter, warning that reopening as cases surged would be irresponsible.

The expert insights made parent Kerry Ludlam reconsider her own stance.

"I think letters like that are so powerful because you think you feel one way and then you read a letter with all of these experts. ... And you're like, 'Well, their opinion is different from mine. Have I been wrong all the time?'" Ludlam said.

She remained inclined to keep her middle schoolers in distance learning, partly because an autoimmune disorder increases her vulnerability. But she said learning more about other families' circumstances and academic challenges convinced her that parents should at least be offered the choice of face-to-face learning.

Without it, some families moved to private schools or other suburbs offering in-person classes. Republican Gov. Brian Kemp had pushed a largely voluntary approach to precautions, even after a summer surge in cases, and urged schools to reopen.

Around Decatur, neighbors dodged the issue in polite conversation as tensions rose during school board meetings and on social media.

Some commenters pushed the debate to its sharpest and crudest edges, suggesting that advocates of resuming in-person classes were OK with gambling teachers' lives in a desperate grasp for normalcy, or that perhaps people urging continued remote learning couldn't see past their privilege to understand how much other families were struggling.

In a Facebook group for district parents, the sniping got so bad that some users complained their posts were shared with their employers by others trying to disparage them.

"I'm reminded of that analogy where if you put black ants and red ants in a jar, they get along fine until you shake up the jar and you set it back down, and then the ants ... go after each other to the death, like without ever once considering who shook their world," Susan Camp, one of the group's administrators, told The Associated Press.

She didn't feel the district's reopening plans were safe or equitable, particularly for the most vulnerable students, but the increasing incivility troubled her, too.

Ludlam worries about the conversations yet to come.

From behind their keyboards and screens, "people just kind of let it fly — forgetting that at some point, the world is going to get back to normal, and we're going to see each other at school or the pool or, you know, the grocery store and have time to stand and talk," Ludlam said. "And we're going to have to face the things we said to each other and the things we accused each other of."

Associated Press medical writer Lindsey Tanner contributed to this report. Follow Franko on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/kantele10>.

Moscow police arrest brother of opposition leader Navalny

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 83 of 95

MOSCOW (AP) — Moscow police launched a series of raids Wednesday on apartments and offices of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's family and associates, arresting his brother.

The searched locations included Navalny's apartment, where police detained his brother, Oleg, and a rented apartment where Navalny's wife, Yulia, has been living.

Video on the internet TV station Dozhd showed Yulia Navalny telling journalists from the window that police had not allowed her lawyer to enter the apartment.

The raids came four days before protests that Navalny's supporters have called for Sunday.

Demonstrations calling for his release took place in more than 100 cities across the nation last Saturday, a strong show of rising anger toward the Kremlin. Nearly 4,000 people were reported arrested at those protests.

Other locations raided by police Wednesday were the offices of Navalny's anti-corruption foundation and the studio that produces his videos and online broadcasts. The popular videos and broadcasts helped make Navalny into Russian President Vladimir Putin's most prominent and persistent foe.

There was no immediate police comment on the searches. Navalny associates said on social media that the searches were connected to alleged violations of epidemiological regulations from last week's mass protest in Moscow.

But "the real reason for the searches of Navalny's teams, relatives and office is Putin's crazy fear," Navalny's team said in a message.

Navalny's challenge to Putin grew after he was arrested on Jan. 17 upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin.

Two days after his arrest, his organization released an extensive video report on a palatial seaside compound allegedly built for Putin. It has been viewed tens of millions of times, further stoking discontent.

Navalny, the Kremlin's most prominent and durable foe, fell into a coma while aboard a domestic flight from Siberia to Moscow on Aug. 20. He was transferred from a hospital in Siberia to a Berlin hospital two days later. Labs in Germany, France and Sweden, and tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established that he was exposed to the Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent.

Russian authorities have refused to open a full-fledged criminal inquiry, citing a lack of evidence that Navalny was poisoned.

In December, Navalny released the recording of a phone call he said he made to a man he described as an alleged member of a group of officers of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, who purportedly poisoned him in August and then tried to cover it up. The FSB dismissed the recording as fake.

Navalny's arrest and the harsh police actions at the protests have brought wide criticism from the West and calls for his release.

Russia's foreign ministry said Wednesday that a statement by the Group of Seven foreign ministers condemning his arrest constitutes "gross interference" in Russia's domestic affairs.

Oklahoma seeking to return \$2M worth of hydroxychloroquine

By SEAN MURPHY The Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — The Oklahoma attorney general's office is attempting to return \$2 million worth of a malaria drug once touted by former President Donald Trump as an effective treatment for COVID-19, a spokesman said Wednesday.

Alex Gerszewski, a spokesman for Attorney General Mike Hunter, said Hunter is attempting to negotiate a return of the 1.2 million hydroxychloroquine pills Oklahoma acquired in April from a California-based supplier, FFF Enterprises. He said the office was acting on a request from the Oklahoma State Department of Health, which authorized the purchase.

A spokeswoman for FFF Enterprises didn't immediately return a message Wednesday seeking comment.

The attempt by Oklahoma to return the hydroxychloroquine was first reported by the online news publication The Frontier.

Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt defended the purchase last year, saying the drug was showing some promise

as a treatment in early March and he didn't want to miss an opportunity to acquire it.

"I was being proactive to try and protect Oklahomans," Stitt said at the time.

The drug has since been shown to have little or no effect on severe cases of COVID-19, and a former state health official chalked up Oklahoma's purchase to something that happens in "the fog of war."

While governments in at least 20 other states obtained more than 30 million doses of the drug through donations from the federal reserve or private companies, Oklahoma and Utah bought them from private pharmaceutical companies.

Then-Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, a Republican, initially defended the state's \$800,000 purchase of 20,000 packets of hydroxychloroquine compounded with zinc, but later canceled an additional plan to spend \$8 million more to buy 200,000 more treatments. The state then managed to secure a refund on the \$800,000 no-bid contract it signed with a local pharmacy company that had been promoting the drugs.

The CEO of the pharmacy company has since pleaded guilty to a federal misdemeanor for mislabeling the drug imported from China. Dan Richards, the operator of Meds In Motion, acknowledged receiving large amounts of the drug from an unregistered manufacturer in China incorrectly labeled as an herbal supplement.

His lawyer has said he trying to help procure as much of the product as possible because at the time it seemed like a promising treatment for the coronavirus.

Associated Press reporter Lindsay Whitehurst contributed to this report from Salt Lake City.

Auschwitz survivors mark anniversary online amid pandemic

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — A Jewish prayer for the souls of the people murdered in the Holocaust echoed Wednesday over where the Warsaw ghetto stood during World War II as a world paused by the coronavirus pandemic observed the 76th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Most International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorations were being held online this year due to the virus, including the annual ceremony at the site of the former Auschwitz death camp, where Nazi German forces killed 1.1 million people in occupied Poland. The memorial site is closed to visitors because of the pandemic.

In one of the few live events, mourners gathered in Poland's capital to pay their respects at a memorial in the former Warsaw ghetto, the largest of all the ghettos where European Jews were held in cruel and deadly conditions before being sent to die in mass extermination camps.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in a message to a World Jewish Congress and Auschwitz memorial museum event, said the online nature of remembrance events takes nothing away from their importance.

"It's a duty but also a responsibility, one we inherit from those who lived through the horrors of the Shoah, whose voices are gradually disappearing," Steinmeier said. "The greatest danger for all of us begins with forgetting. With no longer remembering what we inflict upon one another when we tolerate anti-Semitism and racism in our midst."

"We must remain alert, must identify prejudice and conspiracy theories, and combat them with reason, passion and resolve," Steinmeier said.

From the Vatican, Pope Francis said remembering was a sign of humanity and a condition for a peaceful future while warning that distorted ideologies could lead to a repeat of mass murder on a horrific scale.

In Germany, the parliament held a special session to honor victims. In Austria and Slovakia, hundreds of survivors were offered their first doses of a vaccine against the coronavirus in a gesture both symbolic and lifesaving given the threat of the virus to older adults. In Israel, some 900 Holocaust survivors died from COVID-19 out of 5,300 who were infected last year.

Israel, which counts 197,000 Holocaust survivors, officially marks its Holocaust remembrance day in the spring. But events were also being held across the country, mostly virtually or without members of the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 85 of 95

public in attendance.

Meanwhile, Luxembourg signed a deal agreeing to pay reparations and to restitute dormant bank accounts, insurance policies and looted art to Holocaust survivors.

Survivors and many others joined a World Jewish Congress campaign which involved posting photos of themselves and #WeRemember. They were broadcast at Auschwitz on a screen next to the gate and a cattle car representing the way camp inmates were transported there.

The online nature of this year's commemorations is a sharp contrast to events marking last year's anniversary, when some 200 survivors and dozens of European leaders and royalty gathered at the site of the former camp. It was one of the last large international gatherings before the pandemic brought normal life to a halt.

Due to the pandemic, most survivors today live in "isolation and loneliness," said Tova Friedman, 82, a Poland-born Auschwitz survivor who attended last year's event and had hoped to return this year with her eight grandchildren. Instead she recorded a message of warning from her home in Highland Park, New Jersey.

"Today, as anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head again, the voices of protest are not many and not loud enough," said Tova, who at age 6 was among the thousands of prisoners to greet the Soviet troops who liberated the camp on Jan. 27, 1945.

Piotr Cywinski, director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, also warned of worsening anti-Semitism, populism and demagoguery.

"Our world is suffering (from) our own incapacity to react, our own passivity," Cywinski said. "We are the bystanders of our times."

The vast majority of those killed at Auschwitz were Jews, but Poles, Roma, homosexuals and Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered there.

In all, about 6 million European Jews and millions of other people were killed by the Germans and their collaborators. In 2005, the United Nations designated the anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Of the 6 million Jewish victims, some 1.5 million were children, and this year's commemorations included a special focus on them. All living survivors were either children or still young during the war that began more than 81 years ago.

While commemorations have moved online for the first time, one constant is the drive of survivors to tell their stories as words of caution.

Rose Schindler, a 91-year-old survivor of Auschwitz who was originally from Czechoslovakia but now lives in San Diego, California, has been speaking to school groups about her experience for 50 years. Her story, and that of her late husband, Max, also a survivor, is also told in a book, "Two Who Survived: Keeping Hope Alive While Surviving the Holocaust."

After Schindler was transported to Auschwitz in 1944, she was selected more than once for immediate death in the gas chambers. She survived by escaping each time and joining work details.

The horrors she experienced — the mass murder of her parents and four of seven siblings, the hunger, being shaven, lice infestations — are difficult to convey, but she keeps speaking to groups, over past months by Zoom.

"We have to tell our stories so it doesn't happen again," Schindler said in a Zoom call from her home Monday. "It is unbelievable what we went through, and the whole world was silent as this was going on."

Friedman said she believes it is her role to "sound the alarm" about rising anti-Semitism and other hatred in the world; otherwise, "another tragedy may happen."

That hatred, she said, was on clear view when a mob attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Some insurrectionists wore clothes with anti-Semitic messages like "Camp Auschwitz."

"It was utterly shocking, and I couldn't believe it. And I don't know what part of America feels like that. I hope it's a very small and isolated group and not a pervasive feeling," Friedman said.

Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed to this report.

Empty seas: Oceanic shark populations dropped 71% since 1970

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When marine biologist Stuart Sandin talks about sharks, it sounds like he's describing Jedi of the ocean. "They are terrific predators, fast swimmers and they have amazing senses — they can detect any disturbance in the ocean from great distance," such as smells or tiny changes in water currents.

Their ability to quickly sense anything outside the norm in their environment helps them find prey in the vastness of the open ocean. But it also makes them especially vulnerable in the face of increased international fishing pressure, as global fishing fleets have doubled since 1950.

"You drop a fishing line in the open ocean, and often it's sharks that are there first — whether or not they're the primary target," said Sandin, who works at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Scientists have known for decades that individual shark species are declining, but a new study drawing on 57 global datasets underscores just how dramatically worldwide populations have collapsed in the past half century.

Globally, the abundance of oceanic sharks and rays dropped more than 70% between 1970 and 2018, according to a study published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

And 24 of the 31 species of sharks and rays are threatened with extinction, while three species — oceanic whitetip sharks, scalloped hammerhead sharks and great hammerhead sharks — are considered critically endangered.

"The last 50 years have been pretty devastating for global shark populations," said Nathan Pacoureau, a biologist at Simon Fraser University in Canada and a co-author of the study.

Sometimes sharks are intentionally caught by fishing fleets, but more often they are reeled in incidentally as "bycatch," in the course of fishing for other species such as tuna and swordfish.

Sharks and rays are both fish with skeletons made of cartilage, not bone. In contrast to most other kinds of fish, they generally take several years to reach sexual maturity, and they produce fewer offspring.

"In terms of timing, they reproduce more like mammals — and that makes them especially vulnerable," said Pacoureau. "Their populations cannot replenish as quickly as many other kinds of fish."

The number of fishing vessels trolling the open ocean has risen steeply since the 1950s, as engine power expanded ships' range. And while climate change and pollution also imperil shark survival, increased fishing pressure is the greatest threat for every oceanic shark species.

"When you remove top predators of the ocean, it impacts every part of the marine food web," said Stuart Pimm, an ecologist at Duke University, who was not involved in the study. "Sharks are like the lions, tigers and bears of the ocean world, and they help keep the rest of the ecosystem in balance."

Follow Christina Larson on twitter: @larsonchristina

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Broken by Trump, US refugee program aims to return stronger

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

Krish Vignarajah has been in survival mode for four years as the Trump administration slashed refugee admissions by 85%. She's had to close a third of her resettlement agency's 48 offices and lay off more than 120 employees, some with decades of experience.

Now, she's scrambling to not only rehire staff but double the capacity of her Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, an expansion not seen since the agency scaled up for the wave of refugees that arrived after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 87 of 95

All nine U.S. resettlement agencies are experiencing the whiplash. They're gearing up to handle 125,000 refugees this year and possibly more after that if President Joe Biden makes good on his promise to restore the number of people able to create new lives in America after fleeing persecution or war.

Agencies say they welcome the challenge after being pushed to the brink. But the last four years illustrates the need to make the 41-year-old program that's long enjoyed bipartisan support less vulnerable to political whims if America is to regain its position as a leader in providing sanctuary for the world's oppressed.

"We've seen how the sole concentration of refugee policy in the White House can wreak such destruction in the wrong hands," Vignarajah said.

The Trump administration created so many obstacles that there are doubts whether the pipeline can rebound quickly enough to meet Biden's expected target this year, especially during a coronavirus pandemic that has restricted the ability to safely interview refugees in camps and crowded cities.

"The foundation of the system has been so broken that to even get to 125,000 next year, there's a big question mark," said Jennifer Foy, vice president of U.S. programs with World Relief, a resettlement agency.

Refugee admissions are determined by the president each year, and federal funding for resettlement agencies is based on the number of people they resettle in a given year.

As president, Donald Trump targeted the refugee program under his anti-immigration policies, dropping admissions yearly until they reached a record low of 15,000 for fiscal year 2021, which started in October. Historically, the average has been 95,000 under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

The Trump administration defended the cuts as protecting American jobs during the pandemic and said it sought to have refugees settle closer to their home countries while working on solving the crises that caused them to flee.

More than 100 U.S. resettlement offices closed during Trump's term, including eight of 27 belonging to World Relief, Foy's agency. Its warehouses of donated household goods have grown sparse, and its relationships with hundreds of landlords have waned because almost no refugees are arriving.

The Trump administration also cut or reassigned U.S. support staff overseas who processed applications.

Despite potential problems reopening the pipeline, advocates say it's important that Biden set this year's ceiling at 125,000 people to start building the program back up.

He's also vowed to seek legislation setting an annual baseline of 95,000 refugee admissions, which would help stabilize funding for resettlement agencies. Biden's campaign said the number could go beyond that "commensurate with our responsibility, our values and the unprecedented global need."

Biden, who co-sponsored legislation creating the refugee program in 1980, says reopening the doors to refugees is "how we will restore the soul of our nation."

"Resettling refugees helps reunite families, enriches the fabric of America, and enhances our standing, influence and security in the world," Biden said in June for World Refugee Day.

For decades, America admitted more refugees each year than all other countries combined, only to fall behind Canada in 2018. While the U.S. program shrank and a dozen other countries followed in shutting their doors, refugee numbers worldwide ballooned to a record 26 million because of political strife, violence and famine.

Biden has said he wants to make it easier for refugees to get to the United States by expanding efforts to register and process them abroad and making higher education visas available to those seeking safety. He's also indicated more priority should be given to Latin Americans, especially Venezuelans whose numbers now rival Syrians among the largest group of displaced people.

Refugees already underwent more rigorous screening than any other person entering the U.S. before additional requirements under Trump slowed the process to almost a standstill, according to the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Last year, the Trump administration started requiring refugees to provide addresses dating back 10 years, a near impossible task for people living in exile.

"The Trump administration began to incorporate novel and untested techniques that overwhelmed the system with delays and dubious vetting results," said Vignarajah, the CEO of Lutheran Immigration and

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 88 of 95

Refugee Service.

Still, changing that won't be easy.

"It's easy to ratchet it up, very difficult to ratchet it down, and that's not to say some of those duplicative layers of vetting actually make us safer," she said.

There are also questions about who should be at the front of the line.

The Trump administration changed the eligibility rules, setting up its own categories of who qualifies rather than using the long-standing referral system by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that makes selections based on a person's need to be resettled.

For instance, there was no category for people fleeing war, like Syrians.

As a result, tens of thousands of refugees conditionally approved by the Department of Homeland Security suddenly were disqualified.

Advocates want such cases to get priority.

Mahmoud Mansour, who fled Syria's civil war to Jordan, hopes to regain his spot. His family had completed the work to go to the United States when the Trump administration issued its travel ban barring people from Syria indefinitely and suspending the refugee program for 120 days.

"The past four years, during Trump's term, our lives were ruined," said Mansour, a tailor who has been out of work for a year and relies on help from his two brothers in the U.S. to survive. "In one moment, our dreams vanished."

Now, Mansour feels optimistic again. The 47-year-old father said Biden sent a strong message about restoring humanitarian policies when he lifted the travel ban on his first day in office.

Mansour hopes his family will finally be reunited. And he wants the new president to know: "We will not be a burden. We will be workers there. You will benefit from us, and of course, we will benefit from you."

Watson reported from San Diego. Associated Press reporter Omar Akour in Amman, Jordan, contributed to this report.

Not in short supply: Blame for EU's rusty vaccine rollout

By RAF CASERT and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

APELDOORN, Netherlands (AP) — Jos Bieleveldt had a spring in his step when the 91-year-old Dutchman got a coronavirus vaccine this week. But many think that was way too long in coming.

Almost two months before, Britain's Margaret Keenan, who is also 91 now, received her shot to kick off the U.K.'s vaccination campaign that has, so far, outstripped the efforts in many nations in the European Union.

"We are dependent on what the European Commission says we can, and cannot, do. As a result, we are at the bottom of the list, it takes far too long," Bieleveldt said of the executive arm of the EU, which, perhaps unfairly, has taken the brunt of criticism for a slow rollout in many of its member states. Onerous regulations and paperwork in some countries and poor planning in others have also contributed to the delay, as did a more deliberate authorization process for the shots.

Overall, the 27-nation EU, a collection of many of the richest countries in the world — most with a universal health care system to boot — is not faring well in comparison to countries like Israel and the United Kingdom. Even the United States, whose response to the pandemic has otherwise been widely criticized and where tens of thousands of appointments for shots have been canceled because of vaccine shortages, appears to be moving faster.

While Israel has given at least one shot of a two-dose vaccine to over 40% of its population and that figure in Britain is 10%, the EU total stands at just over 2%.

And it is not just EU citizens who are laying the blame at the bloc's door. Criticism is also coming from many nations that had hoped to see some live-saving liquid from the EU trickle through their borders.

Amid concerns that the richer nations had snapped up far more doses than they needed and poorer nations would be left to do without, the EU was expected to share vaccines around.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 89 of 95

The rocky rollout is also testing the bloc's long commitment to so-called soft power — policies that advance its cause not through the barrel of a gun but through peaceful means, like through the needle of a syringe.

"Today it's harder to get the vaccines than nuclear weapons," said Serb President Aleksandar Vucic, who had been counting on a lot more help from the EU.

Serbia sits at the heart of the Balkan region where the EU, Russia and even China are seeking a stronger foothold. Helping the Balkan countries with their vaccine rollout seemed an area where Europe, with its medical prowess and a willingness to prioritize such cooperation, would have an edge.

Not so far.

Vucic said weeks ago when he welcomed 1 million doses of Chinese vaccines that Serbia had not received "a single dose" from the global COVAX system aimed at get affordable shots to poor and middle-income countries that the EU has championed and funded.

Instead, Vucic said Serbia secured vaccines through deals with individual countries or producers.

Rubbing salt in the wound, Vucic went for the EU's social conscience when he said this week that "the world today is like Titanic. The rich tried to get the lifeboats only for themselves ... and leave the rest." Other nations on the EU's southeastern rim have also been critical.

It is a big turnaround from only a month ago when the EU's future looked pretty bright. It had just inked a last-minute trade deal with the United Kingdom, clinched a massive 1.8 trillion-euro pandemic recovery and overall budget deal and started rolling out its first COVID-19 vaccines.

"This is a very good way to end this difficult year, and to finally start turning the page on COVID-19," EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said at the time.

By this past weekend, though, her attitude soured as it became clear that the bloc would be getting vaccines at a slower rate than agreed upon for its 450 million people.

AstraZeneca has told the EU that of its initial batch of 80 million, only 31 million would immediately materialize once its vaccine got approved, likely on Friday. That came on the heels of a smaller glitch in the deliveries of Pfizer-BioNTech shots.

Both companies say they are facing operational issues at plants that are temporarily delaying the rollout.

Italy is threatening to take legal action against both over the delay. Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte had been boasting that the country's rollout was a huge success, especially when the millionth dose was given on Jan. 15. But after Pfizer announced the temporary supply reduction, Italy slowed from administering about 80,000 doses a day to fewer than 30,000.

Bulgaria has also criticized the drug companies, and some there have called for the government to turn to Russia and China for vaccines.

Hungary is already doing so. "If vaccines aren't coming from Brussels, we must obtain them from elsewhere. One cannot allow Hungarians to die simply because Brussels is too slow in procuring vaccines," Prime Minister Viktor Orban said. "It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice."

But supply isn't the only thing holding up the EU's campaign. The problem is partially that the EU Commission bet on the wrong horse — and didn't get enough doses of the early success vaccines like Pfizer-BioNTech. The commission notes there was no way of knowing which vaccines would succeed — and which would be first — and so it had to spread its orders out over several companies.

The EU rollout was also slowed because the European Medicines Agency took more time than the U.S. or U.K. regulators to authorize its first vaccine. That was by design as it made sure that the member nations could not be held liable in case of problems and in order to give people more confidence that the shot was safe.

But individual countries also share in the blame.

Germany, Europe's cliché of an organized and orderly nation, was found sorely wanting, with its rollout marred by chaotic bureaucracy and technological failures, such as those seen Monday when thousands of people over 80 in the country's biggest state were told they would have to wait until Feb. 8 to get their first shots, even as vast vaccine centers set up before Christmas languished empty.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 90 of 95

"The speed of our action leaves a lot to be desired," Chancellor Angela Merkel said. "Processes have often become very bureaucratic and take a long time, so we have to work on that."

It is no different in France, where there is a Kafkaesque maze of rules to get consent for vaccinating the elderly.

In the Netherlands, which banked on the easy-to-handle AstraZeneca vaccine being the first available, authorities had to scramble to make new plans for the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine, whose ultracold storage requirements make it more complicated.

"We were proven to be insufficiently flexible to make the change," said Health Minister Hugo de Jonge.

The Dutch have been particularly criticized since they were the last in the EU to begin vaccinations, more than a week after the first shots were given in the bloc, and they have been especially slow to roll doses out to elderly people living at home, like Bieleveldt, a retiree.

"I'm already playing in injury time in terms of my age," he said. "But I still want to play for a few more years."

Casert reported from Brussels. AP journalists across the European Union contributed.

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

EXPLAINER: Why India's farmers are revolting against PM Modi

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — A sea of tens of thousands of farmers riding tractors and horses stormed India's historic Red Fort this week — a dramatic escalation of their protests, which are posing a major challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

The AP explains what is at the heart of two months of demonstrations and what it means for Modi's government.

WHO IS PROTESTING?

Most of the protesters are farmers from northern Punjab and Haryana states, the two biggest agricultural producers. They are demanding the repeal of laws passed by Parliament in September that they say will favor large corporate farms, devastate the earnings of many farmers and leave those who hold small plots behind as big corporations win out. Modi has billed the laws as necessary to modernize Indian farming.

Because of the demographics of Punjab and Haryana, many of the protesters in New Delhi happen to be from India's minority Sikh religion, though their grievances are rooted in economic issues, not religious ones. Protests are also happening in other parts of the country among Indians of other backgrounds.

In recent weeks, people who are not farmers have also joined in, and the protests gained momentum in November when the farmers tried to march into New Delhi but were stopped by police. Since then, they have promised to hunker down at the edge of the city until the laws are repealed.

WHAT ARE THEIR CONCERNS?

At the heart of these protests are Indian farmers' fears that the government's moves to introduce market reforms to the farming sector will leave them poorer — at a time when they are already frustrated over their declining clout as the government aims to turn India into a hub for global corporations.

The new legislation is not clear on whether the government will continue to guarantee prices for certain essential crops — a system that was introduced in the 1960s to help India shore up its food reserves and prevent shortages.

While the government has said it is willing to pledge the guaranteed prices will continue, the farmers are skeptical and want new legislation that says such prices are their legal right.

Farmers also fear that the legislation signals the government is moving away from a system in which an overwhelming majority of farmers sell only to government-sanctioned marketplaces. They worry this

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 91 of 95

will leave them at the mercy of corporations that will have no legal obligation to pay them the guaranteed price anymore.

The government argues that this is designed to give farmers more choice in who to sell their produce to. Clauses in the legislation also prevent farmers from taking contract disputes to courts, leaving them with no independent means of redress apart from government-appointed bureaucrats.

These perceived threats to their income terrify India's farmers, who are mostly smallholders: A staggering 68% of them own less than 1 hectare of land. In some states, farming families earn just 20,000 rupees (\$271) on average annually.

WHY ARE THESE PROTESTS SIGNIFICANT?

Farmers form the most influential voting bloc in India — and are often romanticized as the heart and soul of the nation.

Politicians have long considered it unwise to alienate them, and farmers are also particularly important to Modi's base. Northern Haryana and few other states with substantial farmer populations are ruled by his party.

Since the legislation was passed, Modi's government has lost two political alliance partners and some of his own leaders are cautioning him to tread carefully.

The protests against the Modi government are the biggest since he first came to power in 2014. They come at a time when the country's economy has tanked, social strife has widened, protests have erupted against laws some deem discriminatory and the government has been questioned over its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT SAYING?

The Modi government says the legislation will benefit farmers by boosting production through private investment.

The government has offered to amend the laws and suspend their implementation for 18 months — but that has not satisfied farmers who want a full repeal.

Modi's government also initially tried to discredit the Sikh farmers by dismissing their concerns as motivated by religious nationalism. Some leaders in Modi's party called them "Khalistanis," a reference to a movement for an independent Sikh homeland called "Khalistan" in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Under Modi, India has seen a rising tide of Hindu nationalism that has rankled minority groups, mostly Muslims. Some leaders from Modi's party and India's freewheeling TV channels, which have long favored government's Hindu nationalistic policies, have called the farmers "anti-national," a label often given to those who criticize Modi or his policies.

But such allegations appear to have backfired, further angering the farmers, many of whose family members serve in the Indian army, police and civil service. Since then, common citizens also joined them, and the protests have gathered strength.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR MODI?

While this is a major challenge to his government, Modi's popularity is still soaring and his approval ratings remain high because of his Hindu-nationalist policies.

Many agriculture experts agree that the Indian farming sector needs reforms, but they question the way the Modi government introduced the laws and the corporate involvement in agriculture.

"Leaving farmers to the mercy of the markets would be like a death sentence to them," said Devinder Sharma, an agriculture expert who has spent the last two decades campaigning for income equality for Indian farmers. "We are talking about people who feed us."

Critics also highlight what they see as the Modi government's tendency to push through reforms without building consensus. When the laws were passed in Parliament, Modi's party refused to extend the debate over it despite repeated requests from the opposition. It also denied referring the laws to a special committee, where members could further discuss them.

Russian parliament OKs New START nuclear treaty extension

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian lawmakers on Wednesday quickly approved the extension of the last remaining nuclear Russia-U.S. arms control treaty, a fast-track action that comes just days before it's due to expire.

Both houses of parliament voted unanimously to extend the New START treaty for five years, a day after a phone call between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin said they agreed to complete the necessary extension procedures in the next few days.

Speaking via video link to the World Economic Forum's virtual meeting, Putin hailed the decision to extend the treaty as "a step in the right direction," but warned of rising global rivalries and threats of new conflicts.

The pact's extension doesn't require congressional approval in the U.S., but Russian lawmakers must ratify the move and Putin has to sign the relevant bill into law.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told lawmakers that the extension will be validated by exchanging diplomatic notes once all the procedures are completed.

The upper house speaker, Valentina Matvienko, said after the vote that the decision to extend the pact shows that Russia and the U.S. can reach agreements on major issues despite the tensions between them.

New START expires on Feb. 5. After taking office last week, Biden proposed extending the treaty for five years, and the Kremlin quickly welcomed the offer.

The treaty, signed in 2010 by President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers, and envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance.

Biden indicated during the campaign that he favored the preservation of the New START treaty, which was negotiated during his tenure as U.S. vice president.

Russia has long proposed prolonging the pact without any conditions or changes, but the Trump administration waited until last year to start talks and made the extension contingent on a set of demands. The talks stalled, and months of bargaining have failed to narrow differences.

The negotiations were also marred by tensions between Russia and the United States, which have been fueled by the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow's meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and other irritants.

After both Moscow and Washington withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019, New START is the only remaining nuclear arms control deal between the two countries.

Earlier this month, Russia announced that it would follow the U.S. in pulling out of the Open Skies Treaty, which allowed surveillance flights over military facilities, to help build trust and transparency between Russia and the West.

Before the Biden administration took office, Russia always had offered to extend New START for five years — a possibility that was envisaged by the pact at the time it was signed. But President Donald Trump charged that it put the U.S. at a disadvantage. Trump initially insisted that China be added to the treaty, an idea that Beijing bluntly dismissed.

The Trump administration then proposed to extend New START for just one year and also sought to expand it to include limits on battlefield nuclear weapons.

Arms control advocates hailed the treaty's extension as a boost to global security and urged Russia and the U.S. to start negotiating follow-up agreements.

Ryabkov said that Russia will count its Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle along with other Russian nuclear weapons under the treaty limits.

The Russian military has said the Avangard is capable of flying 27 times faster than the speed of sound and could make sharp maneuvers on its way to a target to bypass missile defense systems. It has been fitted to a few existing Soviet-built intercontinental ballistic missiles instead of older type warheads, and in the future could be fitted to the Sarmat, a prospective intercontinental ballistic missile now under development.

Ryabkov said that Russia is ready to sit down for talks on prospective arms cuts, noting that they should also involve non-nuclear precision weapons with strategic range.

Indonesian volcano unleashes river of lava in new eruption

By SLAMET RIYADI Associated Press

YOGYAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's most active volcano erupted Wednesday with a river of lava and searing gas clouds flowing 3,000 meters (nearly 10,000 feet) down its slopes. No casualties were reported.

The sounds of the eruption could be heard 30 kilometers (18 miles) away, officials said. It was Mount Merapi's biggest lava flow since authorities raised its danger level in November, said Hanik Humaida, the head of Yogyakarta's Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Center.

She said the volcano's lava dome is growing rapidly, causing hot lava and gas clouds to flow down its slopes.

After morning rain, the ashfall turned into muck in several villages. More than 150 people, mostly elderly, living within 5 kilometers (3 miles) of the crater were evacuated to barracks set up for displaced people.

Authorities in November had evacuated nearly 2,000 people living on the mountain in Magelang and Sleman districts but most have since returned.

The alert is being maintained at the second-highest level and authorities told people to stay out of an existing danger zone around the crater.

The 2,968-meter (9,737-foot) volcano is on densely populated Java island near the ancient city of Yogyakarta. It is the most active of dozens of Indonesian volcanoes and has repeatedly erupted with lava and gas clouds recently.

Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed 347 people.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of seismic fault lines around the ocean.

US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The United States says all soldiers from Eritrea should leave Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region "immediately."

A State Department spokesperson in an email to The Associated Press late Tuesday cited "credible reports of looting, sexual violence, assaults in refugee camps and other human rights abuses."

"There is also evidence of Eritrean soldiers forcibly returning Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea," the spokesperson said.

The statement reflects new pressure by the Biden administration on the government of Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous country with 114 million people and the anchor of the Horn of Africa, and other combatants as the deadly fighting in Tigray nears the three-month mark.

The AP this week cited witnesses who fled the Tigray region as saying Eritrean soldiers were looting, going house-to-house killing young men and even acting as local authorities. The Eritreans have been fighting on the side of Ethiopian forces as they pursue the fugitive leaders of the Tigray region, though Ethiopia's government has denied their presence.

The U.S. stance has shifted dramatically from the early days of the conflict when the Trump administration praised Eritrea for its "restraint."

The new U.S. statement calls for an independent and transparent investigation into alleged abuses. "It remains unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, or precisely where," it says.

It was not immediately clear whether the U.S. has addressed its demand directly to Eritrean officials. And the office of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed did not immediately respond to questions.

Witnesses have estimated that the Eritrean soldiers number in the thousands. Eritrean officials have not responded to questions. The information minister for Eritrea, one of the world's most secretive countries, this week tweeted that "the rabid defamation campaign against Eritrea is on the rise again."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 94 of 95

The U.S. also seeks an immediate stop to the fighting in Tigray and "full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access" to the region, which remains largely cut off from the outside world, with Ethiopian forces often accompanying aid.

"We are gravely concerned by credible reports that hundreds of thousands of people may starve to death if urgent humanitarian assistance is not mobilized immediately," the statement says.

The United Nations in its latest humanitarian update said it is receiving reports of "rising hunger" in Tigray and cited a "dire lack of access to food" since many farmers in the largely agricultural region missed the harvest because of the fighting, and as "critical staff" to scale up the humanitarian response can't access the region. Transport, electricity, banking and other links "have yet to be restored in much of the region," the U.N. said, and 78% of hospitals remain nonfunctional.

"Our concern is that what we don't know could be even more disturbing," U.N. children's agency chief Henrietta Fore said in a statement Wednesday. "For 12 weeks, the international humanitarian community has had very limited access to conflict-affected populations across most of Tigray."

Vaccinations have stopped across the region, Fore added.

The U.S. statement added that "dialogue is essential between the government and Tigrayans." Ethiopia's government has rejected dialogue with the former Tigray leaders, seeing them as illegitimate, and has appointed an interim administration.

The former Tigray leaders, in turn, objected to Ethiopia delaying a national election last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and considered Abiy's mandate over.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 28, the 28th day of 2021. There are 337 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff from Cape Canaveral, killing all seven crew members, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe.

On this date:

In A.D. 814, Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne died in Aachen in present-day Germany.

In 1547, England's King Henry VIII died; he was succeeded by his 9-year-old son, Edward VI.

In 1911, the notorious Hope Diamond was sold by jeweler Pierre Cartier to socialites Edward and Evalyn McLean of Washington, D.C., for \$180,000.

In 1915, the American merchant vessel SS William P. Frye, en route to England with a cargo of wheat, became the first U.S. ship to be sunk during World War I by a German cruiser, the SS Prinz Eitel Friedrich, even though the United States was not at war.

In 1916, Louis D. Brandeis was nominated by President Woodrow Wilson to the Supreme Court; Brandeis became the court's first Jewish member.

In 1939, Irish poet-dramatist William Butler Yeats died in Menton, France.

In 1956, Elvis Presley made his first national TV appearance on "Stage Show," a CBS program hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey.

In 1973, a cease-fire officially went into effect in the Vietnam War, a day after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords by the United States, North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

In 1977, actor-comedian Freddie Prinze, 22, co-star of the NBC-TV show "Chico and the Man," shot and mortally wounded himself at the Beverly Comstock Hotel (he died the following day).

In 1980, six U.S. diplomats who had avoided being taken hostage at their embassy in Tehran flew out of Iran with the help of Canadian diplomats.

In 1982, Italian anti-terrorism forces rescued U.S. Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, 42 days after he had been kidnapped by the Red Brigades.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 208 ~ 95 of 95

In 1985, the charity supergroup USA for Africa recorded the Michael Jackson-Lionel Richie song "We Are the World" at A&M Studios in Los Angeles.

Ten years ago: Chaos engulfed Egypt as protesters seized the streets of Cairo, battling police, burning down the ruling party's headquarters and defying a military curfew. The nation's largest cable TV company, Comcast Corp., took control of NBC Universal, capping a 13-month bid.

Five years ago: With Donald Trump absent because of a feud with Fox News Channel, the other Republican presidential candidates strained to take advantage of a rare opportunity to step out of the front-runner's shadow during a debate in Des Moines, Iowa. Dozens of educators who competed alongside Christa McAuliffe to become the first teacher in space gathered to remember the seven astronauts who perished aboard Challenger 30 years earlier. Death claimed Paul Kantner, a founding member of the Jefferson Airplane rock group, and former Providence, Rhode Island, mayor Buddy Cianci; both were 74.

One year ago: The United States and several other nations prepared to airlift citizens out of the Chinese city at the center of a virus outbreak that had killed more than 100 people. With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing beside him at the White House, President Donald Trump unveiled his long-awaited Middle East plan, one that strongly favored Israel; it called for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state but would leave sizable chunks of the occupied West Bank in Israeli hands. Palestinians reacted angrily to the plan. Trump's lawyers finished making their case for a speedy acquittal at his Senate impeachment trial.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Nicholas Pryor is 86. Actor Alan Alda is 85. Actor Susan Howard is 79. Actor Marthe (cq) Keller is 76. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., is 74. Actor-singer Barbi Benton is 71. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren is 67. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (sahr-koh-ZEE') is 66. Actor Harley Jane Kozak is 64. Movie director Frank Darabont is 62. Rock musician Dave Sharp is 62. Rock singer Sam Phillips is 59. Rock musician Dan Spitz is 58. Gospel singer Marvin Sapp is 54. Singer Sarah McLachlan is 53. Rapper Rakim is 53. DJ Muggs (Cypress Hill) is 53. Actor Kathryn Morris is 52. Humorist Mo Rocca is 52. Rock/soul musician Jeremy Ruzumna (Fitz and the Tantrums) is 51. R&B singer Anthony Hamilton is 50. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett is 49. Singer Monifah is 49. Actor Gillian Vigman is 49. Retired MLB All-Star Jermaine Dye is 47. Actor Terri Conn is 46. Singer Joey Fatone Jr. ('N Sync) is 44. Rapper Rick Ross is 44. Actor Rosamund Pike is 42. Actor Angelique Cabral is 42. Singer Nick Carter (Backstreet Boys) is 41. Actor Vinny Chhibber is 41. Actor Elijah Wood is 40. Rapper J. Cole is 36. Actor Alexandra Krosney is 33. Actor Yuri Sardarov is 33. Actor Ariel Winter is 23.