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Doubleheader

Milbank at Groton Area
Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021
JV Girls at 4 p.m. followed by
JV Boys, Varsity Girls, Varsity Boys



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



Proposed health plan for S.D. farmers would fall outside state and federal regulations

By: Bart Pfankuch



Gary Cammack

South Dakota lawmakers have passed a bill that would allow agricultural industry groups to develop their own health-benefit plans that would be outside the purview and regulation of the state Division of Insurance and which would sidestep some federal consumer protections.

The measure is being pushed by the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation, a powerful agricultural industry group that is seeking to create a new health plan for its 13,500 members and other farmers and ranchers across the state.

Opponents of the bill — including independent insurance companies and health groups including the American Cancer Society — argue it would be “dangerous” for consumers who buy into the plan, would weaken the stability of the overall insurance marketplace in South Dakota and lead to higher premiums for people on traditional insurance plans across the state.

The measure, Senate Bill 87, was passed by the South Dakota Senate on Feb. 3 on a 19-15 vote; it passed in the House of Representatives by a 50-16 vote on Feb. 10. The bill now moves to Gov. Kristi Noem for consideration.

Backers of the measure say it would allow for creation of affordable health plans that would provide a new coverage option for those in the agriculture industry who mostly are independent operators or contractors and do not qualify for employer-based plans. They note that an estimated 80,000 residents of South Dakota under 65 do not have any form of insurance.

Many farmers and ranchers also make too much money to qualify for subsidies that make traditional insurance plans offered within the Affordable Care Act marketplace more affordable. The bill would allow the Farm Bureau to create its proposed health plan but also opens the door to creation of similar plans by other established agricultural groups in the future. By law, the group health plans are not technically defined as insurance.

“The plan would assist in reducing the number of uninsured and support rural health care and further enhance quality of life in rural America,” said Senate Majority Leader Gary Cammack, R-Union Center, a Meade County rancher and store owner who is the lead sponsor of the bill. “We’ve got a real crisis when it comes to being able to access and afford health care insurance ... this particular plan gives an option to those folks to be able to afford something that will give them some protection and protect them from catastrophic issues that happen in life.”

Opponents say the plan puts individuals or families who buy in at risk of losing money or being denied coverage because they will not receive the consumer protections, guarantees of coverage, or proof of health-plan financial stability that state and federal laws require of traditional insurance plans. Fraud also becomes more likely without state oversight of the third-party contractor that will provide the benefits and run the plan, opponents said.

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"This is terribly unfair to the health insurance industry, because we have this whole stack of rules and regulations and statutes that apply to them and now we're going to put a competitor out in the marketplace that doesn't have to follow any of them," said Randy Moses, a lobbyist for the Independent Insurance Agents of South Dakota. "We're talking about a substantial amount of law, and this bill just throws it all way, no protections whatsoever for consumers."



Nick and Bekah Ihnen of Tulare are a farming family that has had to make tough choices to ensure they have health insurance. Nick Ihnen recently testified in favor of Senate Bill 87, saying it would create a more affordable option for health care coverage for farm families.

Photo: Courtesy Red River Farm Network

In testimony before the Senate and in press releases issued on the bill, opponents said that without state and federal regulation, the new plans could exclude or charge higher premiums on consumers with pre-existing conditions, could drop patients who contract complex and costly illnesses, and may not cover preventive tests or some costly services such as treatment for mental health and cancer. The plans theoretically could have annual or lifetime caps on benefits, which would force major out-of-pocket costs onto customers who become afflicted with serious illnesses, said David W. Benson, lobbyist for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network of South Dakota.

"This could leave people with cancer and other expensive illnesses with massive medical bills or force them to forgo needed medical treatments," Benson said. "These plans would likely attract younger, healthier individuals, segmenting the individual marketplace risk pool in South Dakota, and leaving it with older and sicker enrollees. This would result in increased prices on everyday South Dakotans like cancer survivors."

Similar plans are already allowed in Iowa, Michigan, Kansas, Indiana and Tennessee, which has the most experience with the benefit plans and whose program is the model for the proposed South Dakota plan.

During debate on the bill in the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee, farmer Nick Ihnen of Tulare, S.D., said his family has had to make difficult deci-

sions in order to maintain health insurance.

Ihnen said he and his wife have four children and farm on about 2,000 acres in Spink County. Ihnen said that for 13 years he was able to buy health insurance through his employer in the agriculture industry, but lost that option when he broke away to launch his own retail and crop-consulting business.

The family then had to buy insurance from the ACA marketplace that cost about \$16,000 a year, Ihnen said. The prohibitive cost led his wife, Bekah, to take a job off the farm in order to get employer-provided insurance, which he said has reduced the time he and his wife have for both farming and raising their children.

"As you can imagine, juggling a farming operation, my own retail business, four children and Bekah having an off-farm job makes it challenging to get the work done on our farming operation, to say the least, let alone to have a family life," Ihnen said.

Ihnen said the Farm Bureau benefits plan could provide his family a way to afford health insurance and remain committed to their farm.

"Plain and simple, this option would help my family," Ihnen said. "This will give the next generation confidence of staying on the farm and continuing our strong agricultural tradition."

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Sen. Wayne Steinhauer, R-Hartford, said he was paying about \$18,000 a year for private health insurance before joining Medi-share, a Christian medical sharing plan that is similar to the proposed Farm Bureau health plan. Under that plan, Steinhauer said his annual premiums dropped to about \$7,000 and he still feels well covered. Steinhauer voted to approve the bill in committee and the full Senate.

Sen. Troy Heinert, D-Mission, is a rancher who said he initially supported the bill as a co-sponsor but changed his mind after learning that some coverage under the plan could be restricted because it would operate outside state and federal guidelines.

"I thought that sounds good; low-wage ranch hands or farm hands might qualify," Heinert said. "[But] I can't risk someone thinking they are going to have coverage and something happens in a farm accident or ranch accident and they don't have the coverage."

Heinert voted against the bill in the Senate.

Ryan Brown, an administrator with the Farm Bureau Health Plan of Tennessee, said his organization has been offering health benefits since 1947 and has operated the type of plan South Dakota is considering since 1993. The plan that is the model for the South Dakota Farm Bureau plan has about 100,000 members across the state, he said.

Brown said the plan operates outside the purview of state insurance regulators in part so it can avoid coverage mandates that add administrative and benefit costs.

"Because it's not insurance, it's a membership service organization, we're allowed to do some things that result in lower costs and lower premiums, and we pass that onto the members," Brown said.

Brown said the Tennessee plan has coverage that compares well with health benefits provided by traditional insurers in the Affordable Care Act marketplace. He noted that the Tennessee plan covers both preventive testing and medical treatments, including mental health treatments. The plan does not have lifetime benefit limits, and does not allow for further underwriting or removal from the plan if a patient is sickened by an illness with expensive care or treatments.

He said potential customers are made fully aware of the limits on coverage and their upfront and co-pay costs.

In many cases, Brown said, lower premiums offset the higher co-pay costs incurred by customers.

Brown rejects the idea put forward by opponents of the South Dakota legislation that the Farm Bureau health plans push sicker patients into traditional insurance or that premiums for traditional insurance will rise if the new plans are offered.

"We believe that our effect is not really on the insurance marketplace, but on the uninsured population," Brown said. "This plan is not for everyone; it's for a niche population. We are covering people who otherwise would not have any form of coverage and are now able to pay their medical bills because they have this plan."

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School Board Meeting Minutes

UNOFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS OF BOARD OF EDUCATION
GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 06-6

REGULAR MEETING
February 8, 2021

President Smith called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm in the Elementary Commons Area. Members present: Flihs, Gengerke, Harder, Pharis, Rix, Smith and Weismantel. Others present were Supt. J. Schwan, Principals B. Schwan and Sombke, and Business Manager Weber.

Moved by Weismantel, second Harder to approve the agenda as presented. Motion carried.

Pursuant to SDCL 23-3, there was no potential conflict disclosure reported.

Moved by Pharis, second Harder to approve consent agenda items as presented: District minutes of January 11, 2021, bills, financial reports, custodial accounts, investments, transportation report, lunch reports and open enrollment applications #21-19 and #21-20. Motion carried.

GENERAL FUND: Net Salary – 181,652.45; FIT – 15,616.58; Medicare – 6,791.40; FICA – 29,039.38; American Funds – 542.80; SDRS – 29,242.16; HSA Contribution – 100.00; Waddell & Reed – 1,390.00; Horace Mann – 1,306.51; Thrivent – 250.00; AFLAC – 3,282.62; Delta Dental – 3,932.40; SD Supplemental Retirement – 977.29; Wellmark – 58,121.72; Standard – 665.92; Wage Works – 666.65; Avesis – 256.24; Allied Climate Professionals – services, 1,887.76; ASBSD – webinar, 25.00; Avera – services, 883.15; Cintas – services, 1,390.99; Cole Papers – supplies, 2,634.25; Core Educational – services, 520.00; Custodial Fund – advanced pays, 38,382.86; Dacotah Prairie Museum – registration, 75.00; Dependable Sanitation – services, 1,238.00; Farm Tire Service – repairs, 35.00; Grote Roofing – repairs, 959.18; Groton Area – wrestling supplies, 326.00; Groton Area – bank fees, 76.10; Groton Chiropractic – bus physical, 95.00; Hillyard – supplies, 1,360.62; House of Glass – repairs, 234.00; JW Pepper – music, 105.62; Jostens – supplies, 487.89; Macksteel Warehouse – angle iron, 463.17; Matheson Tri-Gas – supplies, 145.24; McLeod's Supply – forms, 203.14; National Speech & Debate – memberships, 60.00; Northside Implement – repairs, 2,453.54; Northwestern – natural gas, 4,543.37; Pepsi-Cola – supplies, 132.77; PSAT – testing fees, 238.00; Reporter & Farmer – legals, 21.85; S&S Lumber – supplies, 1,317.84; SD Dept of Labor – claim, 939.80; Kiersten Sombke – supplies, 67.89; WageWorks – admin fee, 118.25; Washington HS Choir – show choir tickets, 390.00. Total General Fund – \$395,645.40.

CAPITAL OUTLAY: A&B Business – managed print fee, 2,347.87; Custodial Fund – advanced pays, 26,923.31; Dakota Playground – tire swing/parts, 1,819.26; Menards – banquet table, 95.56. Total Capital Outlay – \$31,186.00.

SPECIAL ED: Net Salary – 27,545.73; FIT – 2,316.55; Medicare – 1,027.72; FICA – 4,394.34; SDRS – 4,584.44; Waddell & Reed – 200.00; AFLAC – 830.11; Delta Dental – 707.34; SD Supplemental Retirement – 100.00; Wellmark – 10,403.00; Standard – 219.53; Wage Works – 259.16; Avesis – 60.64; Amazon – supplies, 37.95; Avera – services, 7,011.56; Custodial Fund – advanced pays, 355.18; Julianne Hanlon – mileage, 37.80; Judy or Gene Williamson – mileage, 599.76; Nikki Wright – mileage, 1,159.20. Total Special Ed – \$61,850.01.

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ENTERPRISE: Food Service Net Salary – 4,272.13; FIT – 336.35; Medicare – 154.14; FICA – 658.88; SDRS – 597.82; AFLAC – 218.49; Wellmark – 1,526.00; Standard – 3.84; Wage Works – 8.33; Avesis – 60.64; Bernard Food – food, 583.68; BIMBO Bakeries – buns, 212.50; Cintas – services, 245.36; Custodial – advanced pays, 122.68; CWD – food, 1,352.55; East Side Jersey Dairy – milk, 957.40; Reinhart – food/paper, 4,102.89; SD Dept of Ed – food, 649.68; US Foods – food, 1,962.79. Total Food Service – \$18,026.15. OST Net Salary – 1,212.27; FIT – 73.88; Medicare – 43.28; FICA – 185.16; SDRS – 143.12; AFLAC – 163.93; Wellmark – 671.00; Standard – 23.28; Custodial Fund – advanced pays, 248.55. Total OST – \$2,764.47. Total Enterprise – \$20,790.62.

CUSTODIAL FUND: Total - \$75,320.39.

RECEIPTS: Local Sources, Taxes – 30,614.45; Other Local Sources – 63,285.23; County Sources – 2,171.40; State Sources – 0.00; Federal Sources – 58,333.49. Total Receipts - \$154,404.57.

Anna Schwan was present to address the board for five minutes on the benefits of returning to a 5-day school week in 2021-22. Topics discussed included student survival needs, social emotional needs, academic needs, and student service needs. She asked the board to consider what the evidence-based justifications are for permanently implementing a 4-day school week, how a 4-day school week would benefit students, what the school board's anticipated school-wide outcomes are in implementing a 4-day week, and how the school day will shift if the work week changes. The board thanked Mrs. Schwan for her input. No action was taken.

The board heard program overview presentations from Technology Coordinator, Aaron Helvig, and Library/Media personnel Brenda Madsen and Natasha Dunker.

The board continued discussion and necessary action on District response to Covid-19 issues including area schools close contact quarantine protocol survey, Covid-19 active case updates for the Groton Area School District, Brown County and the State of South Dakota, Abbott CinaxNOW rapid tests conducted, state vaccination plan, Federal Covid-19 Esser-II funds fiscal relief, post season Covid-19 safety protocols for winter sports from SDHSAA, and protocols for a close contact Covid-19 positive test exposure. Current protocols for a close contact require an at-home 5-day quarantine with permission to return to school on day 6, provided a mask is worn through day 10.

Moved by Gengerke, second Harder to amend the close contact protocol for an in-school Covid-19 positive test exposure by eliminating the 5-day quarantine and allowing the close contact to remain in school provided a mask is worn through day 10. Motion carried. The 5-day at-home quarantine will continue to apply to out-of-school Covid-19 positive tests exposures.

The following topics were discussed in administrative reports: NSU teacher job fair, Collective Bargaining Training, school board recognition week, 2021 legislative update, Kindergarten roundup, teacher observations, parent-teacher conferences, MS/HS 2019-20 data comparison numbers to 2020-21 for 2nd week honor roll, ineligibility list, dual credit participation, certified staff sick, personal and professional leave rates, auxiliary staff sick, personal and professional leave rates, out-of-school remote learner numbers and capital outlay certificate refinance information.

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Superintendent Schwan presented a 5-year comparison of prior District revenues with a 5-year estimate of future revenue.

The board held first reading of recommended policy change to policy ABBA Parent and Family Engagement.

Options for the 2021-22 School Calendar were reviewed and discussed. No action was taken.

The board discussed a proposal for GHS Arena Seat Sponsorship Program. No action was taken.

The board reviewed a letter of resignation from Brian Schuring effective at the end of the 2020-21 school year. Moved by Weismantel, second Flihs to table the issue until the first meeting in March 2021. Motion carried.

The board reviewed a letter of resignation from Brooke Compton effective at the end of the 2020-21 school year. Moved by Gengerke, second Pharis to approve. Motion carried.

Moved by Weismantel, second Gengerke to go into executive session at 11:10 pm pursuant to SDCL 1-25-2(1) for personnel issues including Superintendent evaluation. Motion carried.

Smith declared the board out of executive session at 11:13 pm.

Moved by Harder, second Rix to adjourn. Motion carried.

M. J. Weber, Business Manager

Steven R. Smith, President

The addition of signatures to this page verifies these minutes as official.

Published once at the total approximate cost of _____.

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Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Feb. 11

Parent-Teacher Conference, 1:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.
Basketball Doubleheader with Milbank in Groton.
JV girls (Trent and Heather Traphagen) at 4 p.m.
followed by JV boys (White House Inn), Varsity Girls
and Varsity Boys.

Saturday, Feb. 12

Basketball Doubleheader at Mobridge. JV girls
(Rich and Tami Zimney) at 1 p.m., JV boys (White
House Inn) at 2 p.m., Varsity Girls at 3 p.m. followed
by Varsity Boys.

Monday, Feb. 15

Junior High Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli El-
ementary 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).

Tuesday, Feb. 16: Girls Basketball hosts Warner
with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

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.

Monday, Feb. 22: Boys Basketball hosts Warner
with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

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

#353 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Things don't look much different from yesterday. There were 91,000 new cases reported today, bringing us to 27,321,900 total cases thus far in the pandemic, 0.3% more than yesterday. We continue to decline in the number of people hospitalized with this virus. Today the number is 79,179, so we show a decrease for a 34th consecutive day and a number below 100,000 for the 11th consecutive day. We are up to 471,097 deaths in the US so far, 0.7% more than yesterday. There were 3142 deaths reported today.

Yesterday, California showed its smallest new-case count in about three months. Hospitalizations are down by a third and ICU admissions are down a quarter in two weeks. To offset this good news, yesterday, California also passed New York as the state with the most deaths from the virus. To be sure, per capita, they're still well down the list—after all, California has about twice as many residents as New York; but still. Another not great news item for the state is that the first couple of cases of the B.1.351 variant, the one first seen in South Africa to which our prior immunity seem to be reduced, have showed up there, both in the Bay Area—Santa Clara and Alameda Counties. Remember that B.1.351 is not thought to be more transmissible, so we do not currently think it's going to take over the world, but there are real concerns about this particular variant.

The scientific and regulatory response to new variants is very quick. Eli Lilly added a second antibody, etesevimab to its monoclonal antibody therapy which already contained bamlanivimab. You will recall that monoclonal antibodies are laboratory-made versions of the same sorts of antibodies we make ourselves in response to a virus, only in highly purified form. Yesterday, the FDA granted emergency use authorization (EUA) for this new combination therapy. The authorization is for use to prevent progression to severe disease in those who have been diagnosed. The phase 3 trial of the combination therapy showed a 70 percent reduction in hospitalizations and deaths in treated patients, so this EUA wasn't much of a surprise.

It's been all over the news that the WHO team has finally made its way to China to investigate the origins of this pandemic and has some early reports. The purpose of an investigation like this is not to pin the blame on anyone, but rather to learn things which can help us prevent—or at least be better prepared for—the next pandemic. Understanding how this virus modified itself and moved from species to species is critical to developing the kind of understanding which can make this better preparation possible. The team has experts from 10 countries traveling together; they landed in China about three weeks ago, but had to undergo a quarantine before they were able to move about the country. There has been some question how open the Chinese were going to be to this sort of investigative team; combine anyone's natural reluctance to let a bunch of foreigners comb through your actions around a disaster on this scale with the secrecy and oppressiveness of the state apparatus in China, and it's no surprise folks expected this to be difficult. In fact, however, team members are reporting far more openness than expected going in; a zoologist from the UK, Peter Daszak, told the AP that they had full access to all sites and all of the people they requested. This is a plus.

They don't really have findings as yet, and whatever they have to say at this stage of the game must be considered open to revision as further information is developed; but they have seen no evidence the virus started spreading before the initial cases we know about in mid to late December. They have also pretty much ruled out a lab escape as a potential source to the extent that they are not recommending any follow-up on that possibility. This is because there have been no reports of this virus in any lab prior to the pandemic, laboratory escapes are exceedingly rare, and the procedures in use in the lab in Wuhan would effectively prevent escapes. The general impression is as it has long been: that this virus most likely originated in bats and jumped to humans in nature, not in a lab, probably through an intermediate host. I'm sure there will be more information as time goes on; no one thinks these questions will be fully resolved any time soon.

We've talked about masks a great deal, and lately with these new highly transmissible variants running around, we've been talking about just what kind of mask you should be wearing for best protection. Cloth masks typically fit fairly tightly to the face because fabric's flexibility creates less of a gap at the edges;

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even though they do not filter as effectively as medical-grade masks, CDC tests show a three-ply cloth mask blocks around 44 percent of particles. Surgical masks—those blue paper ones you can pick up everywhere nowadays—are not flexible, so gap a lot at the edges, but they filter more effectively; they block around 42 percent of particles. Put the cloth mask over a surgical mask, and you're blocking up to 92.5 percent of particles. That approaches the efficiency of a properly-fitted N95.

The CDC is still not recommending N95s for the general public. One problem with them is that they are difficult to find and, since the supply is still short, what we have are needed for medical personnel. Another problem is the number of counterfeits floating around the marketplace. It is very difficult to identify counterfeits; even the manufacturers have a problem doing this, a subject we've discussed before. I read a few days ago about a hospital system that spent something like a million dollars on a shipment of fakes. If the counterfeiters can fool the manufacturers of the real deal and hospital acquisitions folks, I don't for a minute think you or I will be able to spot them. Additionally, in a CNN interview yesterday, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the new director of the CDC, pointed out that the N95s are so difficult and uncomfortable to wear that lay people who rely on them tend to abandon wearing masks altogether. I've worn an N95, and while mine was never fit-tested to provide optimal filtration (which also makes breathing even more uncomfortable), I can certainly confirm that they are, indeed, difficult and uncomfortable to wear for those of us who are unaccustomed to them. I doubt they're all that much fun for the folks who wear them all the time either, honestly.

Here's some encouraging news from a series of CDC's tests done on mask-wearing dummies exposed to particles expelled in a simulated cough by another dummy: When the "coughing" dummy wore no mask and the bystander dummy wore a double mask, the bystander's exposure was reduced by 83 percent. That is significant. You will not be surprised to learn the CDC issued new mask guidance today. The update makes this the current recommendation: to put a cloth mask over a blue surgical mask. This is because the cloth mask's superior fit combines with the surgical mask's superior filtration, providing excellent protection. A second, or alternative, recommendation is to wear a single surgical mask, but knot the loops near the mask to reduce the gaps at the edges and tuck any loose edges under; this strategy, in the tests with the dummies, reduced exposure in a mask-wearing dummy from a non-mask-wearing cougher by 64.5 percent. As always, children under the age of 2 and those unable to remove their own masks shouldn't wear one at all.

The CDC has new "best practices" guidelines for vaccination as well. The CDC website says, "If it is not feasible to adhere to the recommended interval, the second dose may be scheduled for administration up to 6 weeks (42 days) after the first dose." This is not a free pass to be irresponsible in managing supplies since the website also says, "jurisdictions and providers must carefully manage vaccine inventory to ensure completion of the vaccine series. At present, jurisdictions receive sufficient supply of doses to vaccinate all persons who receive a first dose." The agency says that the purpose for this new guidance is not to permit deliberate (or careless) delay of second doses, but to provide guidance for situations where the patient misses an appointment for the second dose and for how long to save a second dose for a patient.

There is also new guidance from the CDC for fully vaccinated persons, that is, people who have received both doses of vaccine and are at least two weeks past the second dose. These folks are no longer required to quarantine after exposure to someone with a suspected or confirmed case. We're that sure they're protected. I also suspect, although I do not know, that there may be a developing understanding that a vaccinated person is not a significant source of transmission—can't think of another reason this guidance would have changed. Maybe we'll be seeing some data on this one day soon. We can hope.

We talked a long time ago about possible explanations for children's low rate of infection and severe disease from SARS-CoV-2. One idea promulgated early on is that childhood infections with the common coronaviruses, the ones that mostly just cause colds, conveyed some degree of protective cross-immunity which children enjoy. The thinking was that this protection was of fairly limited duration so that, by the time you reach adulthood it was pretty well worn off. There was a study published in December in the journal *Science* that bolstered this hypothesis. (I last wrote about this in my Update #265 posted on November 14 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4173027562713618> if you want to

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review it.) Well, now it appears not so much. Some new work done by a team at the Perlman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania used experiments done with live virus and hundreds of blood samples drawn before and after the pandemic to show that people with pre-existing antibodies to the seasonal coronaviruses were no less susceptible to infection or to severe disease than those without the antibodies. This is because, even though their antibodies did, indeed, cross-react with SARS-CoV-2, these antibodies were not neutralizing antibodies, the ones that can keep the virus from getting into your cells, that is, they latch on to the virus, but don't disable it or even slow it down. Now children were far more likely to have these non-neutralizing antibodies, which is why some folks were thinking they were the ticket; turns out this is not how things played out. These new findings do comport with our observations of transmission patterns in various populations as well; between that and the rigor of the testing procedure, it seems unlikely these folks have missed something. So we still don't know why kids are protected, but we have a pretty good idea of one posited explanation that won't hold up to scrutiny.

Mimi O'Brien owns a little boutique in Reno, Nevada; her husband, Scott is a police officer. Back in 2018, they were living in their dream home in their dream neighborhood, the neighborhood she grew up in—an easy walk from her shop, her parents close by, beautiful views, the school she attended available in the neighborhood for her two sons to attend. That was the case until late one night in the spring of that year when they awoke to neighbors making all kinds of noise, banging on their doors. The neighbors were not being obnoxious; they were trying to wake the O'Briens up because they could see the O'Brien house was on fire. Everyone got out safely.

The structure, however, was too damaged by the fire to salvage so they moved in with Mimi's parents while they figured out what was next. Not wanting to leave the neighborhood, they decided to rebuild on the same lot, and so they did just that, planning exactly what kind of house they wanted. They figured if they were building, they should do it right. By the time they moved in last August, Mimi's mom had been diagnosed with cancer, and was struggling with sickness from treatments; they'd stepped up to care for her during this time. They had also discovered they were going to have another child, a third son due in December. That's a lot going on—new house, sick mom, new baby.

But fate wasn't done with the O'Briens quite yet: One day in November, not long before Thanksgiving, while Scott was at work and Mimi was finishing up the nursery for her baby that was due in two weeks, a police officer knocked on the door, telling Mimi to evacuate. A wildfire, the Pinehaven fire, was bearing down on the neighborhood, and there was no time to lose in getting out of there. She grabbed her preschooler and the dogs and drove off. She told the Reno Gazette Journal, "I just knew when I left, I wasn't coming back to my house." Later that day, Scott texted his wife to confirm that: As he had made his way around the area, knocking on doors and evacuating people, he'd seen their house on fire. Again.

Total loss. Again.

You might say they'd lost everything, but you'd be wrong. They still had their family, intact. And they had their friends and neighbors who rallied around them. People got together and collected diapers and baby gear, gift cards and needed items for the immediate future. A GoFundMe raised more than \$45,000 to help them through whatever transition they were going to undergo. A couple who lives in another community some 40 minutes away—had never met the O'Briens—heard this story and decided they had to do something to help. They couldn't get together with people, so they wrote a letter asking for help for the O'Briens and walked throughout their own neighborhood, putting a copy of the letter on every door. They explained that, before they even got home from putting the letters out, money was coming in.

All of this has the family more convinced than ever that this neighborhood is for them. Mimi's mom told Kelly Clarkson on her talk show that they have the "ultimate neighbors." I guess they do. They plan to rebuild. I hope it sticks this time.

Stay healthy. We'll talk again.

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	450	428	840	15	Minimal	0.00%
Beadle	2634	2547	5616	39	Moderate	11.97%
Bennett	378	364	1144	9	Minimal	0.00%
Bon Homme	1500	1473	2002	24	Minimal	0.00%
Brookings	3495	3349	11260	35	Substantial	2.76%
Brown	5027	4813	12140	79	Substantial	10.56%
Brule	681	667	1809	9	Minimal	0.00%
Buffalo	419	406	881	13	Minimal	0.00%
Butte	962	929	3095	20	Moderate	3.16%
Campbell	128	121	246	4	Minimal	7.69%
Charles Mix	1236	1191	3796	18	Substantial	14.29%
Clark	356	335	920	4	Substantial	5.56%
Clay	1766	1731	4985	15	Moderate	5.37%
Codington	3825	3636	9291	76	Substantial	7.98%
Corson	462	447	984	11	Minimal	4.55%
Custer	732	711	2611	12	Moderate	9.84%
Davison	2914	2816	6245	59	Moderate	2.99%
Day	630	575	1693	28	Substantial	20.45%
Deuel	461	446	1087	8	Minimal	0.00%
Dewey	1390	1359	3723	21	Moderate	2.04%
Douglas	416	401	875	9	Minimal	3.45%
Edmunds	469	441	984	11	Moderate	0.00%
Fall River	513	491	2503	15	Moderate	6.85%
Faulk	350	320	668	13	Moderate	9.09%
Grant	934	861	2120	37	Substantial	17.74%
Gregory	515	473	1197	27	Moderate	6.90%
Haakon	245	231	514	9	Minimal	7.69%
Hamlin	673	620	1694	38	Moderate	12.12%
Hand	326	311	765	6	Minimal	0.00%
Hanson	345	327	681	4	Moderate	13.04%
Harding	91	89	176	1	Minimal	20.00%
Hughes	2230	2151	6262	33	Substantial	1.04%
Hutchinson	768	724	2246	24	Moderate	7.32%

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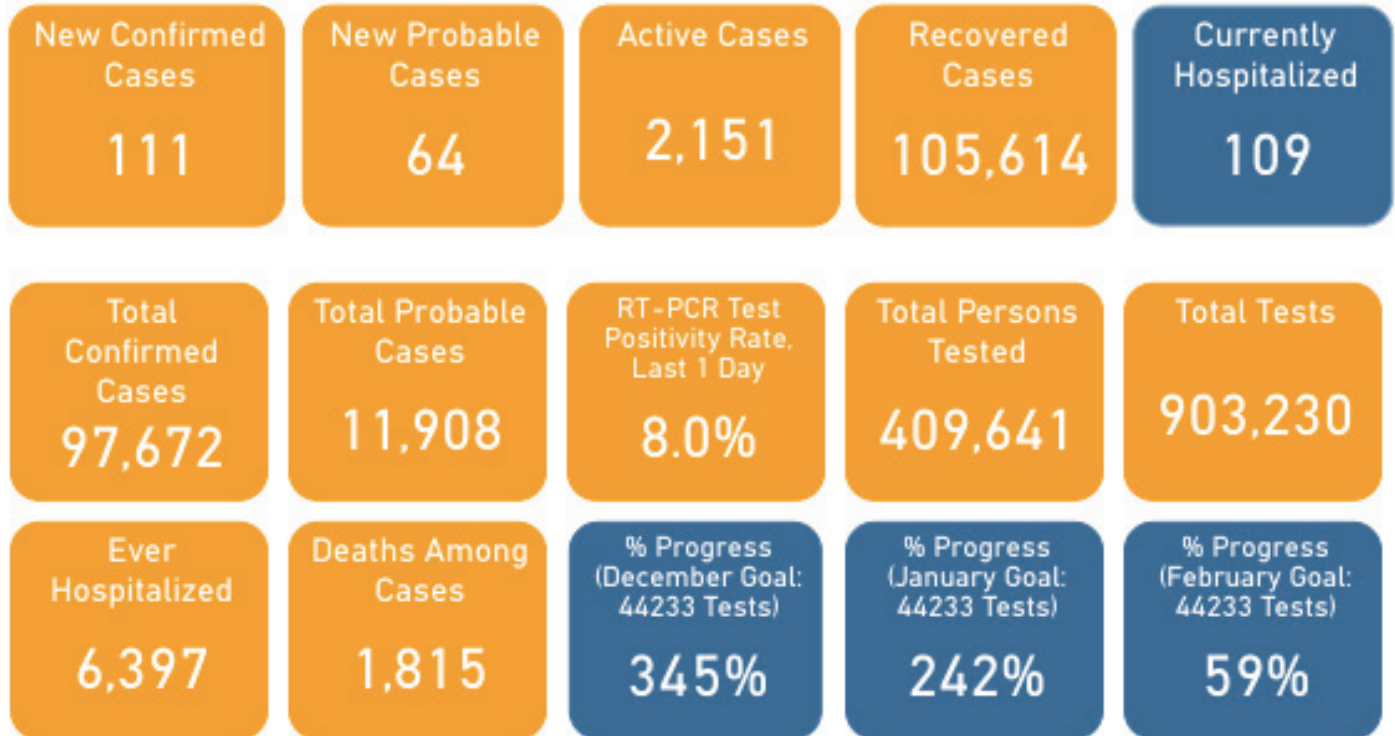
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Hyde	135	133	393	1	Minimal	0.00%
Jackson	274	253	892	14	Minimal	8.33%
Jerauld	268	247	535	16	Minimal	9.09%
Jones	82	81	210	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	613	589	1574	13	Moderate	3.28%
Lake	1155	1110	3125	17	Moderate	2.15%
Lawrence	2772	2697	8221	44	Moderate	3.98%
Lincoln	7549	7336	19348	75	Substantial	7.99%
Lyman	592	577	1826	10	Minimal	0.00%
Marshall	290	279	1120	5	Minimal	0.00%
McCook	727	693	1552	24	Moderate	10.26%
McPherson	237	226	532	4	Minimal	0.92%
Meade	2510	2426	7345	31	Moderate	8.62%
Mellette	241	237	710	2	Minimal	0.00%
Miner	269	247	549	9	Minimal	0.00%
Minnehaha	27333	26494	74447	320	Substantial	8.31%
Moody	605	579	1694	16	Minimal	6.06%
Oglala Lakota	2042	1963	6501	45	Moderate	2.20%
Pennington	12532	12126	37674	178	Substantial	7.70%
Perkins	339	315	761	12	Moderate	0.00%
Potter	357	338	793	3	Moderate	28.00%
Roberts	1121	1067	3971	35	Substantial	6.60%
Sanborn	325	319	660	3	Minimal	5.88%
Spink	789	738	2053	25	Substantial	10.23%
Stanley	321	311	882	2	Moderate	3.85%
Sully	135	131	290	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1216	1176	4045	26	Moderate	8.96%
Tripp	662	638	1431	15	Moderate	1.23%
Turner	1046	987	2591	50	Moderate	5.88%
Union	1916	1817	5908	39	Substantial	12.96%
Walworth	709	676	1768	15	Moderate	11.48%
Yankton	2760	2697	8947	28	Moderate	1.75%
Ziebach	337	327	852	9	Minimal	7.14%
Unassigned	0	0	1808	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4307	0
10-19 years	12257	0
20-29 years	19625	4
30-39 years	18026	15
40-49 years	15633	34
50-59 years	15441	106
60-69 years	12527	241
70-79 years	6708	410
80+ years	5056	1005

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	57164	858
Male	52416	957

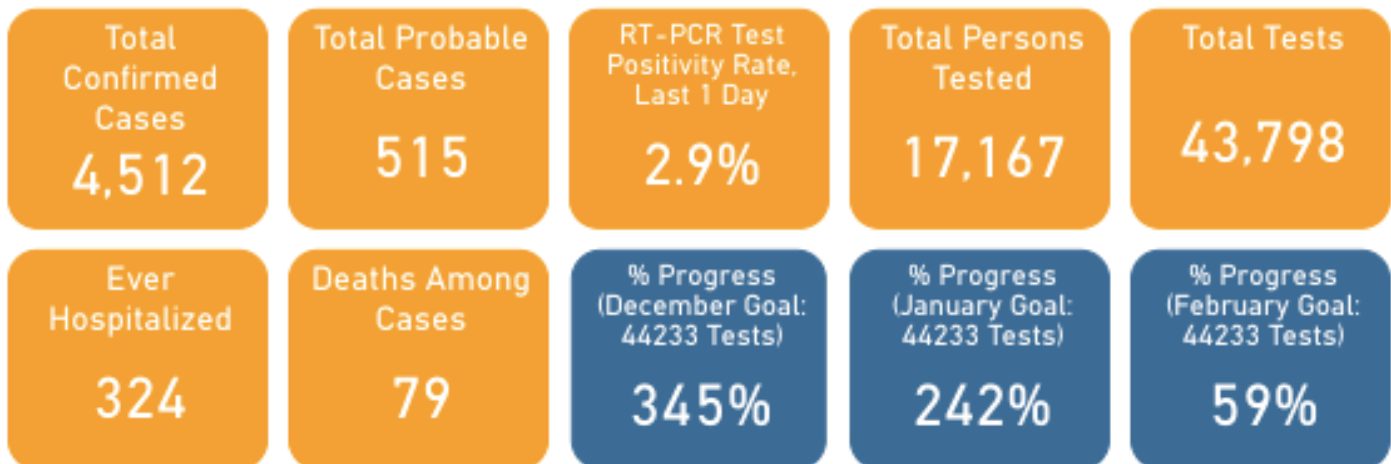
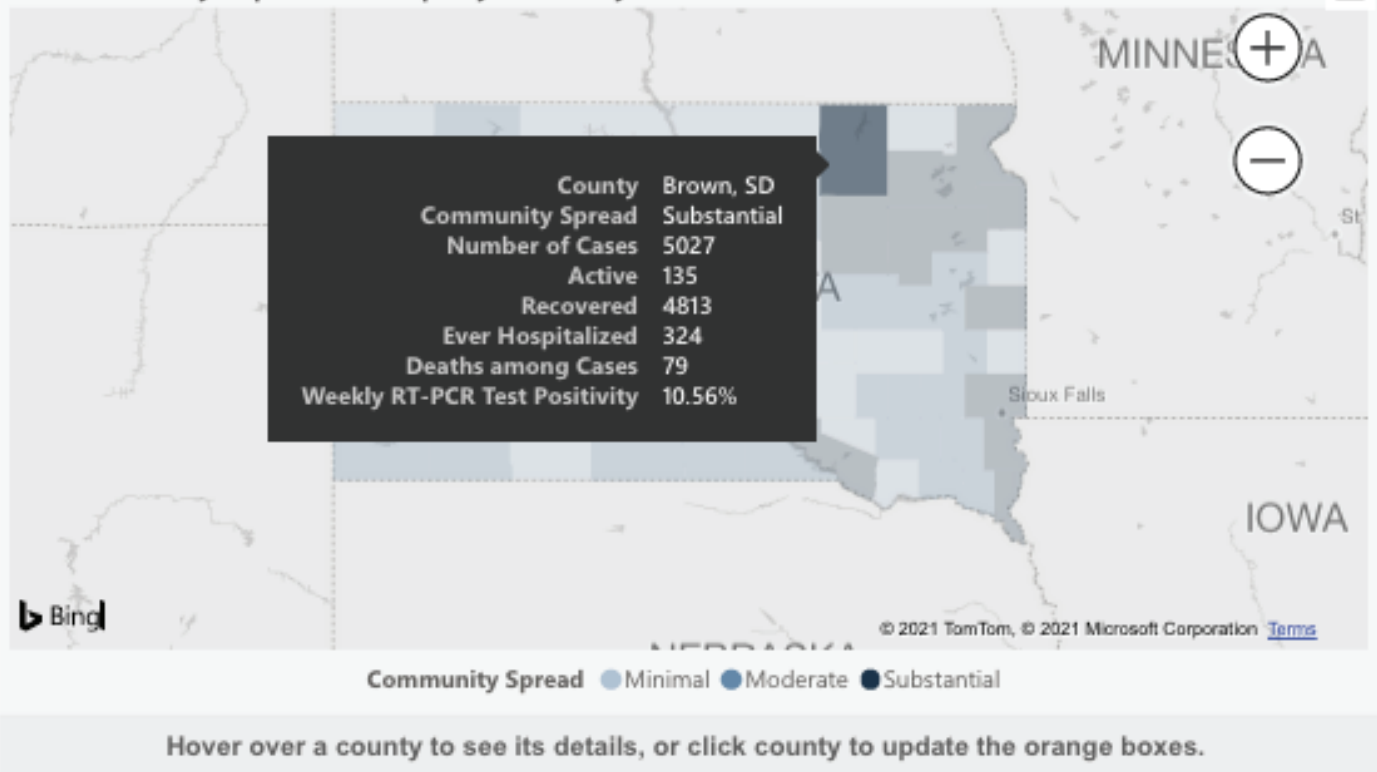
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



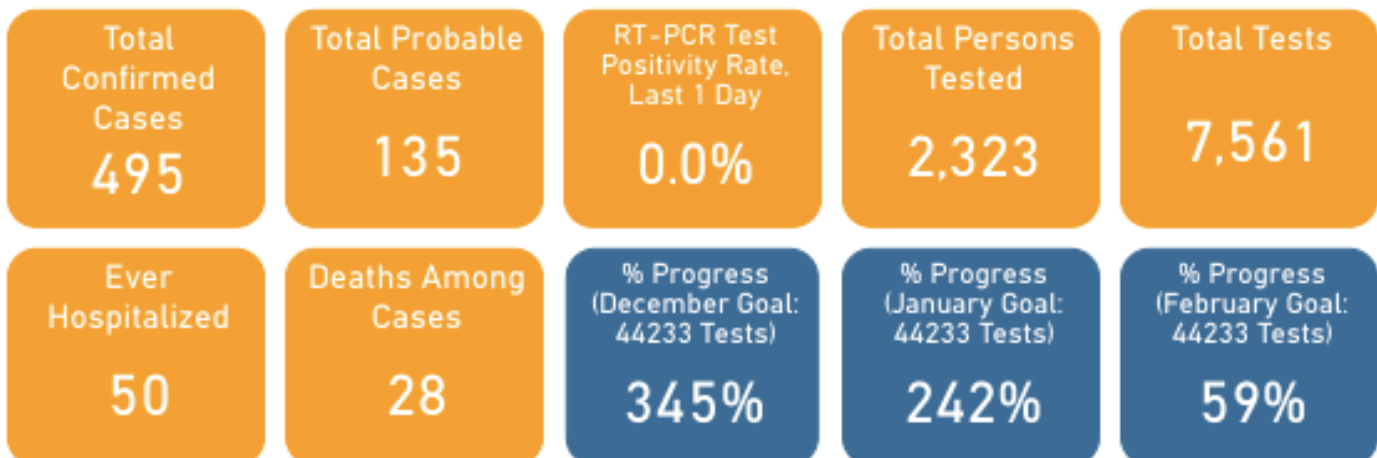
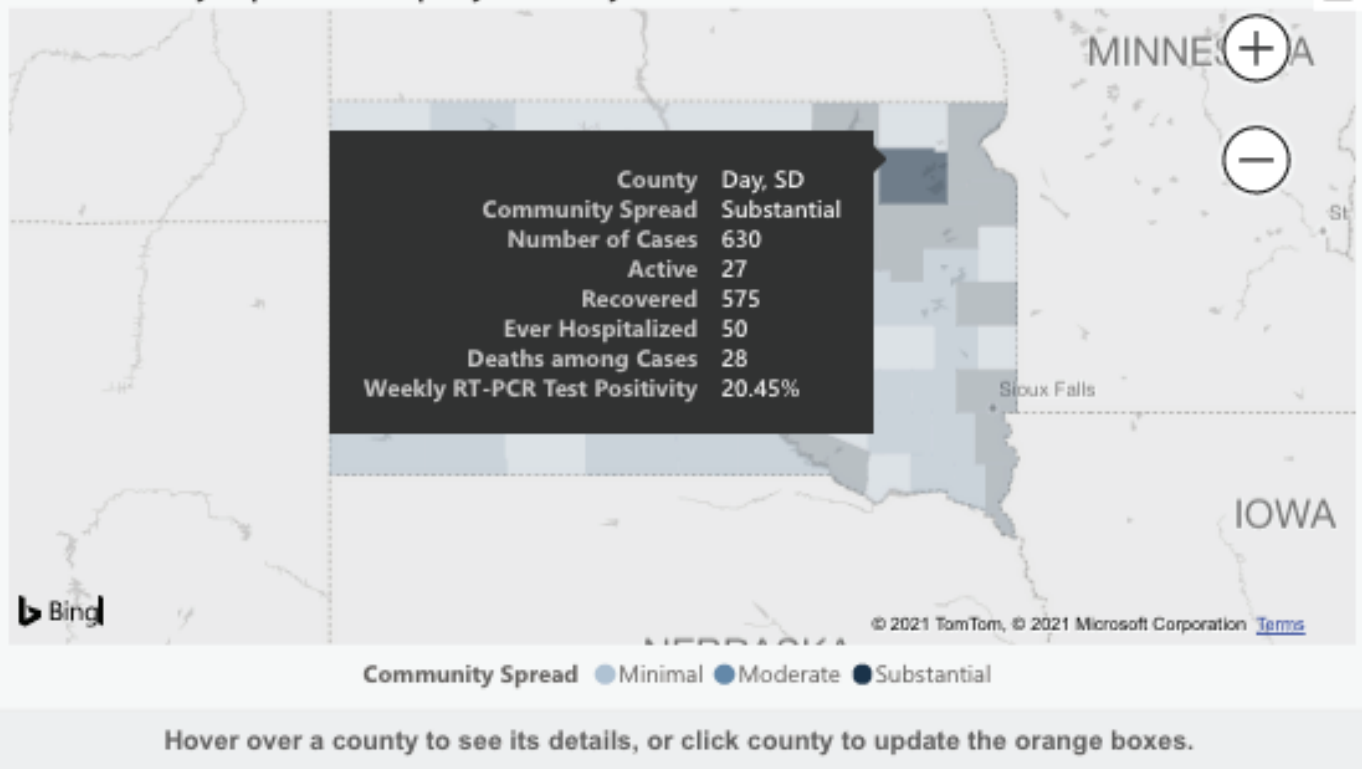
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

129,541

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

89,050

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

13%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	68,729
Pfizer	60,812

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	25,491
Moderna - Series Complete	21,619
Pfizer - 1 dose	23,068
Pfizer - Series Complete	18,872

Doses	% of Pop.
Series Complete	5.87%
1 dose	12.91%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16 years and older

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	326	144	91	235
Beadle	2388	1,146	621	1,767
Bennett*	206	122	42	164
Bon Homme*	1253	407	423	830
Brookings	3483	1,441	1,021	2,462
Brown	5752	1,766	1,993	3,759
Brule*	801	405	198	603
Buffalo*	84	76	4	80
Butte	691	381	155	536
Campbell	475	111	182	293
Charles Mix*	1309	559	375	934
Clark	467	235	116	351
Clay	2063	757	653	1,410
Codington*	4210	1,516	1,347	2,863
Corson*	83	57	13	70
Custer*	1010	490	260	750
Davison	3699	1,045	1,327	2,372
Day*	979	423	278	701
Deuel	562	266	148	414
Dewey*	194	84	55	139
Douglas*	557	165	196	361
Edmunds	427	181	123	304
Fall River*	1081	487	297	784
Faulk	333	257	38	295
Grant*	983	261	361	622
Gregory*	704	248	228	476
Haakon*	243	87	78	165

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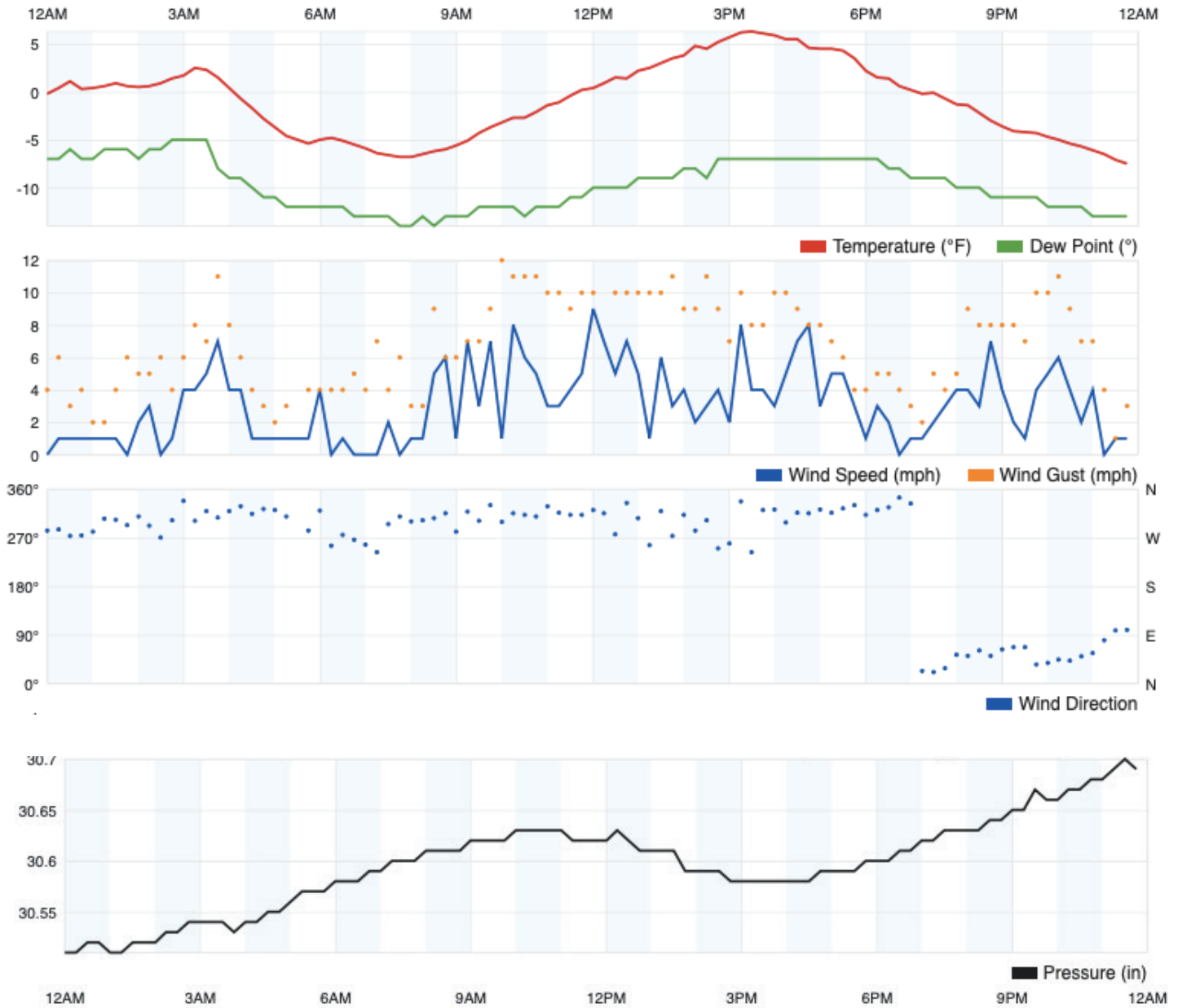
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Hamlin	690	306	192	498
Hand	608	276	166	442
Hanson	186	58	64	122
Harding	25	19	3	22
Hughes*	2945	1,319	813	2,132
Hutchinson*	1454	412	521	933
Hyde*	267	81	93	174
Jackson*	162	92	35	127
Jerauld	240	106	67	173
Jones*	266	100	83	183
Kingsbury	809	305	252	557
Lake	1494	582	456	1,038
Lawrence	2715	1,545	585	2,130
Lincoln	12323	3,365	4,479	7,844
Lyman*	287	179	54	233
Marshall*	672	258	207	465
McCook	862	340	261	601
McPherson	80	40	20	60
Meade*	2255	1,161	547	1,708
Mellette*	17	5	6	11
Miner	346	134	106	240
Minnehaha	34647	11,911	11,368	23,279
Moody*	602	198	202	400
Oglala Lakota*	58	36	11	47
Pennington*	14686	6,722	3,982	10,704
Perkins*	190	116	37	153
Potter	299	75	112	187
Roberts*	1553	979	287	1,266
Sanborn	389	221	84	305
Spink	1264	328	468	796
Stanley*	422	180	121	301
Sully	122	74	24	98
Todd*	76	26	25	51
Tripp*	861	361	250	611
Turner	1572	500	536	1,036
Union	1092	582	255	837
Walworth*	765	323	221	544
Yankton	4699	1,261	1,719	2,980
Ziebach*	32	14	9	23
Other	3146	852	1,147	1,999

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Chance Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Cold	Partly Cloudy	Cold
High: -1 °F	Low: -17 °F	High: -1 °F	Low: -17 °F	High: -4 °F

Continued Cold Through the Weekend

(Overnight Wind Chills -20 to -35°)

Today


- *Mostly Cloudy with light snow*
- *Highs -8 to 7°F*

Friday

- *Partly Sunny with chance of snow south*
- *Highs -7 to 3°F*

Saturday

- *Partly Cloudy*
- *Highs -9 to 3°F*

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 2/11/2021 2:07 AM Central

More of the same into the weekend as an arctic air mass hangs around the region with cold temperatures and bitterly cold wind chills. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

February 11, 2002: High winds of 35 to 45 mph gusting to 60 to 65 mph affected central and northeast South Dakota as well as west central Minnesota through the afternoon and into the evening hours. The high winds caused some spotty tree and roof damage along with a few power outages. A few downed power lines in Aberdeen resulted in a short power outage for some people. Also, a streetlight pole was knocked down in Aberdeen. Some wind gusts included 55 mph at Wheaton, 58 mph at McLaughlin, 59 mph at Pierre, 61 mph at Sisseton and Aberdeen, 62 mph at Mobridge, and 63 mph at Graceville, Minnesota.

1895: The low temperature was 11 degrees below zero at Moline, Illinois marking the last of a station record 16 consecutive days on which the low temperature was at or below zero. During the first 11 days of February, the highest temperature recorded at Moline was only 13 degrees above zero. Their current average high temperature for early February is in the lower 30s.

1935: Africa's lowest recorded temperature occurred on this date in 1935. A bitterly cold 11 degrees below zero was registered at the Atlas Mountains village of Ifrane, Morocco.

1983: Called the "Megalopolitan blockbuster snowstorm," this major snowstorm impacted the Mid-Atlantic and southern New England. Snowfall up to 25 inches fell at Allentown, Pennsylvania. Snowfall amount of 35 inches occurred in parts of the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia at Glen Cary. Windsor Locks, Connecticut recorded a record 19 inches in 12 hours. A ship sunk off the Virginia/Maryland coast killing 33. There were 46 total storm-related fatalities. New 24-hour snowfall records were set in Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Allentown Pennsylvania and Hartford Connecticut. Five inches of snow in one hour was recorded at Allentown and Hartford.

1899 - Perhaps the greatest of all arctic outbreaks commenced on this date. The temperature plunged to 61 degrees below zero in Montana. At the same time a "Great Eastern Blizzard" left a blanket of snow from Georgia to New Hampshire. The state of Virginia took the brunt of the storm, with snowfall totals averaging 30 to 40 inches. (David Ludlum)

1983 - The Middle Atlantic Coast States and southern New England were in the midst of a major snowstorm. In Pennsylvania, the storm produced 21 inches at Philadelphia, 24 inches at Harrisburg, and 25 inches at Allentown, establishing record 24 hour totals and single storm totals for those locations. New York City received 22 inches of snow, and 35 inches was reported at Glen Gary, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia. Windsor Locks CT received a record 19 inches of snow in 12 hours. The storm resulted in forty-six deaths, thirty-three of which occurred when a freighter capsized and sank off the Maryland/Virginia coast. Heavy snow was reported from northeastern Georgia to eastern Maine. (10th-12th) (Storm Data) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Denver, CO, reported only their third occurrence of record of a thunderstorm in February. Ten cities in the north central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Huron SD reported February temperatures averaging 19 degrees above normal. Williston ND reported readings averaging 24 degrees above normal for the month. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Bitter cold air gripped the north central U.S. Morning lows of 35 degrees below zero at Aberdeen SD, Bismarck ND and International Falls MN were records for the date. Bemidji MN was, officially, the cold spot in the nation with a low of 39 degrees below zero, however, a reading of 42 degrees below zero was reported at Gettysburg SD. In the Northern High Plains Region, Baker MT warmed from 27 degrees below zero to 40 above. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - While much of the continental U.S. enjoyed sunshine and seasonable temperatures, a strong weather system over the Hawaiian Islands deluged Honolulu with 2.5 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - North Dakota Governor John Hoeven declares a snow emergency as winds gusting over 70 mph along with heavy snow produces low visibilities and drifts up to 20 feet in northwestern North Dakota. Amtrak train service is interrupted in the region. The Weather Doctor

2006 - Snowfall records fell in Philadelphia and Allentown, Pennsylvania, Bridgeport and Hartford, Connecticut, Newark, New Jersey, and Worcester and Boston, Massachusetts. The highest total reported was 30.2 inches at Fairfield, CT. New York City set a record one-day snowfall record of 26.9 inches in Central Park.

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NEED A COUNSELOR?

There is a story of a man who was waiting for a traffic light to turn green. On his rear bumper was a sticker that read: "DO NOT FOLLOW ME – I'M LOST!"

Another car stopped next to him. The man rolled down his window and motioned for him to do the same. When the man with the sticker on his bumper rolled down his window, the person in the car next to him pointed to himself and said, "Me too. But at least you look like you are going someplace. Mind if I follow you?"

If there is anyone who everyone needs, it is someone smarter than all of us put together that we can follow. We all need a Counselor who is wiser and smarter than we are, and who has more insight and foresight than any one person could ever possess.

We all need a Counselor who knows and understands us. We need One who knows our attitudes and abilities, our flaws and failures, our sins and shortcomings - yet One who is interested in us despite ourselves and can help us get beyond ourselves.

We all need a Counselor who knows tomorrow. We need One who knows what is in store for us and can guide us and guard us through difficult days and long, lonely nights. Someone who will be with us from the beginning of life until the end of life as we now know it.

We all need a Counselor who knows and respects the truth. We need One who will not allow us to hide behind our lies. We need One who will expose our words of deceit or false statements about who we are. We need One who will show us who we are and who we can become through the grace of God. Have you found Him yet?

Prayer: Open our hearts, Father, to be willing to accept the truth of Your Word. Speak to us and lead us through Your Holy Spirit. Guide us and guard us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Troubles multiply for those who chase after other gods. I will not take part in their sacrifices of blood or even speak the names of their gods. Psalm 16:4

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

10-14-17-18-26

(ten, fourteen, seventeen, eighteen, twenty-six)

Estimated jackpot: \$26,000

Lotto America

07-13-20-22-31, Star Ball: 10, ASB: 4

(seven, thirteen, twenty, twenty-two, thirty-one; Star Ball: ten; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.9 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$82 million

Powerball

15-39-58-63-67, Powerball: 7, Power Play: 2

(fifteen, thirty-nine, fifty-eight, sixty-three, sixty-seven; Powerball: seven; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$42 million

Rapid City man charged in local arson spree

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Rapid City man is charged with setting a series of fires that destroyed an artist's studio, a garage, vehicle and other property.

Raymond Andrzejewski, 68, made his first court appearance in Pennington County Court Wednesday on four counts of arson.

"He's setting fires in neighborhoods, peoples' lives are at risk," said police Capt. James Johns.

Johns said Andrzejewski's arrest is the result of "really exhaustive police work" that included interviews, surveillance, physical evidence found at the crime scenes and video footage.

Two fires on Dec. 6 destroyed a garage, car, some outdoor gear, an artist's studio and motorcycle. Another fire was discovered in the entryway to West Park Apartments on Dec. 31. A garage behind a nursing school was burned on Jan. 23.

Johns said police aren't 100% sure of Andrzejewski's alleged motive, but have ruled out any insurance scheme.

A judge set bond at \$30,000 cash. It's not clear whether Andrzejewski has a lawyer to represent him in the case.

South Dakota Senate clears 2 criminal justice reform bills

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Wednesday approved a pair of proposals aimed at criminal justice reform by bolstering training for law enforcement officers and allowing young convicts sentenced to life in prison a chance for parole after they reach the age of 50.

Gov. Kristi Noem pushed the bill to require police officers to receive training on handling people resisting arrest. It would require them to retake the training every two years. It came after the governor last year committed to address law enforcement reform after George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis.

Noem's bill passed unanimously in the Senate, while the other bill addressing probation scraped through on the thinnest of margins — a single vote.

Republican Sen. Arthur Rusch, a former judge, pushed that bill as a way to give young offenders a

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chance at rehabilitation. It would allow people who received life sentences for offenses they committed when they were under 25 years old to apply for parole after they turn 50. A parole board would still get to decide whether to grant it.

Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, as well as 17 GOP senators, opposed the proposal. Both bills will next be considered by the House.

South Dakota governor plans to delay medical pot law a year

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday promised she will honor the will of voters to legalize pot for medical use, just not this year.

The Republican governor announced a plan to delay legalization of medical marijuana until July 1, 2022, saying she did not have enough time to study the issue and implement a program. Medical cannabis was supposed to be legalized on July 1 of this year after voters passed a ballot initiative in November.

The slow-walk was the second setback this week pro-pot groups in the state, after a judge on Monday struck down a voter-passed constitutional amendment that would have legalized recreational pot. Noem, an ardent opponent of recreational pot legalization, had pushed for the lawsuit.

Republican legislative leadership supports Noem's plan. House Speaker Spencer Gosch unveiled a bill early Wednesday that would delay the voter-passed law, known as Initiated Measure 26, by a year and set up a committee to study implementation. The governor would appoint 10 of its 22 members. The committee would be tasked with preparing legislation by next January.

"We are working diligently to get IM 26 implemented safely and correctly," Noem said in a statement. "The feasibility of getting this program up and running well will take additional time."

Noem opposed marijuana legalization of any kind before the November election, but after medical pot legalization passed with nearly 70% support, her administration has been working with Cannabis Public Policy Consulting. The group says it usually takes 14 to 20 months to put a medical pot program together. Neighboring North Dakota took about two years to implement a medical pot program.

Democrats argued Noem's administration should have begun implementing the program as soon as it became clear it had been passed by voters. Noem's administration signed its contract with the cannabis consultants on Jan. 19, according to state records.

"The fact that they are dragging their feet on it is really frustrating," House Democratic Leader Jamie Smith said, noting that the delay affects those who need marijuana for medical conditions.

Gosch, a Republican, argues in his bill that the voter-passed measure did not consider the complexities of setting up a marijuana program, from taxing medical pot to naming the medical conditions that would qualify for a marijuana prescription. Under the law, schools would be required to allow students with prescriptions to consume marijuana, but it is not clear how that would be implemented.

Lawmakers are also working amid uncertainty on the final outcome of the court case on recreational marijuana, as pro-pot groups say they plan to appeal this week's ruling to the state Supreme Court. The high court is not expected to rule until well after lawmakers leave Pierre in March.

But for Republicans, at least one thing is clear: Voters want medical marijuana.

"The people have spoken," Gosch said. "We have a job to do."

However, Melissa Mentele, who spearheaded the medical cannabis campaign, argued the delay was not respecting the will of voters, noting they had passed "a complete policy" based on best practices from other states.

She called Noem's proposal "harmful to patients and disrespectful to the people of South Dakota."

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press and Dakotan. February 8, 2021.

Editorial: Keystone Pipeline: The Controversy Continues

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The proposed Keystone XL pipeline has been an on-again, off-again proposition for several years, and it's currently off again after President Joe Biden recently signed an executive order pulling the plug on the controversial project.

The pipeline would transport oil pumped from Alberta's corrosive tar sands over environmentally sensitive land and through, for instance, lands belonging to Native American tribes that oppose the project. Biden's decision to axe the pipeline, which was based primarily on environmental concerns, has also revved up proponents of the project who decry the loss of jobs and, as some have charged, the undercutting of America's bid for energy independence.

The arguments are familiar and don't really need to be rehashed here in greater detail.

We can, however, offer a generalized local perspective since the Yankton area already has its own Keystone pipeline from Alberta. It was constructed a decade ago by TransCanada (now TC Energy) and it did leave an impact.

First off, one thing it didn't leave was thousands of jobs. It certainly brought in a small army of workers, but most of them hailed from places like Texas and Oklahoma. There were a few local people hired for some lower-end, lower-paying jobs. None of these jobs were permanent: The workers were here and then they were gone, and the part-time help vanished. It did leave behind one or two permanent jobs. So, when people talk about the 10,000 or 20,000 (or more) jobs that would be created by the Keystone XL pipeline project, bear in mind that those would be fleeting jobs. Ultimately, the entire project was expected to create a total of about 50 permanent, full-time jobs, some of which would be located in Canada, according to the Oklahoma City Daily Oklahoman.

However, this isn't to say the workers didn't have an impact when they were in the Yankton area. They had to eat and shop during their time here, and that boosted Yankton's local revenues. Coming as it did amid the Great Recession, the economic bump was a welcomed plus as long as it lasted.

Also, it left behind a continuing economic impact in terms of property tax valuation. According to the TC Energy website, the company accrued \$6 million in property taxes across 17 South Dakota counties as of 2017 (the latest year available). It is still feeding the coffers in those counties.

The environmental and energy aspects are more problematic.

The pipeline does have a history of leaks. There was a 16,800-gallon leak east of Menno in 2016; a 407,000-gallon leak near Aberdeen in 2017; and a 380,000-gallon leak in North Dakota in 2019. There have also been several tiny leaks, including a 10-gallon leak near Hartington, Nebraska, and a five-gallon leak near Freeman, both in 2010. Since the pipeline projects move across, above and below environmentally sensitive areas — at Yankton, the pipeline runs underneath the Missouri River — environmentalists have real concerns.

Also, how vital the Keystone project is to America's energy future is debatable. The current world oil market is stabilized because of OPEC production cuts spurred by a supply glut created by the COVID-19 pandemic along with the fact that an increasing number of industries and individuals are shifting to renewable energy sources. Fossil fuel simply isn't the wave of the long-term future — consider GM's announcement last week to phase out gas and diesel engines in favor of electric engines by 2035 — although the need for petroleum, while steadily diminishing, will likely never completely disappear. Thus, it may seem odd that some prominent officials are fervently doubling down on the matter. It could be argued that the longer the Keystone project is delayed, the less relevant it becomes.

Finally (and apart from the local take), the Keystone XL pipeline is also about neighbors. Biden's decision is being fiercely criticized by South Dakota officials who, either way, will also have to deal with the tribes, other landowners and local groups who oppose the project and will still be here whether the pipeline is built or not.

Controversy seems to be the one constant with this issue, and that will never change until the matter is finally settled, once and for all. Biden's decision ends yet another chapter in this back-and-forth story, and the battle will likely stagger on.

END

Ethnic minorities protest Myanmar coup, as opposition grows

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Members of Myanmar's ethnic minorities marched through streets in traditional dress and floated on wooden long boats in a scenic lake Thursday to protest last week's coup, a sign of the broad and growing resistance to the military takeover.

Opposition to the coup received a major boost from abroad from U.S. President Joe Biden, who ordered new sanctions and promised more measures to come as he demanded the junta hand power back to the elected government. That's part of a growing trend, as more governments consider sanctions against the military.

The military seized power on Feb. 1, ousting leader Aung San Suu Kyi and preventing recently elected lawmakers from opening a new session of Parliament — a shocking reversal after about a decade of progress towards democracy in Myanmar. The junta said it was forced to step in because Suu Kyi's government failed to properly investigate allegations of fraud in recent elections, though the election commission has said there is no evidence to support those claims.

In response to the coup, tens of thousands of protesters have marched daily in Yangon and Mandalay, the country's biggest cities — and the demonstrations have spread throughout the country, showing depth of the resistance. The rallies have drawn people from all walks of life, despite an official ban on gatherings of more than five people. Factory workers and civil servants, students and teachers, medical personnel and people from LGBTQ communities, Buddhist monks and Catholic clergy have all come out in force.

On Thursday, people from Myanmar's ethnic minority groups, who are concentrated in far-flung, border states, joined in — a striking show of unity in a country where some groups have resented the Burman majority's control and have also had their differences with Suu Kyi. But their deep mistrust of the military, which has brutally repressed their armed struggles for more autonomy, has made them uneasy allies with her party.

"Our people have been oppressed by the junta for many years. They have cracked down brutally. How long are they going to keep doing this?" asked protester Naw Ohn Hla, a human rights activist from the Karen ethnic group, at a demonstration in Yangon. "But the people understand the situation, and most of them are joining now."

There have also been reports of police officers who belong to the Kayah ethnic group risking their jobs to protest the takeover. In a video shot Wednesday in a small village in the eastern state of Kayah, 42 police officers could be seen standing together to declare their support for the protesters and refuse entreaties from a senior officer to return to duty. Residents streamed to the scene to protect the defiant officers from arrest.

In Myanmar's eastern Shan State, home to the country's largest ethnic minority group, scores of wooden long boats used for fishing and transportation on scenic Inle Lake hosted a unique floating protest, with passengers holding placards denouncing the coup and calling for justice. Some protesters squeezed messages lengthwise onto oars, including "Respect Our Votes" and "Say No to Coup."

Large rallies have also taken place in the capital, Naypyitaw — which is unusual since the planned city has a large military presence. On Thursday, in the southern city of Dawei, protesters stamped and wiped their feet on a poster of Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the much-scorned coup leader who now heads the ruling junta.

Hundreds of protesters also gathered outside the Chinese Embassy to criticize what they said was Beijing's failure to condemn the military takeover. They held signs, many in English and Mandarin, with slogans such as, "Reject the Coup, Shame on you China" and "Dear Chinese Government, Don't Stay Muted. This is not Zoom meeting."

About 200 politicians and activists have been arrested since the coup, according to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

More senior members of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, along with other politicians and activists, were arrested Wednesday night.

So far, police have sprayed water cannons and shot rubber bullet and live rounds in the air in an attempt to disperse crowds. In the past, though, the military has not hesitated to employ force in big cities. It ruled directly for five decades after a 1962 coup, and used lethal force to quash a massive 1988 uprising and a 2007 revolt led by Buddhist monks.

International sanctions were employed by Western governments in reaction to those crackdowns, but they were eased when elections in 2010 and 2015 showed the country's tentative steps toward democracy.

At the White House on Wednesday, Biden said he was issuing an executive order that will prevent Myanmar's generals from accessing \$1 billion in assets in the United States.

It remains to be seen what, if any, impact the U.S. action will have on Myanmar's military regime. Many of the military leaders are already under sanctions because of attacks against the Muslim Rohingya minority.

COVID-defying nun toasts 117th birthday with wine and prayer

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

Question: How does one cram enough candles onto a birthday cake for one of the world's oldest survivors of COVID-19? Answer: With 117 candles, you can't.

A French nun who is believed to be the world's second-oldest person was celebrating her 117th birthday in style on Thursday. There were plans for Champagne and red wine, a feast with her favorite dessert, a Mass in her honor, and other treats to toast Sister André's exceptional longevity through two world wars and a recent coronavirus infection.

"It's a big day," David Tavella, the communications manager for the nun's care home in the southern French city of Toulon, told The Associated Press. "She is in great shape. I went to see her this morning. She is really happy. She wanted me to tell her the schedule for the day again."

It was packed. Some of Sister André's great-nephews and great-great nephews were expected to join a morning video call for her, and the bishop of Toulon was due to celebrate a Mass in her honor.

"She was very proud when I told her. She said, 'A Mass for me?'" Tavella said.

The menu for her birthday feast included a starter of foie gras, followed by capon with fragrant mushrooms and wrapping up with baked Alaska, the nun's favorite dessert.

"All of it washed down with red wine, because she drinks red wine. It's one of her secrets of longevity. And a bit of Champagne with dessert, because 117 years have to be toasted," Tavella said.

As for packing dozens of candles onto a cake, "we stopped trying a long time ago," he added. "Because even if we made big cakes, I'm not sure that she would have enough breath to blow them all out. You would need a fire extinguisher."

Sister André's birth name is Lucile Randon. The Gerontology Research Group, which validates details of people thought to be 110 or older, lists her as the second-oldest known living person in the world, behind only an 118-year-old woman in Japan, Kane Tanaka.

Tavella told French media earlier this week that Sister André tested positive for the coronavirus in mid-January but she had so few symptoms that she didn't even realize she was infected. Her survival made headlines both in France and beyond.

"When the whole world suddenly started talking about this story, I understood that Sister André was a bit like an Olympic flame on a 'round the world tour that people want to grab hold of, because we all need a bit of hope at the moment," Tavella said.

By strange coincidence, Tavella was celebrating his 43rd birthday on Thursday.

"We often joke that she and I were born on the same day," he said. "I never tell myself that she is 117 because she is so easy to talk to, regardless of age. It is only when she talks about World War I as though she lived through it that I realize, 'Yes, she did live through it!'"

The Latest: Fauci: Virus shot categories to open up by April

By The Associated Press undefined

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WASHINGTON — Dr. Anthony Fauci predicts by April it will be “open season” for vaccinations in the U.S., as supply boosts allow most people to get shots to protect against COVID-19.

Speaking to NBC’s “Today Show,” Fauci, who serves as science adviser to President Joe Biden, says the rate of vaccinations will greatly accelerate in the coming months. He credits forthcoming deliveries of the two approved vaccines, the potential approval of a third and moves taken by the Biden administration to increase the nation’s capacity to deliver doses.

He says, “by the time we get to April,” it will be “open season, namely virtually everybody and anybody in any category could start to get vaccinated.”

He cautioned it will take “several more months” to logistically deliver injections to adult Americans but predicted herd immunity could be achieved by late summer.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

WHO launches vaccine help for 6 ex-Soviet states. U.K. medical teams seek out vulnerable homeless people to get them vaccinated. President Joe Biden’s virus-fighting team is on a war strategy, seeking to defeat the defining challenge of his presidency.

— Follow 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:

GENEVA — The World Health Organization’s chief for Europe says it’s launching with the European Union a 40-million euro (\$48.5 million) program to help deploy COVID-19 vaccines in six countries that were once Soviet republics.

Dr. Hans Kluge, who also highlighted a drop in coronavirus cases in recent weeks while warning case counts remain too high, says the program complements work through an existing EU program and the WHO-backed COVAX Facility that aims to deploy vaccines for people in all countries in need whether rich or poor.

The program will involve Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

“Vaccines offer a way to emerge faster from this pandemic. But only if we ensure that all countries, irrespective of income level, have access to them,” Kluge told reporters from Copenhagen, Denmark.

“Unfair access to vaccines, can backfire. The longer the virus lingers, the greater the risk of dangerous mutations,” he added.

Kluge hailed “good news” that new infections in the 53-country WHO Europe region has declined for four straight weeks, and said COVID-related deaths have fallen in each of the last two weeks. He also pointed to declining hospitalization rates.

In the region, some 7.8 million people have completed their immunization, Kluge said.

BUDAPEST— Hungary expects to receive 500,000 doses of a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine next week and will begin administering them as soon as possible, a government official told a press conference in Budapest on Thursday.

Gergely Gulyas, chief of staff to Prime Minister Viktor Orban, said the Sinopharm vaccine would undergo assessment by Hungary’s National Public Health Center before being put into circulation.

“This is the safest vaccine given that it has already been administered to 30 million people in the world,” Gulyas said.

Hungary, which has been critical of the European Union’s sluggish vaccine rollout, also expects 200,000 doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V to arrive this month. Doctors in Budapest were instructed this week to choose patients under 75 and with no chronic health conditions to receive the first round of Sputnik V jabs.

NAIROBI, Kenya — Tanzania’s president denies that COVID-19 is in his country, but the World Health Organization says two travelers from Tanzania have been found to have the virus now dominant in South

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Africa.

WHO Africa chief Matshidiso Moeti tells reporters the travelers went to the U.K. She again encouraged Tanzania's government to share information on the pandemic, and she counts Tanzania as one of eight African countries that has the variant.

The East African nation has not updated its number of virus cases since April, and populist President John Magufuli has not only claimed that God has helped to defeat COVID-19 there but also has expressed doubts about its vaccines.

The U.S. Embassy on Wednesday reported a "significant increase" in the number of COVID-19 cases in Tanzania since last month, with no details. The Catholic church in Tanzania also has been outspoken in warning that COVID-19 is present and encouraging citizens to take precautions.

LISBON, Portugal -- Portugal has started inoculating the country's about 15,000 firefighters against COVID-19.

Portuguese firefighters commonly operate ambulances, and they will be vaccinated over a two-week period starting Thursday.

Meanwhile, the health ministry says antigen tests will be more widely used at schools, factories and other places where people gather as part of a new strategy to contain the pandemic.

Parliament is expected later Thursday to extend Portugal's state of emergency decree, which allows the government to impose the current lockdown, through March 1.

The seven-day average of daily deaths in Portugal is the highest in the world, at 2.05 per 100,000 people, according to Johns Hopkins University. But the seven-day average of daily new cases has fallen from a peak of 122.37 new cases per 100,000 people on Jan. 27 to 47.56 per 100,000.

WASHINGTON — The meetings begin each day not long after dawn. Dozens of aides report in, coffee in hand, joining by Zoom from agency headquarters, their homes or even adjacent offices.

The sessions start with the latest sobering statistics meant to focus the work and offer a reminder of what's at stake: new coronavirus cases, people in hospitals, deaths. But they also include the latest signs of progress: COVID-19 tests administered, vaccine doses shipped, shots injected.

Where the last U.S. administration addressed the pandemic with the vernacular of a natural disaster — using the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mantra of a "federally supported, state managed and locally executed" response — President Joe Biden's team is borrowing from the Pentagon and the doctrine of overwhelming force.

"We're at war with this virus," COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients told The Associated Press. "We're taking every resource and tool the federal government has to battle on every front."

For Biden, beating back the pandemic is a defining challenge of his presidency. The U.S. has seen the most confirmed virus deaths in the world at over 471,000.

BERLIN — Chancellor Angela Merkel says Germany didn't act quickly enough last fall to prevent a second surge in coronavirus infections.

"We didn't shut down public life early enough or systematically enough amid signs of a second wave and warnings from various scientists," she told lawmakers Thursday.

Merkel and the governors of Germany's 16 states agreed late Wednesday to extend the current lockdown until at least March 7. Schools and hairdressers will be able to open earlier, albeit with strict hygiene measures.

Merkel defended a decision to set a target of pushing the number of new weekly cases per 100,000 inhabitants below 35 before the lockdown is eased further.

"The virus doesn't follow dates, the virus follows infection numbers," she said.

Germany's disease control agency said there were just over 64 cases per 100,000 inhabitants nationwide in the past week.

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The Robert Koch Institute said there were 10,237 new cases and 666 deaths in the past day, taking the total to 2.31 million, including 63,635 deaths.

BRUSSELS — With the coronavirus still widely circulating across Belgium, health authorities were relieved to announce Thursday that the country is being spared a bad flu season.

Even better, they said there is no flu outbreak this winter as fears of a “twindemic” that would have combined an annual flu season and the COVID-19 pandemic have not been realized.

“Despite the quantity of samples analyzed, the number of positive tests for influenza is much lower than during the previous winters,” the Sciensano public health institute said.

Usually in Belgium, the number of visits to general practitioners and the number of positive flu tests rises simultaneously from December to a peak between mid-January and mid-March.

According to Sciensano, the low number of flu cases has also been seen in across the globe, likely due to measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, including wearing masks, social distancing and more hand washing.

LONDON — AstraZeneca said Thursday it’s working with the University of Oxford to adapt its COVID-19 vaccine to protect against new strains of the virus as public health officials raise concerns about mutations that may make the virus more resistant to existing vaccines.

The Anglo-Swedish drugmaker worked with Oxford to develop one of the first COVID-19 vaccines authorized for widespread use. AstraZeneca said it hopes to cut the time needed to produce large amounts of any new vaccine to between six and nine months.

The comments came as Astra-Zeneca said fourth-quarter net income rose to \$1.01 billion from \$313 million in the same quarter a year earlier. Drug sales increased 11% to \$7.41 billion, driven by a 24% increase in cancer treatments.

The company posted \$2 million of revenue from its COVID-19 vaccine, which it has pledged to supply on a non-profit basis during the pandemic.

NAIROBI, Kenya — The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director says African countries that have not found cases of the coronavirus variant dominant in South Africa should go ahead and use the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.

John Nkengasong spoke to reporters a day after South Africa announced that it would not use the AstraZeneca vaccine, citing a small study that suggested it was poor at preventing mild to moderate disease caused by the variant.

Nkengasong said just seven countries on the 54-nation African continent have reported the variant and none besides South Africa is being “overwhelmed” by the variant. None has expressed concerns about the AstraZeneca vaccine except for South Africa.

Africa has had more than 96,000 confirmed deaths.

JERUSALEM — Israel began reopening its education system on Thursday after a more than six-week closure due to the country’s worrying surge in coronavirus infections.

Kindergartens and first to fourth grades opened in cities with low infection rates, with around one-fifth of the country’s pupils returning to classrooms. Middle schools and high schools remained closed.

Israel began easing restrictions on Sunday after more than a month of nationwide lockdown. It has vaccinated more than 3.5 million citizens with an initial dose of the Pfizer vaccine, but infection rates remain high.

The Health Ministry reported more than 711,000 confirmed cases, including at least 5,265 deaths.

PRAGUE — The Czech government has imposed a complete lockdown on the three hardest-hit counties to help contain a more contagious variant of the coronavirus.

Health Minister Jan Blatny says the measure will become effective Friday for two counties in western

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Czech Republic on the German border — Cheb and Sokolov — and another in the northern part of the country — Trutnov — on the border with Poland.

Residents of the counties are barred from leaving those places, while people without residency can't travel there. Exceptions include travel to work. Police will be deployed to enforce the measure.

The counties have been facing the highest occurrence of the fast-spreading coronavirus variant found in Britain. Local hospitals have reached their capacity and COVID-19 patients have to be transported to hospitals in other parts of the Czech Republic.

The number of infected people is around 1,100 per 100,000 in the three counties in the last seven days, several times higher than the rest of the country.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has reported 504 new coronavirus cases for the latest 24-hour period. It is the highest daily jump in about two weeks and raising worries about a potential surge as the country begins the Lunar New Year's holidays.

Health officials said Thursday the newly reported cases took the country's total for the pandemic to 82,434, with 1,496 deaths.

In recent weeks, South Korea's caseload has displayed a gradual downward trajectory largely thanks to stringent distancing rules such as a ban on social gatherings of five or more people.

Officials have urged the public to maintain vigilance and stay at home during the four-day Lunar New Year's holidays that began Thursday. Millions of people were expected to travel across the country to visit hometowns and return home during the holidays.

MEXICO CITY — Mexican regulatory authorities have granted approval for the use of two Chinese coronavirus vaccines — the Coronavac made by Sinovac and another made by CanSino.

The assistant health secretary says the first bulk shipment of an expected 2 million CanSino doses is to arrive Thursday to be finished and bottled in Mexico.

Mexico has so far received only about 760,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which have almost all been used.

The CanSino vaccine reportedly has an efficacy rate of around 65.7%, while the Sinovac dose has been rated as low as 50.65% at preventing infections.

Mexico also expects to get its first AstraZeneca shipment of 500,000 doses Sunday.

TOKYO — Japan is reporting its worst one-day death toll for the pandemic — 121 people who died from COVID-19 in the previous 24 hours.

The number reported Thursday by Japan's Health Ministry raised the country's pandemic death toll to 6,678.

Japan has not started coronavirus vaccinations. Shots for medical workers are set to begin this month.

The country also has never had a lockdown, but a government-backed state of emergency is now in place for Tokyo and other urban areas that urges people to stay home and restaurants to close at night.

Although coronavirus cases stayed relatively low in Japan last year compared to the United States and Europe, infections have been climbing recently. Demands are growing to cancel the Tokyo Summer Olympics, which are scheduled to start in July.

GENEVA — Independent experts advising the World Health Organization about immunization on Wednesday recommended the use of AstraZeneca's vaccine even in countries that turned up worrying coronavirus variants in their populations.

The WHO experts' advice is used by health care officials worldwide, but doesn't amount to a green light for the United Nations and its partners to ship the vaccine to countries that have signed up to receive the shots through a global initiative. That approval could come after separate WHO group meetings on Friday and Monday to assess whether an emergency-use listing for the AstraZeneca vaccine is warranted.

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The AstraZeneca vaccine is important because it forms the bulk of the stockpile acquired so far by the U.N.-backed effort known as COVAX, which aims to deploy coronavirus vaccines to people globally. COVAX plans to start shipping hundreds of millions of doses of the vaccine worldwide later this month.

CHICAGO — The Chicago Teachers Union has approved a deal with the nation's third-largest school district to get students back to class during the coronavirus pandemic, union officials announced early Wednesday.

The vote ends the possibility of an immediate teacher lockout or strike. The agreement follows months of negotiations with Chicago Public Schools, which had intensified in recent weeks, with plans that included more teacher vaccinations and metrics to allow school closures when COVID-19 infections spike.

The union said 13,681 members voted to approve the agreement and 6,585 voted against it. Despite the approval, the union characterized it as the "absolute limit to which CPS was willing to go at the bargaining table to guarantee a minimum number of guardrails for any semblance of safety in schools."

'Overwhelm the problem': Inside Biden's war on COVID-19

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The meetings begin each day not long after dawn. Dozens of aides report in, coffee in hand, joining by Zoom from agency headquarters, their homes or even adjacent offices.

The sessions start with the latest sobering statistics meant to focus the work and offer a reminder of what's at stake: new coronavirus cases, people in hospitals, deaths. But they also include the latest signs of progress: COVID-19 tests administered, vaccine doses shipped, shots injected.

Where the last administration addressed the pandemic with the vernacular of a natural disaster — using the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mantra of a "federally supported, state managed and locally executed" response — President Joe Biden's team is borrowing from the Pentagon and the doctrine of overwhelming force.

"We're at war with this virus," COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said in an interview with The Associated Press between Sunday morning meetings on the response. "We're taking every resource and tool the federal government has to battle on every front."

It's a strategy facing urgent tests after Biden inherited an inconsistent vaccine distribution plan and with the emerging threats from new virus variants.

The goal, Biden aides say, is as simple as it is ambitious: After a year of being on defense they want to take the fight to the virus — to "overwhelm the problem," a kind of mantra for the team.

The campaign is being waged in schools and sterile pharmaceutical plants, on the vast blacktop of stadium parking lots and along the sidewalks outside Americans' homes. To defeat the virus, Biden's team must oversee a herculean logistical effort to put shots into hundreds of millions of arms, but also overcome vaccine hesitance, politically charged science skepticism and fatigue across all corners of society after nearly a year of hardship.

For Biden, beating back the pandemic is a defining challenge of his presidency, testing his central promise to the American people that he can better manage the outbreak than his predecessor. His team seemingly day by day rolls out an almost dizzying array of new efforts and appeals large and small — everything from building a surgical glove factory in the U.S. by year's end to asking Americans to wear masks while walking their dogs.

The central question for Biden and his team, one that can't be answered yet: Will it all add up to enough?

"They're taking exactly the right approach," said Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University who previously served as Baltimore's health commissioner. "The federal government is taking responsibility, instead of leaving everything to state and local governments and blaming others when things go wrong."

For all of the activity, though, Biden knows that there are more grim statistics to come before Americans can return to any semblance of the "before days."

More Americans have died from COVID-19 in the last year than during all of World War II and some

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projections show the death toll could top that of the Civil War by the beginning of summer.

New virus cases, which had been at historic highs following the holiday season, have steadily declined over Biden's early weeks in office, but still remain worryingly elevated, and lives are still being lost at a rate of about 21,000 per week.

Since he took office three weeks ago, Biden's team has attacked the problem on multiple fronts. They have unleashed billions of federal dollars to boost vaccinations and testing and developed a model to deploy more than 10,000 active-duty troops to join even more members of the National Guard to put shots into arms. Mass vaccination sites, supported by federal troops, are set to open in California, Texas and New York in coming weeks.

As concerns grow about potentially dangerous mutations in the virus, Biden aides view the vaccines less as a silver bullet and more as part of a complementary series of moves that taken together offer the prospect of real progress.

And for the U.S. to fully contain the problem, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, has warned that the pace of vaccinations must increase globally to curtail the mutants.

"We're not going to sugarcoat in any way how hard this is, but we're going to demonstrate clear evidence of progress and action," Zients said.

Biden is already well on pace to exceed his goal of 100 million vaccinations in his first 100 days in office. It's an assuredly achievable goal that some consider inadequate but also a break from the off-base predictions of the Trump administration that undercut public confidence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 26 million doses have been administered in Biden's first three weeks in office.

Much of the improvement in vaccination deliveries so far has been due to long-planned manufacturing ramp-ups, not the actions of the Biden team, aides acknowledge. But with the prospect of a third vaccine receiving approval in coming weeks, they are trying to anticipate and eliminate the next set of bottlenecks, when capacity to deliver injections and demand for vaccines become limiting factors.

Wen urged the Biden administration to set more aggressive targets — a moon shot — to increase the pace of vaccinations to 3 million per day. "I think they just need to be a lot more ambitious when they talk to the public," she said.

Beyond the focus on sheer numbers of shots delivered, there is question of whose arms.

Biden's team has taken an increased role in determining where each vial of vaccine goes, with an eye on ensuring that lower-income, rural and minority communities are covered, an implicit criticism of how some states have handled their rollouts.

New distributions to community health centers, announced Tuesday, and a 1 million weekly dose pharmacy program being rolled out this week will allow the White House to directly steer vaccines to underserved communities.

The ideas are not without their critics. On a call with the White House on Tuesday, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson appealed to the administration to work through states rather than alternative distribution avenues, arguing they have excess demand they already can't meet. Other governors expressed concern that the federal program would upend their own plans to use those health centers to distribute vaccines.

"While governors appreciate the federal partnership, it is important that any increase in manufacturing capacity for vaccines should go to the states for distribution and not duplicated through separate federal programs," Hutchinson told the AP.

The White House has defended them as pilot programs that can be scaled up to more sites with more doses if they prove to be effective.

In one key instance, the more hands-on federal response has meant the Biden White House has taken a step back.

Where the Trump White House got involved in editing CDC guidance for businesses, travel and schools — prompting complaints about meddling with science and leading some states to adopt their own more stringent protocols — the Biden administration is leaving it to career scientists to craft policies.

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New, more prescriptive federal guidance on schools is expected as soon as Friday. While Biden in December promised that “the majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days,” his administration has since narrowed that goal to cover just K-8 schools, and even then, plans to count success as being open just a single day per week.

That’s drawing criticism from some Republicans who say Biden is setting the bar too low and for ignoring the lessons of schools that have remained open for most of the pandemic.

One early success of the Biden plan was born out of conversations with governors frustrated about constantly fluctuating vaccine supplies. The lack of certainty led some states to slow the administration of first doses to ensure enough second shots would be available if deliveries dropped. Biden’s team pledged to give states three weeks notice on what’s coming their way.

“We now see more vaccine on the horizon than we did a few weeks ago,” Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, told the AP. “The more we learn about more vaccine the happier I am.”

Early reviews from the public of Biden’s response have been largely positive.

Two weeks into Biden’s administration, a Quinnipiac poll showed 61% of Americans approving of the way the president is handling the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly all Democrats and 33% of Republicans said they approve. In a December Quinnipiac poll, 39% of Americans approved of the way President Donald Trump was handling the coronavirus pandemic. Seventy-eight percent of Republicans, but just 3% of Democrats, approved.

Biden’s national strategy for the pandemic, released on his second day in office, provides the roadmap for the months ahead: more testing, clear guidance, and more and equitable vaccinations.

But the path to a “new normal” is still unclear. The science on what will be necessary to achieve “herd immunity,” particularly with the rise of new mutations, remains unresolved.

The Biden team is already actively working with pharmaceutical companies to prepare “booster” shots for the variants, potentially annually, like flu vaccines. And they’re building the infrastructure to ramp up testing for the virus, given that testing could be part of life for years to come.

Biden’s call for Americans to wear a mask for his first 100 days will undoubtedly be extended, aides said. And his other goals are likely to be adjusted upward in coming months.

“We’ll set the next set of goals as we make progress against the first set of goals,” Zients said.

Associated Press writers Hannah Fingerhut and Jonathan Lemire in Washington and Andrew DeMillo in Little Rock, Arkansas, contributed to this report.

How a leading anti-Trump group ignored a crisis in its ranks

By STEVE PEOPLES and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Last June, the Lincoln Project was on a high.

Led by several prominent former Republican consultants, its slickly produced ads attacking President Donald Trump made it perhaps the best known of the so-called Never Trump organizations. The group tried to claim a higher moral ground in an effort to purge Trump from the GOP. Money flowed in by the tens of millions of dollars from donors eager to help.

But within the organization, a grave threat was emerging.

In June 2020, members of the organization’s leadership were informed in writing and in subsequent phone calls of at least 10 specific allegations of harassment against co-founder John Weaver, including two involving Lincoln Project employees, according to multiple people with direct knowledge of the situation. The email and phone calls raise questions about the Lincoln Project’s statement last month that it was “shocked” when accusations surfaced publicly this year. It’s also the first known suggestion that Weaver targeted a Lincoln Project staffer.

Despite the early warning, the group took no action against Weaver and pressed forward with its high-profile work. For the collection of GOP consultants and former officials, being anti-Trump was becoming very good for business. Of the \$90 million Lincoln Project has raised, more than \$50 million has gone to

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firms controlled by the group's leaders.

There is no evidence that the Lincoln Project buried the allegations against Weaver for business reasons. But taken together, the harassment allegations and new revelations about spending practices raise significant questions about the management of one of the highest-profile antagonists of Trump. The revelations threaten the stature of not just the Lincoln Project but the broader coalition of establishment-oriented Republican groups hoping to pool their resources to excise Trump from the party.

Lincoln Project co-founder Steve Schmidt insisted that he and the rest of the group's leadership were not aware of any internal allegations of wrongdoing involving Weaver.

"No Lincoln Project employee, intern, or contractors ever made an allegation of inappropriate communication about John Weaver that would have triggered an investigation by HR or by an outside employment counsel," Schmidt said. "In other words, no human being ever made an allegation about any inappropriate sexualized communications about John Weaver ever."

Weaver declined to comment for this story, but in a statement released late last month to Axios he generally acknowledged misconduct and apologized.

"To the men I made uncomfortable through my messages that I viewed as consensual mutual conversations at the time: I am truly sorry," he wrote. "They were inappropriate and it was because of my failings that this discomfort was brought on you."

The Lincoln Project launched in November 2019 as a super PAC that allowed its leaders to raise and spend unlimited sums of money.

Its founders represent a who's who of prominent Republican strategists on cable television, including Schmidt and Reed Galen, both former advisers to John McCain; conservative attorney George Conway; former New Hampshire GOP chair Jennifer Horn; Florida-based veteran political ad maker Rick Wilson; and Weaver, who has long advised former Ohio Gov. John Kasich.

Backed by its founders' commanding social media presence, the organization quickly attracted a massive following of Trump critics in both parties that exceeded even its own founders' expectations.

Since its creation, the Lincoln Project has raised \$90 million. But only about a third of the money, roughly \$27 million, directly paid for advertisements that aired on broadcast and cable, or appeared online, during the 2020 campaign, according to an analysis of campaign finance disclosures and data from the ad tracking firm Kantar/CMAG.

That leaves tens of millions of dollars that went toward expenses like production costs, overhead — and exorbitant consulting fees collected by members of the group.

"It raises questions about where the rest of the money ultimately went," said Brendan Fischer, an attorney with the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center in Washington. "Generally speaking, you'd expect to see a major super PAC spend a majority or more of their money on advertisements and that's not what happened here."

The vast majority of the cash was split among consulting firms controlled by its founders, including about \$27 million paid to a small firm controlled by Galen and another \$21 million paid to a boutique firm run by former Lincoln Project member Ron Steslow, campaign finance disclosures show.

But in many cases it's difficult to tell how much members of the group were paid. That's because the Lincoln Project adopted a strategy, much like the Trump campaign they criticized, to mask how much money they earned.

While several firms did collect payments, Weaver and Wilson are not listed in publicly available records. They were likely paid as subcontractors to those firms, an arrangement that avoids disclosure. Schmidt collected a \$1.5 million payment in December but quickly returned it.

"We fully comply with the law," Schmidt said. "The Lincoln Project will be delighted to open its books for audit immediately after the Trump campaign and all affiliated super PACs do so, explaining the cash flow of the nearly \$700 million that flowed through their organizations controlled by Brad Parscale and Jared Kushner."

The Lincoln Project parted with one co-founder, Horn, last week, claiming in an unusual public state-

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ment that she was seeking a \$250,000 signing bonus and a \$40,000-a-month consulting contract. Horn declined to engage publicly, but public records reveal that the unexpected success of the Lincoln Project has extended a lifeline to some founders who have spent much of the past decade under financial distress.

Over the past decade, Weaver has repeatedly failed to pay taxes, defaulted on loans and faced lawsuits from creditors seeking to collect. In October, he paid off \$313,000 in back taxes owed to the IRS dating back to 2011, records show. A separate case in Texas is still pending over \$340,000 back rent his family owes after shuttering a children's boutique they operated, records show.

Others used the money earned during their time with Lincoln Project to refinance homes, or purchase a new one. Schmidt purchased a \$1.4 million "Mountain Modern" custom home in Kamas, Utah, with five bedrooms, seven baths and a "stunning" view of the Uinta Mountains, according to property records and real estate listings. He is currently trying to resell the home for \$2.9 million.

But as money flowed into the group, multiple people with direct knowledge said allegations against Weaver were repeatedly raised inside the organization, long before leaders acknowledged them publicly in late January. Those with knowledge insisted on anonymity in order to disclose private communications.

Last June, someone working for the Lincoln Project payroll sent an email to Steslow, one of the organization's co-founders, detailing numerous cases of sexual harassment involving Weaver that spanned several years. While the AP has not seen the email, its contents were confirmed by four people who had directly seen it.

Schmidt did not confirm the existence of the email, saying only that if one existed, it was not shared with anyone on the organization's board or leadership.

But multiple people familiar with the situation say that Steslow immediately raised the email with Galen, who helped manage day-to-day operations at the time, and the Lincoln Project's corporate counsel Matthew Sanderson. Steslow also encouraged his colleagues to remove Weaver from the organization.

Those allegations and others were discussed on subsequent phone calls with organization leaders in June and August, and employees were assured that the alleged incidents would be investigated. Weaver went out on medical leave in August, but as the presidential campaign moved into the summer and fall, there was no formal resolution.

The Washington Blade reported earlier this week details of another set of internal communications over the summer indicating that Lincoln Project leaders were aware of allegations against Weaver and preparing to respond to media reports.

The allegations against Weaver followed a similar pattern in which the 61-year-old married father of two would allegedly send private messages to young gay men on Twitter. They often began with references to work before shifting to things like their personal appearance, workout routines and favorite sexual positions.

At least two Lincoln Project employees were targeted last year, including an intern who was finishing law school, and a communications staffer. There is no allegation of physical contact.

Already, Trump's allies have begun seizing on the Lincoln Project's problems to discredit the broader Never Trump movement.

An unrelated group known as the Republican Accountability Project this week is running television ads across 19 states pressuring 22 Republican senators to vote to "convict and disqualify" Trump in the ongoing impeachment trial. The group has also launched a \$1 million billboard campaign calling for the resignation of key Trump allies who voted to block the certification of the election results.

One of the Republicans targeted in the billboard attack, Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., falsely conflated the groups in a fiery response through an adviser.

"The Never-Trump movement is doing all they can to distract the press from their massive sexual abuse and harassment scandal," Stefanik adviser Alex DeGrasse said. He called the billboard campaign "next-level desperation."

Peoples reported from New York.

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Trial highlights: Harrowing footage, focus on Trump's words

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats opened their first day of arguments in former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial with searing footage of the U.S. Capitol riot as they painted Trump as an "inciter in chief" who systematically riled up his supporters and falsely convinced them the election had been stolen, culminating in the deadly attack.

"He assembled, inflamed and incited his followers to descend upon the Capitol," the lead impeachment manager, Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., said Wednesday.

As she presented harrowing footage of the siege, Del. Stacey Plaskett, a Democrat representing the U.S. Virgin Islands and one of the prosecutors, said Trump had "put a target" on the backs of then-Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who were leading the certification of President Joe Biden's election victory. "His mob broke into the Capitol to hunt them down," Plaskett said.

Highlights from the first full day of arguments:

TRUMP'S WORDS COME BACK TO HAUNT HIM

Trump's voice rang out in the Senate Chamber as Democrats aired video from his rallies and other remarks to supporters. Interspersed throughout were slides of Trump's tweets contesting the election and promoting the Jan. 6 rally in Washington, which he promised would be "wild."

The impeachment managers put Trump's rhetoric on trial, from the months he spent laying the groundwork to contest the election results to the speech he delivered outside the White House egging his supporters to "fight" before they stormed the Capitol.

"He truly made his base believe that the only way he could lose was if the election were rigged," said Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, another one of the prosecutors.

Trump, the House impeachment managers argued, whipped his supporters into a frenzy with the "big lie" that their votes had been stolen, and urged them to fight.

"This attack never would have happened but for Donald Trump," said Rep. Madeleine Dean, D-Pa., choking back emotion. "And so they came, draped in Trump's flag, and used our flag, the American flag, to batter and to bludgeon."

There was no widespread fraud in the election, as has been confirmed by election officials across the country and former Attorney General William Barr. Dozens of legal challenges to the election put forth by Trump and his allies were dismissed.

NEW SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE

To reconstruct the siege for senators, Democrats aired never-before-seen security footage from inside the Capitol that showed the attack unfolding. Their presentation included chilling video of the rioters rampaging into the building and audio of distressed police officers who tried in vain to keep them out. "We have been flanked and we've lost the line," one frantic officer could be heard saying.

The presentation also showed the perilous moments when lawmakers and others, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Pence, were rushed to safety; body cam footage of an officer being beaten; the sounds of crunching, breaking glass; profane screams and violent threats; and cries as the rioters streamed into the building, some carrying riot shields and weapons.

"Where do they count the f—ing votes?" one member of the mob could be heard shouting. "You work for us," one yelled at officers. "Where's that meeting at?"

Democrats warned that many of the scenes would be hard to watch, including the horrifying screams of an officer being crushed in a doorway and video of one of the rioters, Ashli E. Babbitt, being shot to death by U.S. Capitol Police.

Also never before seen: Footage of Capitol Police officer Eugene Goodman, who has already been hailed as a hero, warning Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, that the mob was headed his way. Romney turned and dashed in the other direction.

"I did not know that was Officer Goodman," Romney told reporters after seeing it. "I look forward to thanking him when I next see him."

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Goodman also directed the mob away from the Senate Chamber and toward other officers.

PRAISE FOR PENCE

While the Democrats excoriated Trump, they lavished praise on an unlike figure: former Vice President Pence, outlining in exacting detail how his life had been put in physical danger and hailing him as a "patriot" for defying Trump's pressure campaign to overturn the election results.

"Vice President Pence had the courage to stand against the president, tell the American public the truth and uphold our Constitution. That is patriotism," said Plaskett, whose presentation included previously unseen footage of Pence and his family being evacuated from the Senate chamber as rioters spread through the Capitol.

Other footage showed the rioters chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" as others searching for him. At one point, Plaskett said, the rioters were within 100 feet of where Pence was sheltering with his family.

"They were talking about assassinating the vice president of the United States," she said.

Many Republicans had been appalled by Trump's treatment of his most loyal soldier during his final days in office. And the focus appeared to be a tacit acknowledgement of the Democrats' intended audience as they try to convince Senate Republicans — many of whom are close with Pence — that Trump deserves to be punished for what happened.

"Mike Pence is not a traitor to this country. He's a patriot," said Castro. "And he and his family, who was with him that day, didn't deserve this, didn't deserve a president unleashing a mob on them, especially because he was just doing his job."

TRUMP'S LAWYERS RETURN

They were merely observers as Democrats had the floor. But members of Trump's legal team indicated they would stay the course despite a flood of criticism, both from Republican senators and the former president, about their performance during procedural arguments Tuesday.

"Not at all," said attorney Bruce Castor when asked by reporters whether there would be any changes to their strategy. "No, I don't anticipate any," echoed David Schoen, another attorney.

Both Castor and Schoen said they had spoken to Trump on Tuesday, but Castor denied that the former president had expressed displeasure to him.

"Far from it," he said, even as Schoen allowed there was room for improvement after Republican senators panned their performance as disjointed and unhelpful.

"To the extent they were critical of anything that I did, I just want to try to do a better job then," he said.

"Bottom line is I think his team will do better, can do better," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, D-S.C., a close ally of the president, after the two had spoken. While he acknowledged there was "room for improvement," Graham said he'd tried to tell Trump that "the case is over. It's just a matter of getting the final verdict now." All but six Republican senators voted Tuesday against moving forward with the trial.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Dean described the House Chamber descending into chaos as she stood with colleagues in the gallery above the floor and made panicked calls to her husband and sons.

"Someone shouted up to us, 'Duck!' then 'Lie down!' then 'Ready your gas masks!'" she remembered. "Shortly after there was a terrifying banging on the chamber doors. I will never forget that sound."

Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., described the text he sent to his wife telling her to hug their young children.

"On Jan. 6," said Castro, "President Trump left everyone in this Capitol for dead."

Throughout the proceeding, the House managers served as personal witnesses of the horror and repeatedly invoked the word "us" as they appealed to fellow lawmakers targeted in the attack.

"He was coming for you, for Democratic and Republican senators. He was coming for all of us, just as the mob did at his direction," said Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., after describing Trump's rhetoric.

REPUBLICANS HOLD FIRM

There appears little chance enough Republicans will break with Democrats to convict Trump at the end of the trial. And some of them appeared indifferent to the proceedings and unmoved by the evidence Wednesday.

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Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, who led the Senate challenge to the election along with Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, said the prosecutors' case was "predictable" and included information that was already public.

The video evidence was "nothing new here, for me, at the end of the day," said Hawley, who maintains the trial is unconstitutional.

Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, another close ally of Trump, predicted the remainder of the trial was "going to be pretty tedious" and said the two sides would be better served if they just made their cases "in a couple hours" and be "done with this."

And Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who sat with his back to the screen, writing notes on a pad, walked out in the middle of Plaskett's description of the threats against Pence.

It was a notable contrast with Democrats like Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin, who described the prosecutors' presentation of evidence as "painful" to watch.

While it forced them to relive a traumatic moment, "it also helps to bring closure, so I think it's something that we have to go through," said Cardin, who described Jan. 6 as "one of the roughest days of our life."

Chilling video footage becomes key exhibit in Trump trial

By LISA MASCARO, ERIC TUCKER, MARY CLARE JALONICK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chilling security video of last month's deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, including of rioters searching menacingly for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence, has become a key exhibit in Donald Trump's impeachment trial as lawmakers prosecuting the case wrap up their opening arguments for why Trump should be convicted of inciting the siege.

The House will continue with its case Thursday, with Trump's lawyers set to launch their defense by week's end.

The footage shown at trial, much of it never before seen, has included video of the mob smashing into the building, distraught members of Congress receiving comfort, rioters engaging in hand-to-hand combat with police and audio of Capitol police officers pleading for back-up. It underscored how dangerously close the rioters came to the nation's leaders, shifting the focus of the trial from an academic debate about the Constitution to a raw retelling of the Jan. 6 assault.

Videos of the siege have been circulating since the day of the riot, but the graphic compilation shown to senators Wednesday amounted to a more complete narrative, a moment-by-moment retelling of one of the nation's most alarming days. It offered fresh details into the attackers, scenes of police heroism and staff whispers of despair.

The footage included rioters roaming the halls chanting "Hang Mike Pence," some equipped with combat gear. Outside, the mob had set up a makeshift gallows. And in one wrenching moment, police were shown shooting and killing a San Diego woman, Ashli Babbitt, as the mob tried to break through doors near the House Chamber.

Pence, who had been presiding over a session to certify Joe Biden's election victory over Trump — thus earning Trump's censure — was shown being rushed to safety, where he sheltered in an office with his family just 100 feet from the rioters. Pelosi was seen being evacuated from the complex as her staff hid behind doors in her suite of offices.

Though most of the Senate jurors seem to have made up their minds, making Trump's acquittal likely, they sat riveted as the jarring video played in the chamber. Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma bent his head at one point, another GOP colleague putting his hand on his arm in comfort.

"They did it because Donald Trump sent them on this mission," said House prosecutor Stacey Plaskett, the Democratic delegate representing the Virgin Islands, told them.

"President Trump put a target on their backs and his mob broke into the Capitol to hunt them down."

Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, saw himself in the footage, dashing down a hallway to avoid the mob. Romney said he hadn't realized that officer Eugene Goodman, who has been praised as a hero for luring rioters away from the Senate doors, had been the one to direct him to safety.

"That was overwhelmingly distressing and emotional," he said.

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Earlier in the day, prosecutors laid out their case by methodically linking Trump's verbal attacks on the election to the violence that resulted when hundreds of loyalists stormed the building. Trump did nothing to stem the violence and watched with "glee," the Democrats said, as the mob ransacked the building. Five people died.

The goal of the presentation was to cast Trump not as an innocent bystander but rather as the "inciter in chief" who spent months spreading falsehoods about the election. Using evocative language meant to match the horror of the day, they compared Trump to a fire chief who delights in seeing fires spread, not extinguished, and they compared his supporters to a cavalry in war.

"This attack never would have happened, but for Donald Trump," Rep. Madeleine Dean, one of the impeachment managers, said as she choked back emotion. "And so they came, draped in Trump's flag, and used our flag, the American flag, to batter and to bludgeon."

Thursday brings the second and final full day of House arguments, with the Trump legal team taking the lectern Friday and Saturday for up to 16 hours to lay out their defense. The difficulty facing Trump's defense team became apparent at the start as they leaned on the process of the trial, unlike any other, rather than the substance of the case against the former president.

The prosecutors on Wednesday aimed to pre-emptively rebut arguments that Trump's lawyers have foreshadowed as central to their defense, arguing for instance that there was no First Amendment protection for the president's role in directly inciting the insurrection. Defense lawyers are likely to blame the rioters themselves for the violence, but the Democrats' presentation made clear that — despite the vivid videos of the event — they view Trump as ultimately responsible.

Trump is the first president to face an impeachment trial after leaving office and the first to be twice impeached. He is charged with "incitement of insurrection," words his defense lawyers say are protected by the Constitution's First Amendment and just a figure of speech. The prosecutors are arguing that Trump's words weren't just free speech but part of "the big lie" — his relentless efforts to sow doubts about the election results. Those began long before the votes were tabulated, revving up his followers to "stop the steal" though there was no evidence of substantial fraud.

As the House impeachment managers make the case for holding Trump to account, the defense has countered that the Constitution doesn't allow impeachment of an official who is out of office. Even though the Senate rejected that argument in Tuesday's vote to proceed to the trial, the legal issue could resonate with Senate Republicans eager to acquit Trump without being seen as condoning his behavior.

Trump attorney David Schoen added starkly partisan tones to the argument, saying the Democrats were fueled by a "base hatred" of the former president.

While six Republicans joined with Democrats to vote to proceed with the trial on Tuesday, the 56-44 vote was far from the two-thirds threshold of 67 votes needed for conviction.

Minds did not seem to be changing Wednesday, even after senators watched the graphic video.

"I've said many times that the President's rhetoric is at time overheated, but this is not a referendum on whether you agree with everything the president says or tweets," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who was among those leading the effort to challenge the Electoral College tally certifying the election. "This is instead a legal proceeding."

It appears unlikely that the House prosecutors will call witnesses, and Trump has declined a request to testify. The trial is expected to continue into the weekend.

Trump's second impeachment trial is expected to diverge from the lengthy, complicated affair of a year ago. In that case, Trump was charged with having privately pressured Ukraine to dig up dirt on Biden, then a Democratic rival for the presidency. It could be over in half the time.

The Democratic-led House impeached the president swiftly, one week after the attack.

'We'll be left without families': Fear in Ethiopia's Tigray

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — As soldiers from Eritrea looted the border town of Rama in Ethiopia's Tigray

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region, one home became a dispensary for frightened residents seeking medicine in the midst of war. In return, they shared details of killings in nearby communities. An American nurse visiting her family listened in shock.

Now, after escaping to her home in Colorado, she struggled to estimate the number of dead. "I don't know, 1,000?" she told The Associated Press. "It was a lot, just in the rural areas." She has been unable to reach her parents since leaving.

If the fighting doesn't end soon, she said, "we'll be left without families."

Rare witness accounts are illuminating the toll of the shadowy conflict in Tigray, which is largely cut off from the world as fighting enters a fourth month in a region of 6 million people. Ethiopian forces and allied fighters pursue the fugitive former leaders of Tigray who long dominated Ethiopia's government. Each side sees the other as illegitimate after last year's national elections were delayed and Tigray defiantly held its own.

Soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, a secretive nation and enemy of the former Tigray leaders, are deeply involved, though Ethiopia and Eritrea deny their presence. The European Union this week joined the United States in urging Eritrea to withdraw its forces, asserting they are "reportedly committing atrocities and exacerbating ethnic violence."

With journalists barred, communications patchy and the international community unable to investigate atrocities firsthand, it is challenging to verify witness accounts. But their details are consistent with others who describe a region where the health system is largely destroyed, vast rural areas remain out of reach and Red Cross officials warn that thousands of people could starve to death.

Once Tigray reopens to scrutiny, people will be shocked, said Hailu Kebede, foreign affairs head for the Salsay Woyane Tigray opposition party that, along with two others, estimates more than 52,000 civilians have died. He told the AP they have attempted to collect data from witnesses in every administrative area of the region.

"We have thousands of names," said Hailu, who spent weeks hiding on the outskirts of the Tigray capital, Mekele, listening to bombardment and gunfire. He said one relative was killed.

"This is the least-documented war," Hailu said. "The world will apologize to the people of Tigray, but it will be too late."

Even as the delivery of aid slowly begins to improve, it is questioned.

One woman from Tigray, a student in Europe, asserted that Ethiopian authorities have begun arriving in her family's border-area village with badly needed food but are withholding it from families suspected of links to Tigray fighters. She is not the first to make that claim.

"If you don't bring your father, your brothers, you don't get the aid, you'll starve," she recounted after speaking with her sister about events in the Irob administrative area. Like others, she spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear for her family.

A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Billene Seyoum, and the official overseeing Tigray's state of emergency, Redwan Hussein, didn't respond to questions. The prime minister, who once said no civilian had been killed in the conflict, now says the suffering and deaths in Tigray "have caused much distress for me personally."

The student in Europe also learned that her uncle and two nephews were killed by Eritrean soldiers during a recent holiday gathering. The Irob Advocacy Association, relying on witnesses who have reached cities with phone service, has listed 59 victims overall.

"I'm so ashamed of my government," the student said, and started to cry. Like many in the diaspora, she scours social media for information. "I worry if somebody from my family dies, I will learn about it from Facebook."

People who have contacted the outside world are frustrated by how little it knows about the conflict.

"The north is dying," said a man from Irob who reached Mekele last month. "I strongly believe there is a campaign to target the people. Every public and private institution is looted." The north is occupied by Eritrean soldiers, he said. That's confirmed even by Tigray's new interim government, the Ethiopian Human

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Rights Commission said in a statement Thursday.

The woman who left Rama for the U.S. described an uneasy world where Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers both appeared to be in charge.

Eritrean soldiers came to her family's home multiple times to sack it, she said. At first, they sought jewelry, cell phones and money. Later they took whatever they could find.

"If they found a spoon, they even took the spoon," she said.

Some soldiers acknowledged they were from Eritrea, she said, and they assumed that everyone in Tigray received military training as they did in what human rights groups call one of the world's most repressive states.

For two and a half months, she hid indoors like many Tigray residents, scared of being raped, shot "for no reason" or, like her brother, beaten. The soldiers said they had come for "Debretsion," the fugitive regional leader.

She could tell which towns in Tigray were being looted from the names written on vehicles, even ambulances, driven through Rama on their way into Eritrea, 7 kilometers (4.3 miles) away.

She finally left when her mother declared, "You're not going to die here." She walked for 11 hours on rural paths to the town of Adwa, then found transport to Mekele. Ethiopian soldiers manned some checkpoints, she said, and Eritrean soldiers manned others.

"On the way, you could see a lot of buildings were destroyed," she said. "You couldn't see anybody in cities, it was all quiet."

In Mekele, despite showing her U.S. passport, she was asked for her local identity card. "I was like, I don't live here, I'm a U.S. citizen," she said, her voice starting to shake. "I was so scared."

Like other ethnic Tigrayans trying to fly out of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, she was questioned and feared she would be unable to board. She arrived in the U.S. last month.

Others from Tigray who have reached Addis Ababa but hold no foreign passport are trying to hide their ethnic background amid reports of arrests and harassment.

"I'm in the middle of Ethiopia and I can't go anywhere," said Danait, who came from Mekele and gave only her first name out of concern for relatives in Axum, Shire and other Tigray towns that she still cannot reach by phone. "No, I don't feel safe."

In UK, roving teams bring COVID-19 vaccine shots to homeless

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — In a pandemic, homeless people face being more forgotten than they already are. But not by doctors like Dr. Anil Mehta, who is on a mission to bring the coronavirus vaccine to those hardest to reach and often most at risk of getting sick in east London.

Mehta, a general practitioner, and his small team of doctors and nurses have been showing up at homeless centers in his local area, a COVID-19 hot spot, offering a free jab to dozens who might otherwise get left behind in Britain's mass vaccination drive.

"They will get missed if we don't find them proactively," Mehta said. "They really don't have anything going for them, in terms of medical care. Finding them is absolutely essential to what we need to achieve in our boroughs."

The homeless aren't listed among the British government's highest priority groups for the vaccine roll-out — which currently include people over 70, nursing home residents, front-line medical staff and social care workers, as well as the clinically vulnerable.

Because those sleeping outside and people in shelters have no address that doctors can contact them at, some local authorities across Britain have begun sending out roving vaccination teams to identify the clinically vulnerable among them so they can have access to the jab.

The charity Homeless Link said the U.K. government last month appealed to local officials to accommodate as many so-called rough sleepers as possible and help them register with a doctor as temperatures plummet and as a more contagious virus variant drove a huge surge in U.K. infection rates. But the charity

said there has been no clear strategy to ensure that the homeless get inoculated, and that means officials in different areas have been left to take different tacks.

"We believe that a targeted approach to vaccination is needed to protect people with no home," said Rick Henderson, the charity's chief executive.

"Homeless people are substantially more likely to report having chronic diseases such as asthma, heart problems and stroke, and are old before their time. Furthermore, their use of communal accommodation such as homeless hostels increases their risk of contracting COVID-19," he added.

In the outer reaches of northeast London, which has seen some of England's worst infection rates, Mehta and his mobile vaccination team have been busy working outside of their clinic. They gave a vaccine jab to over 200 homeless people and social care workers at two community centers last week, and plan to reach another 70 next week.

Mehta is happy with the progress so far.

"These are very hard-to-reach groups — they could be in different places, here today and going to central London the next day," he said. "We are effectively chasing them."

Earlier this week, Britain's government also urged anyone unlawfully living in the U.K. to register with a doctor and receive a vaccine, promising that they wouldn't have their immigration status checked or risk deportation. It wasn't clear how many people the policy affects — the last official estimate, in 2005, suggested there were about 430,000 people in the country with no legal right to remain.

More than 12 million people in Britain have now had at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine. Officials say they are on track to offer first doses to 15 million in the top priority groups by Monday, and have set a target of vaccinating every adult in the country by the fall.

Follow AP coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at:

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

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Countries curb diplomatic ties, weigh sanctions on Myanmar

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A growing number of governments are curbing diplomatic ties with Myanmar and increasing economic pressure on its military over the coup last week that erased the fragile democratic progress in the long-oppressed Southeast Asian nation.

President Joe Biden said Wednesday he was issuing an executive order that will prevent Myanmar's generals from accessing \$1 billion in assets in the United States, and promised more measures.

The U.S. was among many Western governments that lifted most sanctions in the past decade to encourage democratic transition as Myanmar's military rulers were taking gradual steps toward civilian rule — changes that proved temporary with the ousting of the elected government and detentions of Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and others.

One of the strongest reactions came from New Zealand, which has suspended all military and high-level political contact with the country and pledged to block any aid that could go to its military government or benefit its leaders. It also placed a travel ban on Myanmar's new military rulers.

"We do not recognize the legitimacy of the military-led government and we call on the military to immediately release all detained political leaders and restore civilian rule," Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said Tuesday.

In Washington, Biden said his actions were aimed at freezing U.S. assets that benefit Myanmar's military leaders while maintaining support for health care programs, civil society groups and other areas. The U.S. already has sanctions in place against some Myanmar military leaders over the killings and persecution of minority Rohingya Muslims.

There has so far been no change in the level of U.S. diplomatic representation in Myanmar, where Thomas

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Vajda continues as ambassador.

In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said European foreign ministers will meet Feb. 22 to review the 27-nation bloc's relations with Myanmar and explore ways to increase economic pressure. Its options could include sanctions targeting individuals and businesses owned by Myanmar's military as well as cuts in development assistance.

Since 2014, the EU has granted Myanmar almost 700 million euros (\$850 million). Borrell said the EU's special system for granting least-developed countries duty-free and quota-free access to all products except arms and ammunition could also be reassessed.

"We now need to develop a robust response to this unacceptable seizure of power, which reverses 10 years of democratic transition," he said, adding that the review would examine "how closely we work with the government and its institutions from a legal, financial and technical perspective, as well as the impact on beneficiaries."

The U.N. Human Rights Council, the 47-member-state body based in Geneva, has scheduled a special session on Friday to consider the human rights implications of the crisis in Myanmar.

Human rights advocates have urged governments to take harsher action, while avoiding penalties that would hurt ordinary Myanmar citizens.

"President Biden's announcement of asset freezes and an Executive Order opening the door for further targeted sanctions on Myanmar's military are important and welcome steps," Daniel Sullivan, senior advocate for human rights for Refugees International, said in a statement.

"But there is much more that the United States can and must do to censure the military's egregious behavior and recognize the true threat that the Myanmar military's seizure of power presents," he said.

It's unclear if Myanmar's neighbors will come together to take meaningful action.

The leaders of Malaysia and Indonesia have urged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to convene a special meeting to discuss Myanmar, a member state. But ASEAN has long operated on a principle of non-interference in each other's affairs and its decisions are made by consensus, meaning it would take just a single member, possibly Myanmar itself, to block any move it sees as hostile.

Following the coup, Brunei, the current ASEAN chair, issued a statement calling for the "pursuance of dialogue, reconciliation and the return to normalcy in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar."

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a retired general who himself seized power in a military coup in 2014, told reporters on Wednesday he received a letter from Myanmar's junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, asking for Thailand's support for "the democracy in Myanmar." The letter wasn't disclosed to the media.

Associated Press writers Nick Perry in Wellington, New Zealand, Lorne Cook in Brussels, Jim Gomez in Manila, Philippines, Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul in Bangkok, and Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

Reports: Mori to resign Tokyo Olympics over sexist remarks

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The long saga of Yoshiro Mori appears to be near the end.

Japan's Kyodo news agency and others reported on Thursday — citing unnamed sources "familiar with the matter" — that Yoshiro Mori will step down on Friday as the president of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee.

The move follows his sexist comments about women more than a week ago, and an ensuing and rare public debate in Japan about gender equality. They also come just over five months before the Olympics are to open.

A decision is expected to be announced on Friday when the organizing committee's executive board meets. The executive board is overwhelming male, as is the day-to-day leadership.

The 83-year-old Mori, in a meeting of the Japanese Olympic Committee more than a week ago, essentially

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said women “talk too much” and are driven by a “strong sense of rivalry.” Mori, a former prime minister, gave a grudging apology a few days after his opinions were reported but declined to resign.

This is more than just another problem for the postponed Olympics, which have made the risky choice of trying to open on July 23 in the middle of a pandemic with 11,000 athletes — and later, 4,400 Paralympic athletes.

More than 80% of the Japanese public in recent polls say the Olympics should be postponed or canceled.

Mori’s remarks have drawn outrage from many quarters and have put the spotlight on how far Japan lags behind other prosperous countries in advancing women in politics or the boardrooms. Japan stands 121st out of 153 in the World Economic Forum’s gender equality rankings.

Though some on the street have called for him to resign — several hundred Olympic volunteers say they are withdrawing — most decision makers have stopped short of this and have simply condemned his remarks. Japan is a country that works largely on consensus with politicians — often elderly and male — acting behind the scenes and leaking trial balloons to sense public sentiment.

His replacement is reported to be 84-year-old Saburo Kawabuchi, a former president of the Japanese soccer association.

Here are samples of comments and observations about what has been playing out as pressure has mounted on Mori.

AKIO TOYODA, president of Toyota Motor Corp.

Toyota is one of 14 so-called Olympic TOP sponsors that pay about \$1 billion every four-year cycle to the International Olympic Committee. The company seldom speaks out on politics, but this week Toyoda said: “The (Mori) comment is different from our values, and we find it regrettable.” Toyota and Coca-Cola are also major sponsors of the torch relay, which is to begin on March 25. Toyota has not called for Mori to resign. but its comments have received headline attention.

YURIKO KOIKE, governor of Tokyo Metropolitan Government

Koike called Mori’s comments a “major issue” for the Olympics. She is one of the few powerful female politicians in Japan and has worked closely on the Olympics. She said she will skip an Olympic meeting next week with IOC President Thomas Bach, Mori and the national government. “I don’t think holding talks under the current circumstances will produce a positive message,” she said. “I will not attend the meeting.”

KOICHI NAKANO, political scientist at Tokyo’s Sophia University

‘Koike, as a natural populist, smells political gains by making use of her standing as a prominent female politician. Koike is no feminist, but she knows that being a woman in a very conservative, male-dominated Japan can be used to her advantage. By refusing to attend the meeting she can indicate that she is more in touch with the widely shared sentiment in the Japanese society that Mori should resign.”

INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

The IOC accepted Mori’s apology and said the case was closed. Then it waited almost a week to issue a more forceful statement and said his remarks were “absolutely inappropriate.” It pointed out that the local organizing committee also called the remarks “inappropriate.” The IOC has not called publicly for Mori to resign. Most of its statement about Mori focused on how it says it has improved gender-equality in the Olympics over the last 25 years.

MIZUHO FUKUSHIMA, head of the Social Democratic Party

Opposition leaders have been pressuring Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to convince Mori to step down. There are some unconfirmed reports in Japan that former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe could replace Mori. Mori got his job in 2014, when Abe was prime minister. “We must tell the world that Japan is a country committed to making a gender-equal society,” Fukushima said. “He (Mori) must step down.”

Associated Press writers Yuri Kageyama and Mari Yamaguchi contributed to this report.

AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Hustler founder and First Amendment battler Larry Flynt dies

By JOHN ROGERS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Larry Flynt, who turned his raunchy Hustler magazine into an empire while fighting numerous First Amendment court battles and flaying politicians with stunts such as a Donald Trump assassination Christmas card, has died. He was 78.

Flynt, who had been in declining health, died Wednesday at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, his longtime attorney, Paul Cambria, told The Associated Press.

Flynt was shot in a 1978 assassination attempt and left paralyzed from the waist down but refused to slow down, building a flamboyant reputation along with a fortune estimated at \$100 million.

He toiled around in a gold-plated wheelchair with a velvet-lined seat.

"His doctors had said he should have passed away 30 years ago," his nephew, Jimmy Flynt Jr., said Wednesday. "He outlived most of the doctors who took care of him."

Born Nov. 1, 1942, in Lakeville, Kentucky, Larry Claxton Flynt Jr. grew up poor. Divorced twice by age 21, Flynt eventually found his calling by buying bars and turning them into Hustler clubs that featured topless dancers. In an effort to drum up business, he published a newsletter that became Hustler magazine.

Founded in 1974, Hustler was unashamedly crude, low-brow and hard-core, thumbing its nose at the pretensions of such high-toned men's magazines as Playboy.

The magazine featured raw, politically incorrect humor, photos of female genitalia and sometimes S&M and bondage scenes with women tied and gagged. It shocked the public with a 1978 cover depicting a woman being fed into a meat grinder.

It was no shock, then, that Flynt faced many legal fights over obscenity laws or that he was intensely disliked by the religious right and feminist groups.

"Larry Flynt should be remembered as a scourge on society; he directly contributed to and profited from the sexual exploitation of women for the majority of his career, and our culture is poorer for it," Dawn Hawkins, senior vice president and executive director of the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, said in a statement Wednesday.

Flynt maintained throughout his life that he wasn't just a pornographer but also a fierce defender of free-speech rights.

"My position is that you pay a price to live in a free society, and that price is toleration of some things you don't like," he once told the Seattle Times. "You have to tolerate the Larry Flynts of this world."

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with him at least once, when he won a long and bitter battle with the Rev. Jerry Falwell. The televangelist sued him for libel after a 1983 Hustler alcohol ad suggested Falwell had lost his virginity to his mother in an outhouse.

That case and much of the rest of Flynt's life were depicted in the 1996 film, "The People vs. Larry Flynt," which brought Oscar nominations for director Milos Forman and for Woody Harrelson, who portrayed Flynt. Flynt had a cameo as a judge.

Flynt owned not only Hustler but other niche publications, a video production company, scores of websites, two Los Angeles-area casinos and dozens of Hustler boutiques selling adult-oriented products.

At the time of his death he claimed to have video-on-demand operations in more than 55 countries and more than 30 Hustler Hollywood retail stores throughout the United States.

His successes were offset by tragedies.

While he was involved in an obscenity trial in Georgia in 1978, Flynt was shot twice by white supremacist serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin, who said he was incensed by a Hustler mixed-race photo layout. Franklin was executed for a slaying despite opposition from Flynt, who was opposed to the death penalty.

The shooting left Flynt in unrelenting pain for many years, prompting him to give up his proclaimed

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born-again Christianity and embrace alcohol and pain killers.

He and his fourth wife, Althea, moved to Los Angeles and spent most of their time behind their mansion's 5,000-pound steel door. Althea, who became addicted to heroin and contracted the AIDS virus, drowned in their bathtub in 1987 at age 33. Her death was ruled accidental.

"Althea was the best thing that ever happened to me," a disconsolate Flynt said at the time.

Flynt's behavior in those years was wildly erratic. He was removed from the U.S. Supreme Court after he interrupted proceedings in 1983 by shouting invectives at the justices.

He later appeared in a federal courthouse in Los Angeles wearing a Purple Heart and a diaper made out of an American flag.

A sober Flynt eventually returned to work, pain eased by surgery.

He spent his later years in the political arena. When California voters recalled Gov. Gray Davis in 2003, Flynt was among 135 candidates to replace him. He campaigned as "a smut peddler who cares" and gathered more than 15,000 votes.

A self-described progressive liberal, Flynt was no fan of former President Donald Trump. In 2017, Flynt offered a \$10 million reward for evidence that would lead to Trump's impeachment, and in 2019 Larry Flynt Publications sent a Christmas card to some Republican congressional members that showed Trump lying dead in a pool of blood, with the killer saying, "I just shot Donald Trump on Fifth Avenue and no one assassinated me." It was a reference to Trump's boast that he could do the same and not lose any votes.

Over the years, he vastly expanded his business into the internet and the adult movie industry, noting the inroads they made into his magazine sales.

"You can see more on cable and satellite today than you could see in what I published in 1974," Flynt told The Associated Press in 2003.

This story contains biographical information compiled by former Associated Press writer Greg Risling.

Despite Biden's push, a difficult road to peace in Yemen

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Buthaina al-Raimi was five years old when a Saudi airstrike destroyed her home in the Yemeni capital and killed her parents and all five of her siblings in August 2017.

Ever since, she still breaks into tears for seemingly no reason. When planes fly overhead, she shouts to her uncle, "They're going to hit us!"

For her uncle, Khalid Mohammed Saleh, the U.S. decision last month to stop backing the Saudi coalition and push for an end to the war can do nothing to end her suffering.

"It's a wise decision, but it's too late," he said. It's also too early, he said — too early to say whether President Joe Biden's move will bring peace to Yemen.

Biden's halt to support for the Saudi-led coalition was a dramatic break with the air campaign against Yemen's Houthi rebels, which had brought international condemnation for causing thousands of civilian deaths. With the move, Biden launched a new push to bring an end to a 6-year-old war that has caused the Arab world's poorest nation to collapse into a humanitarian catastrophe.

But reaching peace will be a difficult path. The warring parties have not held substantive negotiations since 2019. A deal brokered by the U.N. in 2018 after talks in Sweden has largely gone nowhere; only one of its components — prisoner exchanges — has made any progress in slow steps worked out in multiple rounds of talks.

Fighting on the ground and coalition airstrikes continue. The Houthis' grip on the north of the country has only grown stronger, and they have captured new territory from pro-government forces over the past year.

Peter Salisbury, Yemen expert at the International Crisis Group, said Biden's policy shift was "really welcome news." But, he said, that "won't automatically mean an end to the war, at all."

Yemen on Thursday marks 10 years since the fall of longtime autocrat Ali Abdullah Saleh in the wake of an Arab Spring uprising — a moment Yemenis hoped would lead to effective governance and greater freedom. Instead, a brutal war followed when the Iranian-backed Houthis in late 2014 seized the capital

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Sanaa along with much of the country's north, ousting the government of Saleh's successor, President Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi.

Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition that has waged a ferocious air campaign, while supporting allied forces controlling the south in the name of restoring Hadi's internationally recognized government.

The ensuing war has killed some 130,000 people and devastated Yemen's already weak infrastructure, from roads and hospitals to water and electricity. U.N. aid agencies have warned that the hunger crisis caused by the war could turn into full-fledged famine.

The Obama administration greenlighted the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen. For years, the U.S. provided the coalition with intelligence, refueled its aircraft and sold it weapons. American involvement with Saudi Arabia's command and control was supposed to minimize airstrikes on civilians.

But often, it did not. The coalition was sharply criticized for indiscriminate strikes that hit markets, schools and other civilian infrastructure, leaving thousands of civilians dead or wounded.

Buthaina became a symbol of that civilian cost when a photo of her after the August 2017 strike went viral, showing her with bruises shutting her eyes. Since losing her family, she has been in the care of her uncle Saleh and other relatives.

"Her life, like many others, has been destroyed before it starts," he said.

Decisive military victory for either side has become highly unlikely, and all sides say they want negotiations. But corralling them all to the peace table means dealing with multiple factions each with different international backers with different agendas.

The anti-Houthi ranks have nearly fragmented several times. Most recently in 2019, forces of the Saudi-backed Hadi clashed with southern separatist factions backed by the United Arab Emirates, which is the other main power in the coalition but deeply distrusts Hadi.

The infighting eased after a Saudi-brokered deal. But the Houthis exploited the turmoil to make gains in government-held, oil-rich Marib province. They also continued missile and drone attacks deep inside Saudi Arabia — including strikes just days after Biden's announcement.

Just a few days after Biden's announcement, the Houthis launched a new offensive in Marib and hit Saudi territory with drone attacks.

Biden appointed a new special envoy for Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, and called for a cease-fire, the opening of humanitarian channels to deliver more aid, and the return to long-stalled peace talks.

Melanie Ward, executive director for the International Rescue Committee in Britain, called on London to seize a "vital opportunity" to work closely with the Biden administration to address years of gridlock in the U.N. Security Council and to bring Yemen a step closer to lasting peace.

Houthi demands were outlined in a proposal last year. They called for a nationwide cease-fire, the lifting of the coalition's air, land and sea blockade and the reopening of roads in battleground areas. An interim period would follow, with negotiations among Yemenis over the country's future.

The Houthis insisted the deal be negotiated and signed between them and the Saudi-led coalition, clearly aiming to sideline Hadi's government, Salisbury said.

The Saudis demand the rebels surrender their heavy weapons, particularly ballistic missiles. The kingdom backs a 2016 U.N.-brokered draft proposal that would grant the Houthis a minor role in government and pave the way for elections. Hadi's government insists any settlement include the return of his government to Sanaa.

Biden's cutoff of support, meanwhile, does not immediately set back the coalition's ability to keep waging the war.

The administration put on hold temporarily several big-ticket arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It said it would end offensive support to the coalition, though it underlined it would continue to help Saudi Arabia boost its defenses against outside attacks.

U.S. officials have not given further specifics, leaving questions over what cooperation will end. For example, it would suggest that Washington will stop sharing intelligence used by the Saudis in targeting in Yemen — but it is unclear if that would also halt intelligence on sites used by Houthis to launch missile

or drone strikes into the kingdom.

Biden also reversed the Trump administration's designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. That move has been hailed by aid groups working in Yemen, who feared the designation would disrupt the flow of food, fuel and other goods barely keeping Yemenis alive.

The reversal of the designation and the end of U.S. support give "a rare glimpse of hope for a country where six years of brutal war has killed and maimed tens of thousands of people, destroyed houses, farms, markets, schools and hospitals, and pushed civilians to the cliff edge of famine," said Mohamed Abdi, Yemen director for the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Mavs' Cuban relents on anthem after NBA reiterates policy

By SCHUYLER DIXON AP Sports Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban relented Wednesday and the national anthem will be played before home games this season after the NBA reiterated its "longstanding league policy" to include the song.

The league's initial reaction to Cuban's decision was to say teams were free to conduct pregame activities as they wished with the unusual circumstances created by the coronavirus pandemic. Most teams don't have fans at home games.

But the NBA abruptly reversed course with Cuban's decision reverberating around the country, including a question put to White House press secretary Jen Psaki during her daily briefing. Athlete protests of social and racial injustice during the "The Star-Spangled Banner" became a flashpoint between then-President Donald Trump and various leagues during his administration.

"With NBA teams now in the process of welcoming fans back into their arenas, all teams will play the national anthem in keeping with longstanding league policy," the league said.

The Mavericks played a prerecorded anthem with both teams standing along the free throw lines, as spelled out in NBA guidelines, before Wednesday night's 118-117 win over Atlanta. In the past, Cuban always had live performances of the anthem, although that practice has changed across all sports because of the pandemic.

Less than half of the roughly 1,500 vaccinated essential workers were at their seats during the anthem. All players and coaches stood, including Dallas coach Rick Carlisle with his right hand over his heart.

"It's an animated discussion, which is certainly not surprising," Carlisle said before the game. "This was Mark's decision. He was steadfast about it. It's been quite a day."

The Mavericks released a statement from Cuban while acknowledging the club would return to playing the anthem.

"We respect and always have respected the passion people have for the anthem and our country," Cuban said. "But we also loudly hear the voices of those who feel that the anthem does not represent them. We feel that their voices need to be respected and heard, because they have not been.

"Our hope is that going forward people will take the same passion they have for this issue and apply the same amount of energy to listen to those who feel differently from them," he said. "Then we can move forward and have courageous conversations that move this country forward and find what unites us."

The Mavericks played their first 10 regular-season games without fans before allowing the essential workers in for free for the first time Monday against Minnesota.

Rich Patterson, a 29-year-old who works in health care and attended the Atlanta game with a colleague, said the anthem was important to him, but that he wasn't hung up on whether it was played before sporting events.

"This is a sporting event and I'm here to have fun," Patterson said from seats a few rows from the front of a platform about a dozen feet above the playing area. "I'm not here to worry about politics on either side."

Cuban at that point declined to elaborate on his decision to not play the anthem, other than to say nobody noticed until after 11 regular-season home games.

The move wasn't without support among NBA coaches.

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"This should happen everywhere," New Orleans coach Stan Van Gundy tweeted Wednesday. "If you think the anthem needs to be played before sporting events, then play it before every movie, concert, church service and the start of every work day at every business. What good reason is there to play the anthem before a game?"

The question Van Gundy raises has been debated for some time.

The NBA rule book does not specifically say that the anthem — or anthems, in games involving the Toronto Raptors, the lone Canadian team in the league — must be played before games. The only rule regarding the songs states this: "Players, coaches and trainers must stand and line up in a dignified posture along the foul lines during the playing of the American and/or Canadian national anthems."

That rule was relaxed last year in the NBA's restart bubble at Walt Disney World, when the league took no objection to players kneeling for the anthem to show their desire for an end to racial injustice and police brutality.

Players were criticized for kneeling; some of those who stood, such as Miami's Meyers Leonard and Orlando's Jonathan Isaac, also faced backlash on social media for choosing to stand. San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich, a graduate of the Air Force Academy and coach of the U.S. men's national team, also stood for anthems in the bubble.

In an interview with ESPN, Cuban said it was never his intent to quit playing the anthem for good. The outspoken billionaire said the issue was part of an ongoing conversation with people in the community and the league, particularly as fans begin returning to arenas.

"We have no problem playing the national anthem at all," Cuban said. "I stand for the national anthem. My hand is always over my heart. The real issue is how do you represent the voices of those who feel the anthem doesn't represent them or causes them consternation."

Dallas players Jalen Brunson and Willie Cauley-Stein said they felt Cuban was showing support for them, and they appreciated it.

"One thing I'll say about Mark is he's not scared of what's being talked about," Cauley-Stein said. "It's not just a business to him. When you get to this level, it's such a business. And when you've got a guy that shows his full character and he's not being a businessman and he's like human, that's big-time for a player to go through."

Backlash to not playing the anthem was swift in the Texas Capitol, where Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick urged Cuban to "sell the franchise & some Texas Patriots will buy it." Other GOP lawmakers suggested the tax breaks the American Airlines Center receives should come under new scrutiny.

Patrick said he intends to introduce a bill in the Texas Senate that will ensure the national anthem is played at all events that receive public funding. He said the bill has broad support.

"It is hard to believe this could happen in Texas, but Mark Cuban's actions of yesterday made it clear that we must specify that in Texas we play the national anthem before all major events," Patrick said. "In this time when so many things divide us, sports are one thing that bring us together — right, left, Black, white and brown."

AP Basketball Writer Tim Reynolds contributed to this report.

More AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/hub/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Biden in call with China's Xi raises human rights, trade

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

Joe Biden had his first call as president with Xi Jinping, pressing the Chinese leader about trade and Beijing's crackdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong as well as other human rights concerns.

The two leaders spoke Wednesday just hours after Biden announced plans for a Pentagon task force to review U.S. national security strategy in China and after the new U.S. president announced he was levying sanctions against Myanmar's military regime following this month's coup in the southeast Asian country.

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A White House statement said Biden raised concerns about Beijing's "coercive and unfair economic practices." Biden also pressed Xi on Hong Kong, human rights abuses against Uighur and ethnic minorities in the western Xinjiang province, and its actions toward Taiwan.

"I told him I will work with China when it benefits the American people," Biden posted on Twitter after the call.

China's state broadcaster CCTV struck a mostly positive tone about the conversation, saying Xi acknowledged the two sides had their differences, and those differences should be managed, but urged overall cooperation.

CCTV said Xi pushed back against Biden's concerns on Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, saying the issues are China's internal affairs and concern Chinese sovereignty. He warned, "The U.S. should respect China's core interests and act with caution."

Biden, who had dealt with the Chinese leader when he served as Barack Obama's vice president, used his first three weeks in the White House to make several calls with other leaders in the Indo-Pacific region. He has tried to send the message that he would take a radically different approach to China than former President Donald Trump, who placed trade and economic issues above all else in the U.S.-China relationship.

With Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga late last month, Biden underscored the U.S. commitment to protecting the Senkaku Islands, a group of uninhabited islets administered by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing. In his call with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Biden emphasized the need for "close cooperation to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific." And in his call with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week, the president highlighted that the two nations' alliance was essential to stability in the region, the White House said.

Top aides to Biden have repeatedly heard from Asia-Pacific counterparts who had become discouraged by Trump's frequently sharp rhetoric aimed at allies, talk of reducing troop levels in South Korea and odd interactions with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, according to a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private calls.

Allies in the region have made clear they want a more purposeful and steady approach to engagements going forward, according to the official.

To that end, Biden and other top administration officials have taken care in their initial interactions with their counterparts to look to the long game in resetting the relationships.

Biden used Wednesday's call to raise concerns about Beijing's crackdown on activists in Hong Kong and about its policies affecting Muslims and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. In the final hours of the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the Chinese Communist Party had committed crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uighurs and other minority groups.

China has denied any abuses and says the steps it has taken are necessary to combat terrorism and a separatist movement.

The White House also said Biden made clear his concern about Beijing's increasingly "assertive" action with Taiwan. Beijing claims full sovereignty over Taiwan, even as the two sides have been governed separately for more than seven decades.

Days into Biden's presidency, China dispatched warplanes close to the island. The U.S. Navy, in turn, last week sent a guided-missile destroyer through the waterway that separates China and Taiwan.

One area that Biden doesn't appear ready to move quickly on is discontinuing Trump's trade war with China, which led to tariffs on their steel, aluminum and other goods.

Biden plans to leave the tariffs in place as his administration conducts a top-to-bottom review of trade policy. Administration officials note that the president is still awaiting confirmation of his U.S. trade representative nominee, Katherine Tai, and his pick for commerce secretary, Gina Raimondo. Both are expected to play key roles in helping shape China trade policy.

Administration officials say Biden also wants to consult with allies in Asia and Europe before making decisions on tariffs.

Biden and Xi know each other well and have had frank exchanges.

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Biden played host to then-Chinese vice president Xi during his 2012 visit to the United States. Biden used that visit to get a read of Xi and was blunt at moments, even raising concerns about Chinese theft of intellectual property and human rights abuses during a luncheon toast.

The following year, when Biden visited China, he publicly criticized Beijing for refusing to affirm that it would renew the visas of American journalists and for blocking the websites of American-based news media sites.

Biden has said he believes there are areas where the U.S. and China can work closely, such as addressing climate change and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. But ultimately, Biden said recently, he expects the U.S.-China relationship to be one of "extreme competition" in coming years.

On Thursday, China's state broadcaster said Xi told Biden: "You've said America's greatest feature is possibility. I hope that this type of possibility will develop in a way that is conducive to improving relations between the two countries."

Associated Press writer Huizhong Wu in Taipei, Taiwan, contributed to this report.

Trump can't hang on to lawyers after false election claims

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER, NOMAAN MERCHANT and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump spent much of his career deploying high-powered lawyers to do his bidding. Now he is having trouble finding top-tier help when he might need it most.

Since losing the November election to President Joe Biden, Trump has been hemorrhaging attorneys. Established firms backed away from his baseless claims of election fraud. Those he did retain made elementary errors in cases that were quickly rejected as meritless. His personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, was ridiculed for his performance before a federal judge during one election-related case.

His legal options contesting the election exhausted, Trump still needed a team to represent him in his historic second impeachment trial on a charge that he incited the deadly Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot. A team of South Carolina lawyers was retained, then backed out, so Trump was left with a lawyer from Pennsylvania and another from Alabama, giving them only days to prepare.

High-profile clients are typically strong pulls for ambitious lawyers, but Trump's rocky relationships with his attorneys show the limits of taking on cases with dubious merits. His allegations of fraud were rejected by courts, his attorney general and other prominent Republicans.

Trump's impeachment lawyers started off their defense by misspelling the words "United States" in their brief. And their initial presentation during the trial was panned by even some of Trump's most ardent supporters.

Trump fumed from his perch in Mar-a-Lago, and some in his circle said he should fire his lawyers. But he may not have many more options. And his legal peril is growing, most recently with a new criminal investigation into his election conduct in Georgia.

Trump has often used litigation as a weapon. He and his namesake company have been involved in scores of lawsuits, from million-dollar real estate conflicts to personal defamation lawsuits and fights with casino patrons. He also threatens legal action regularly.

But aside from a few loyal lawyers like Giuliani and a small, high-powered team representing him for New York-related probes, it's not clear what heavy hitters are left to represent him.

His impeachment team, David Schoen, a frequent television legal commentator, and Bruce Castor, a former district attorney in Pennsylvania, had just over a week to prepare after Trump and his previous defense team parted ways because they refused to offer Trump's claim of election fraud as a defense.

Castor, who has faced criticism for his decision as district attorney to not charge actor Bill Cosby in a sex crimes case, started off with a rambling presentation. Unlike the Democrats, who relied on a carefully structured and planned presentation to argue the constitutionality of the proceeding, Castor had only a yellow legal pad with handwritten notes on it in front of him and appeared to be speaking off the cuff.

As Trump watched on TV, he complained privately that his defense looked weak compared to that of

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the Democrats, who showed an emotional video of the mayhem on Jan. 6 that has left Capitol Hill reeling. Former Trump economic adviser Peter Navarro, who remains in close touch with the former president, called on him to fire his legal team and embrace a new approach centered on Trump's unfounded claims of massive election fraud.

Navarro told The Associated Press that he "warned the president that his legal team was going to fail him."

Trump's first impeachment team was fronted by noted defense lawyer Alan Dershowitz, as well as then-White House counsel Pat Cipollone, and Jay Sekulow, who has argued cases before the Supreme Court.

Dershowitz was baffled by Castor's performance, saying on Newsmax: "I have no idea what he's doing." Several Republican senators were equally stunned. Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana said Trump's team did a "terrible job."

When asked Wednesday about the criticism, Castor told reporters, "Only one person's opinion matters." Castor was asked whether Trump expressed any disapproval and replied: "Far from it."

Trump was hardly pleased with the outcome in his election fights in court, regardless of who the lawyers were. Some of them made outlandish claims that courts quickly dispatched.

Attorney Sidney Powell, who Trump had said was part of his team of "wonderful lawyers and representatives," falsely suggested a vendor of vote-counting equipment had been created in Venezuela to rig elections for Hugo Chavez, who died in 2013. Trump's campaign subsequently distanced itself from Powell, saying she was practicing law on her own. The vendor, Dominion Voting Systems, sued Powell for defamation last month and is seeking \$1.3 billion.

The day after the riot, a lawyer who was representing Trump's campaign in a Philadelphia election case asked to withdraw from the matter, filing a stunning motion in federal court that said Trump "used the lawyer's services to perpetrate a crime" and "insists upon taking action that the lawyer considers repugnant."

Dozens of judges rejected Trump's election claims, sometimes with scathing criticism. But the power of those false claims endured with Trump's die-hard supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6.

While Trump's remarks at a rally before the riot have drawn attention for his calls to "fight," his lawyers for nearly two months pushed false and unsubstantiated claims of election rigging in several states, promoted widely by conservative outlets and on social media.

But after impeachment, Trump's legal needs will likely accelerate, with the investigations in New York, Georgia and possibly Washington, D.C., where prosecutors will have the power of subpoena.

"You don't want to have the last person in America standing who's a member of the bar and willing to take your case as your representative," said Jessica Levinson, director of Loyola Law School's Public Service Institute.

Richer reported from Boston and Merchant reported from Houston. Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Eric Tucker in Washington, Kate Brumback in Atlanta and Meg Kinnard in Columbia, S.C., contributed to this report.

Digital siege: Internet cuts become favored tool of regimes

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — When army generals in Myanmar staged a coup last week, they briefly cut internet access in an apparent attempt to stymie protests. In Uganda, residents couldn't use Facebook, Twitter and other social media for weeks after a recent election. And in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, the internet has been down for months amid a wider conflict.

Around the world, shutting down the internet has become an increasingly popular tactic of repressive and authoritarian regimes and some illiberal democracies. Digital rights groups say governments use them to stifle dissent, silence opposition voices or cover up human rights abuses, raising concerns about restricting freedom of speech.

Regimes often cut online access in response to protests or civil unrest, particularly around elections, as they try to keep their grip on power by restricting the flow of information, researchers say. It's the digital

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equivalent of seizing control of the local TV and radio station that was part of the pre-internet playbook for despots and rebels.

"Internet shutdowns have been massively underreported or misreported over the years," said Alp Toker, founder of internet monitoring organization Netblocks. The world is "starting to realize what's happening," as documenting efforts like his expand, he said.

Last year there were 93 major internet shutdowns in 21 countries, according to a report by Top10VPN, a U.K.-based digital privacy and security research group. The list doesn't include places like China and North Korea, where the government tightly controls or restricts the internet. Shutdowns can range from all-encompassing internet blackouts to blocking social media platforms or severely throttling internet speeds, the report said.

Internet cuts have political, economic, and humanitarian costs, experts warned. The effects are exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdowns that are forcing activities like school classes online.

The shutdowns highlight a wider battle over control of the internet. In the West, efforts to rein in social media platforms have raised competing concerns about restricting free speech and limiting harmful information, the latter sometimes used by authoritarian regimes to justify clampdowns.

In Myanmar, internet access was cut for about 24 hours last weekend, in an apparent bid to head off protests against the army's seizing of power and the detention of leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her allies. By Sunday afternoon, internet users reported data access on their mobile phones was suddenly restored.

Norway's Telenor ASA, which runs one of Myanmar's main wireless carriers, said the communications ministry cited "circulation of fake news, stability of the nation and interest of the public" in ordering operators to temporarily shut down networks.

Telenor said it had to comply with local laws. "We deeply regret the impact the shutdown has on the people in Myanmar," it said.

It's a familiar move by Myanmar's government, which carried out one of the world's longest internet shutdowns in Rakhine and Chin states aimed at disrupting operations of an armed ethnic group. The cutoff began in June 2019 and was only lifted on Feb. 3.

Another long-running internet shutdown is in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which has been choked off since fighting started in early November -- the latest in a series of outages with no sign of service returning anytime soon. That's made it challenging to know how many civilians have been killed, to what extent fighting continues or whether people are starting to die of starvation, as some have warned.

In Uganda, restrictions on social media sites including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube took effect ahead of a Jan. 14 presidential election, along with a total internet blackout on the eve of polling. Authorities said it was to prevent opposition supporters from organizing potentially dangerous street protests.

The social media curbs were lifted Wednesday, except for Facebook. Longtime leader Yoweri Museveni, who was facing his biggest challenge to power yet from popular singer-turned-lawmaker Bobi Wine, had been angered by the social network's removal before the vote of what it said were fake accounts linked to his party.

In Belarus, the internet went down for 61 hours after the Aug. 9 presidential election, marking Europe's first internet blackout. Service was cut after election results handed victory to authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko but the vote was widely seen as rigged and sparked enormous protests. Access remained unstable for months, particularly around weekend protests, when mobile internet service repeatedly went down.

The risk is that regular shutdowns become normalized, said Toker.

"You get a kind of Pavlovian response where both the public in the country and the wider international community will become desensitized to these shutdowns," he said, calling it the "greatest risk to our collective freedom in the digital age."

Internet shutdowns are also common in democratic India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has increasingly used them to target his political opposition. His Hindu nationalist government has ordered hundreds of regional shutdowns, according to a tracking site.

Most have been in disputed Kashmir, which endured an 18-month blockade of high-speed mobile service that ended last week. But they've also been deployed elsewhere for anti-government demonstrations, including massive farmers' protests that have rattled Modi's administration.

"It used to be authoritarian governments who did this, but we are seeing the practice become more common in democracies such as India," said Darrell West, avice president of governance studies at the Brookings Institution who has studied internet shutdowns.

"The risk is that once one democracy does it, others will be tempted to do the same thing. It may start at the local level to deal with unrest, but then spread more broadly."

Cara Anna in Nairobi, Rodney Muhumuza in Kampala, Uganda, Aijaz Hussain in Srinigar, India, and Sheikh Saaliq in New Delhi contributed to this report.

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Follow Kelvin Chan at www.twitter.com/chanman

Hustler publisher Larry Flynt dies at 78

By JOHN ROGERS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Porn purveyor Larry Flynt, who built Hustler magazine into an adult entertainment juggernaut that included casinos, films, websites and other enterprises as he relentlessly championed First Amendment rights, has died at age 78.

Flynt, who had been in declining health, died Wednesday at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, his longtime attorney, Paul Cambria, told The Associated Press. He had been paralyzed and nearly killed in a 1986 assassination attempt.

"He suffered decades of health issues and you can imagine it was pretty difficult," said his nephew Jimmy Flynt Jr. He added, "I loved him and may he rest in peace."

From his beginnings as a fledgling Ohio strip club owner to his reign as founder of one of the most outrageously explicit adult-oriented magazines, Flynt constantly challenged the establishment and was intensely disliked by the religious right and feminist groups that said he demeaned women and put them at risk with pictures of bondage and other controversial acts.

Flynt maintained throughout his life that he wasn't just a pornographer but also a fierce defender of free-speech rights.

"My position is that you pay a price to live in a free society, and that price is toleration of some things you don't like," he once told the Seattle Times. "You have to tolerate the Larry Flynts of this world."

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with him at least once, when he won a long and bitter battle with the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who sued him for libel after a 1983 Hustler alcohol ad suggested Falwell had lost his virginity to his mother in an outhouse.

That case and much of the rest of Flynt's life were depicted in the acclaimed 1996 film, "The People vs. Larry Flynt," which brought Oscar nominations for director Milos Forman and for Woody Harrelson, who portrayed Flynt.

Flynt's far-flung company produced not only Hustler but other niche publications. He also owned a video production company, scores of websites, two Los Angeles-area casinos and dozens of Hustler boutiques selling adult-oriented products. He also licensed the Hustler name to independently owned strip clubs.

At the time of his death he claimed to have video-on-demand operations in more than 55 countries and more than 30 Hustler Hollywood retail stores throughout the United States.

"It's a massive corporation and he started it with nothing," Jimmy Flynt Jr. said.

His publishing and financial successes were offset in equal measure by controversies and tragedies.

Over the years, Flynt fought battles with drug and alcohol addiction, and his daughter Lisa Flynt-Fugate was killed in a car crash in 2014 at age 47.

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Left paralyzed from the waist down and in unrelenting pain by a March 6, 1978, shooting, Flynt refused to slow down, continuing to build his business for another 44 years. Always a flashy dresser, he used a gold-plated wheelchair with a velvet-lined seat.

"His doctors had said he should have passed away 30 years ago," Jimmy Flynt Jr. said Wednesday. "He outlived most of the doctors who took care of him," he added with a chuckle.

With an estimated fortune over \$100 million, Flynt spent his later years in the political arena. When California voters recalled Gov. Gray Davis in 2003, Flynt was among 135 candidates to replace him. He campaigned as "a smut peddler who cares" and gathered more than 15,000 votes.

A self-described progressive, Flynt was no fan of former President Donald Trump. Before the 2016 election, he offered payment of up to \$1 million for video or audio recordings of Trump engaging in illegal or "sexually demeaning or derogatory" activity.

In 2017, Flynt offered a \$10 million reward for evidence that would lead to Trump's impeachment, and in 2019 Larry Flynt Publications sent a Christmas card to some Republican congressional members that showed Trump lying dead in a pool of blood, with the killer saying, "I just shot Donald Trump on Fifth Avenue and no one assassinated me." It was a reference to Trump's boast that he could do the same and not lose any votes.

Although Flynt often disgusted the masses, he became an unlikely poster boy for First Amendment causes, who even supporters of the same issues weren't sure what to make of.

"If I can leave any kind of legacy at all, it will be that I helped expand the parameters of free speech," he told the Los Angeles Times in 1998.

During the 1998-99 impeachment of President Bill Clinton, he threatened to expose lawmakers' sexual exploits. Saying he only wanted to unmask the hypocrisy of the investigation, he offered huge sums for material that could be verified and published in Hustler. His efforts at the time hit former Reps. Bob Livingston — who was expected to become House speaker before Flynt threatened to expose his affairs — and Bob Barr.

Political analyst Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, University of Southern California Sol Price School of Public Policy senior fellow, said at time his effort was "dangerous to the First Amendment ... This is sexual bounty hunting."

Over the years, he vastly expanded his business into the internet and the adult movie industry, noting the inroads they made into his magazine sales.

"You can see more on cable and satellite today than you could see in what I published in 1974," Flynt told The Associated Press in 2003.

Born Nov. 1, 1942, in Lakeville, Kentucky, Larry Claxton Flynt Jr. grew up poor.

He ran away from home and joined the Army at 15, but when military officials learned his true age they discharged him. Undeterred, Flynt enlisted in the Navy and served until 1964.

Divorced twice by age 21, he eventually found his calling by buying bars and turning them into Hustler clubs that featured topless dancers. In an effort to drum up business, he published a newsletter that became Hustler magazine.

Unlike the more subdued Playboy and Penthouse, Hustler featured raw imagery and biting cartoons. It showed female genitalia and shocked readers with a 1978 cover depicting a woman being fed into a meat grinder. Pictorials sometimes featured S&M and bondage scenes with women tied and gagged.

Flynt offered large sums of money to famous women to pose naked, and although they turned him down he did manage to publish a photographer's nude sunbathing photos of former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

His magazine became a lightning rod for anti-pornography groups and drew the ire of Cincinnati attorney Charles Keating, who helped get Flynt sentenced to 25 years in prison for selling Hustler. The conviction was thrown out, but it helped form the cornerstone of subsequent legal battles.

During one of those battles Flynt announced in 1977 that he had become a born-again Christian with the help of former President Jimmy Carter's sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton. He promised his magazine would still feature nudity but become more tasteful.

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His religious revival was short-lived. While he was involved in an obscenity trial in Georgia in 1978, Flynt was shot twice by white supremacist Joseph Paul Franklin, who said he was incensed by a magazine's mixed-race photo layout.

Prosecutors decided not to try Franklin, who was executed in November 2013 for a 1977 slaying outside a suburban St. Louis synagogue.

Ironically, Flynt was one of the most vocal opponents of executing Franklin, saying that while he hadn't forgiven him, he didn't think capital punishment was the solution.

In chronic pain, Flynt gave up Christianity and embraced alcohol and pain killers. He and his fourth wife, Althea, moved to Los Angeles and spent most of their time behind their mansion's 5,000-pound steel door. Althea, who became addicted to heroin and contracted the AIDS virus, drowned in their bathtub in 1987 at age 33. Her death was ruled accidental.

"Althea was the best thing that ever happened to me," a disconsolate Flynt said at the time.

A sober Flynt eventually returned to work, pain eased by surgery, and he tooled around his office in his signature gold-plated wheelchair. With a gruff voice but otherwise friendly demeanor, he rarely missed an opportunity to promote himself.

Among his many legal battles was a dispute that erupted in 1983 when he said he obtained an FBI tape related to a drug sting involving carmaker John DeLorean. He was found in contempt of court for screaming profanities at federal judges, and served several months. The charge was eventually overturned on appeal.

Flynt also had a second run-in with authorities in Ohio in the late 1990s. He and his brother, Jimmy, who owned a store in Cincinnati, were indicted on obscenity and conspiracy charges. The store paid a \$10,000 fine and agreed to stop selling X-rated videos as part of a plea agreement.

He also had legal run-ins with his brother and nephews over the years. In one action he claimed the nephews were producing inferior films under the Flynt name that were an embarrassment to him.

Survivors include Flynt's brother, Jimmy; his wife, Elizabeth Berrios; and several children.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

This story contains biographical information compiled by former Associated Press writer Greg Risling.

Trump trial video shows vast scope, danger of Capitol riot

By LISA MASCARO, ERIC TUCKER, MARY CLARE JALONICK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — Prosecutors unveiled chilling new security video in Donald Trump's impeachment trial on Wednesday, showing the mob of rioters breaking into the Capitol, smashing windows and doors and searching menacingly for Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as overwhelmed police begged on their radios for help.

In the previously unreleased recordings, the House prosecutors displayed gripping scenes of how close the rioters were to the country's leaders, roaming the halls chanting "Hang Mike Pence," some equipped with combat gear. Outside, the mob had set up a makeshift gallows.

Videos of the siege have been circulating since the day of the riot, but the graphic compilation amounted to a more complete narrative, a moment-by-moment retelling of one of the nation's most alarming days. In addition to the evident chaos and danger, it offered fresh details on the attackers, scenes of police heroism and cries of distress. And it showed just how close the country came to a potential breakdown in its seat of democracy as Congress was certifying Trump's election defeat to Democrat Joe Biden.

"They did it because Donald Trump sent them on this mission," said House prosecutor Stacey Plaskett, the Democratic delegate representing the U.S. Virgin Islands. "His mob broke into the Capitol to hunt them down."

The stunning presentation opened the first full day of arguments in the trial as the prosecutors argued Trump was no "innocent bystander" but rather the "inciter in chief" of the deadly Capitol riot, a president who spent months spreading election lies and building a mob of supporters primed for his call to stop Biden's victory.

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Though most of the Senate jurors have already made up their minds on acquittal or conviction, they were riveted and sat silently. Screams from the audio and video filled the Senate chamber. Senators shook their heads, folded their arms and furrowed their brows. One Republican, James Lankford of Oklahoma, bent his head, a GOP colleague putting his hand on his arm in comfort.

"On Jan. 6, President Trump left everyone in this Capitol for dead," said Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, a prosecutor.

Pence, who had been presiding over a session to certify Biden's victory over Trump — thus earning Trump's criticism — is shown being rushed to safety, sheltered in an office with his family just 100 feet from the rioters. Pelosi was evacuated from the complex before the mob prowls her suite of offices, her staff hiding quietly behind closed doors.

At one dramatic moment, the video shows police shooting into the crowd through a broken window, killing a San Diego woman, Ashli Babbitt. In another, a police officer is seen being crushed by the mob.

Police overwhelmed by the rioters frantically announce "we lost the line" and urge officers to safety. One officer later died.

Some senators acknowledged it was the first time they had grasped how perilously close the country came to serious danger.

"When you see all the pieces come together, just the total awareness of that, the enormity of this threat, not just to us as people, as lawmakers, but the threat to the institution and what Congress represents, it's disturbing," said Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. "Greatly disturbing."

Trump is the first president to face an impeachment trial after leaving office and the first to be twice impeached. He is charged with incitement of insurrection through fiery words his defense lawyers say are protected by the Constitution's First Amendment and just figures of speech.

The House Democrats showed piles of evidence from the former president himself -- hundreds of Trump tweets and comments that culminated in his Jan. 6 rally cry to go to the Capitol and "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat. Trump then did nothing to stem the violence and watched with "glee," they said, as the mob ransacked the iconic building.

"To us, it may have felt like chaos and madness, but there was method to the madness that day," said Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., the lead prosecutor, who pointed to Trump as the instigator.

"And when his mob overran and occupied the Senate and attacked the House and assaulted law enforcement, he watched it on TV like a reality show. He reveled in it."

In one scene, a Capitol Police officer redirects Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, down a hallway to avoid the mob. It was the same officer, Eugene Goodman, who has been praised as a hero for having lured rioters away from the Senate doors.

"It tears at your heart and brings tears to your eyes," Romney said after watching the video. He said he didn't realize how close he had been to danger.

The day's proceedings unfolded after Tuesday's emotional start that left the former president fuming when his attorneys delivered a meandering defense and failed to halt the trial on constitutional grounds. Some allies called for yet another shakeup to his legal team.

The prosecutors are arguing that Trump's words were part of "the big lie" — his relentless efforts to sow doubts about the election results, revving up his followers to "stop the steal" even though there was no evidence of substantial fraud.

Trump knew very well what would happen when he took to the microphone at the outdoor White House rally that day as Congress gathered to certify Biden's win, said Rep. Joe Neguse, D-Colo, another impeachment manager.

"This was not just a speech," he said.

Security remained extremely tight Wednesday at the Capitol, fenced off and patrolled by National Guard troops.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki has said Biden would not be watching the trial.

The difficulty facing Trump's defenders became apparent at the start as they leaned on the process of the trial rather than the substance of the case against him. They said the Constitution doesn't allow

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impeachment at this late date, after he has left the White House.

Even though the Senate rejected that argument in Tuesday's vote to proceed, the legal issue could resonate with Republicans eager to acquit Trump without being seen as condoning his behavior.

Defense lawyer Bruce Castor encouraged senators on Tuesday to be "cool headed" as they assessed the arguments.

A frustrated Trump revived his demands for his lawyers to focus on his unsupported claims of voter fraud, repeatedly calling former White House aide Peter Navarro, who told the AP in an interview that he agreed. He is calling on Trump to fire his legal team.

"If he doesn't make a mid-course correction here, he's going to lose this Super Bowl," Navarro said, a reference to public opinion, not the unlikely possibility of conviction.

While six Republicans joined with Democrats to vote to proceed with the trial, the 56-44 vote was far from the two-thirds threshold of 67 votes that would be needed for conviction.

Minds did not seem to be changing, even after seeing the graphic video.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who was among those leading the effort to challenge the Electoral College tally, said, "The president's rhetoric is at times overheated, but this is not a referendum on whether you agree with everything the president says or tweets."

Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., another leader of the election challenge, said, "Nothing new here for me at the end of the day."

As the country numbs to the Trump era's shattering of civic norms, the prosecutors sought to remind senators and the nation how extraordinary it was to have a sitting U.S. president working to discredit the election.

As far back as spring and summer, Trump was spreading false claims about the election and refusing to commit to the peaceful transfer of power once it was over, they said.

Trump's second impeachment trial is expected to diverge from the lengthy, complicated affair of a year ago. In that case, Trump was charged with having privately pressured Ukraine to dig up dirt on Biden, then a Democratic rival for the presidency. The second trial could be over in half the time.

Associated Press writers Kevin Freking in Washington, Nomaan Merchant in Houston and Michelle Price in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

Trial highlights: Harrowing footage, focus on Trump's words

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats opened their first day of arguments in former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial Wednesday with searing footage of the U.S. Capitol riot as they painted Trump as an "inciter in chief" who systematically riled up his supporters and falsely convinced them the election had been stolen, culminating in the deadly attack.

"He assembled, inflamed and incited his followers to descend upon the Capitol," said the lead impeachment manager, Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md.

As she presented harrowing footage of the siege, Del. Stacey Plaskett, a Democrat representing the U.S. Virgin Islands and one of the prosecutors, said Trump had "put a target" on the backs of then-Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who were leading the certification of President Joe Biden's election victory. "His mob broke into the Capitol to hunt them down," Plaskett said.

Highlights from the first full day of arguments:

TRUMP'S WORDS COME BACK TO HAUNT HIM

Trump's voice rang out in the Senate Chamber as Democrats aired video from his rallies and other remarks to supporters. Interspersed throughout were slides of Trump's tweets contesting the election and promoting the Jan. 6 rally in Washington, which he promised would be "wild."

The impeachment managers put Trump's rhetoric on trial, from the months he spent laying the groundwork to contest the election results to the speech he delivered outside the White House egging his supporters to "fight" before they stormed the Capitol.

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"He truly made his base believe that the only way he could lose was if the election were rigged," said Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, another one of the prosecutors.

Trump, the House impeachment managers argued, whipped his supporters into a frenzy with the "big lie" that their votes had been stolen, and urged them to fight.

"This attack never would have happened but for Donald Trump," said Rep. Madeleine Dean, D-Pa., choking back emotion. "And so they came, draped in Trump's flag, and used our flag, the American flag, to batter and to bludgeon."

There was no widespread fraud in the election, as has been confirmed by election officials across the country and former Attorney General William Barr. Dozens of legal challenges to the election put forth by Trump and his allies were dismissed.

NEW SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE

To reconstruct the siege for senators, Democrats aired never-before-seen security footage from inside the Capitol that showed the attack unfolding. Their presentation included chilling video of the rioters rampaging into the building and audio of distressed police officers who tried in vain to keep them out. "We have been flanked and we've lost the line," one frantic officer could be heard saying.

The presentation also showed the perilous moments when lawmakers and others, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Pence, were rushed to safety; body cam footage of an officer being beaten; the sounds of crunching, breaking glass; profane screams and violent threats; and cries as the rioters streamed into the building, some carrying riot shields and weapons.

"Where do they count the f—ing votes?" one member of the mob could be heard shouting. "You work for us," one yelled at officers. "Where's that meeting at?"

Democrats warned that many of the scenes would be hard to watch, including the horrifying screams of an officer being crushed in a doorway and video of one of the rioters, Ashli E. Babbitt, being shot to death by U.S. Capitol Police.

Also never before seen: Footage of Capitol Police officer Eugene Goodman, who has already been hailed as a hero, warning Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, that the mob was headed his way. Romney turned and dashed in the other direction.

"I did not know that was Officer Goodman," Romney told reporters after seeing it. "I look forward to thanking him when I next see him."

Goodman also directed the mob away from the Senate Chamber and toward other officers.

PRAISE FOR PENCE

While the Democrats excoriated Trump, they lavished praise on an unlike figure: former Vice President Pence, outlining in exacting detail how his life had been put in physical danger and hailing him as a "patriot" for defying Trump's pressure campaign to overturn the election results.

"Vice President Pence had the courage to stand against the president, tell the American public the truth and uphold our Constitution. That is patriotism," said Plaskett, whose presentation included previously unseen footage of Pence and his family being evacuated from the Senate chamber as rioters spread through the Capitol.

Other footage showed the rioters chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" as others searching for him. At one point, Plaskett said, the rioters were within 100 feet of where Pence was sheltering with his family.

"They were talking about assassinating the vice president of the United States," she said.

Many Republicans had been appalled by Trump's treatment of his most loyal soldier during his final days in office. And the focus appeared to be a tacit acknowledgement of the Democrats' intended audience as they try to convince Senate Republicans — many of whom are close with Pence — that Trump deserves to be punished for what happened.

"Mike Pence is not a traitor to this country. He's a patriot," said Castro. "And he and his family, who was with him that day, didn't deserve this, didn't deserve a president unleashing a mob on them, especially because he was just doing his job."

TRUMP'S LAWYERS RETURN

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They were merely observers as Democrats had the floor. But members of Trump's legal team indicated they would stay the course despite a flood of criticism, both from Republican senators and the former president, about their performance during procedural arguments Tuesday.

"Not at all," said attorney Bruce Castor when asked by reporters whether there would be any changes to their strategy. "No, I don't anticipate any," echoed David Schoen, another attorney.

Both Castor and Schoen said they had spoken to Trump on Tuesday, but Castor denied that the former president had expressed displeasure to him.

"Far from it," he said, even as Schoen allowed there was room for improvement after Republican senators panned their performance as disjointed and unhelpful.

"To the extent they were critical of anything that I did, I just want to try to do a better job then," he said.

"Bottom line is I think his team will do better, can do better," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, D-S.C., a close ally of the president, after the two had spoken. While he acknowledged there was "room for improvement," Graham said he'd tried to tell Trump that "the case is over. It's just a matter of getting the final verdict now." All but six Republican senators voted Tuesday against moving forward with the trial.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Dean described the House Chamber descending into chaos as she stood with colleagues in the gallery above the floor and made panicked calls to her husband and sons.

"Someone shouted up to us, 'Duck!' then 'Lie down!' then 'Ready your gas masks!' she remembered. "Shortly after there was a terrifying banging on the chamber doors. I will never forget that sound."

Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., described the text he sent to his wife telling her to hug their young children.

"On Jan. 6," said Castro, "President Trump left everyone in this Capitol for dead."

Throughout the proceeding, the House managers served as personal witnesses of the horror and repeatedly invoked the word "us" as they appealed to fellow lawmakers targeted in the attack.

"He was coming for you, for Democratic and Republican senators. He was coming for all of us, just as the mob did at his direction," said Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., after describing Trump's rhetoric.

REPUBLICANS HOLD FIRM

There appears little chance enough Republicans will break with Democrats to convict Trump at the end of the trial. And some of them appeared indifferent to the proceedings and unmoved by the evidence Wednesday.

Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, who led the Senate challenge to the election along with Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, said the prosecutors' case was "predictable" and included information that was already public.

The video evidence was "nothing new here, for me, at the end of the day," said Hawley, who maintains the trial is unconstitutional.

Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, another close ally of Trump, predicted the remainder of the trial was "going to be pretty tedious" and said the two sides would be better served if they just made their cases "in a couple hours" and be "done with this."

And Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who sat with his back to the screen, writing notes on a pad, walked out in the middle of Plaskett's description of the threats against Pence.

It was a notable contrast with Democrats like Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin, who described the prosecutors' presentation of evidence as "painful" to watch.

While it forced them to relive a traumatic moment, "it also helps to bring closure, so I think it's something that we have to go through," said Cardin, who described Jan. 6 as "one of the roughest days of our life."

New riot video shows Officer Goodman point Romney to safety

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

During the impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump on Wednesday, Democrats revealed new footage of a U.S. Capitol Police officer hailed for his heroism during the Jan. 6 insurrection, this time directing Sen. Mitt Romney to turn around and head in the opposite direction of rioters storming the building.

The response under fire of Eugene Goodman and other officers during the Jan. 6 attack was central to

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the arguments made by impeachment managers seeking a conviction against the former president. In the footage, Romney is seen walking toward the rioters until an officer turns him around and he runs in the other direction.

"I was very fortunate indeed that Officer Goodman was there to get me in the right direction," Romney told reporters later.

Wearing a suit and tie and a mask with a blue line, Goodman stood inside the U.S. Senate chamber, watching as the footage was shown of his efforts to save lives.

"As we all know now, but for the heroism of Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman and other law enforcement officers who took (rioters) in a different direction to the police line, they very likely would have gotten here," said Rep. David Cicilline of Rhode Island, one of the impeachment managers.

The managers played audio and video, some never before heard or seen publicly, of badly outmanned officers trying to delay or misdirect rioters, some of whom themselves were from other law enforcement agencies. In calls made to dispatchers, officers are heard pleading for help, the desperation in their voices clear.

"We have been flanked and we've lost the line," one officer is heard saying.

Several investigations are underway to determine why agencies left law enforcement undermanned and unequipped despite weeks of warnings of violence from far-right and white supremacist groups. Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund resigned the day after the riots and Acting Chief Yogananda Pittman faces a no-confidence vote from her rank and file.

Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick died after the attack, one of five people to be killed.

Goodman became a national hero after video shot by HuffPost reporter Igor Bobic showed his response to rioters climbing the stairs near an entrance to the U.S. Senate chamber. With no other officers to be seen, he takes a half step to his left at the top of the stairs, then walks to the right, away from the chamber. The mob follows him into a room where other officers wait.

Goodman has not spoken publicly about his actions that day. He escorted Vice President Kamala Harris to her place at the inauguration ceremony two weeks after the attack.

Other videos shown Wednesday depict officers pushing back in vain against rioters intent on stopping the certification of President Joe Biden's victory over Trump.

Speaking during a break in Wednesday's proceedings, Romney said seeing the images of police officers fighting off violent insurrectionists brought tears to his eyes. "That was overwhelmingly distressing and emotional," he said.

Asked about the video in which Goodman tells Romney to turn around, the senator said he didn't know the identity of the officer before.

"I look forward to thanking him when I next see him," he said.

Brady-Brate trophy pass wows Bucs' Super Bowl boat parade

By FRED GOODALL AP Sports Writer

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Even on the water, it seems the connection between seven-time Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady and his receivers cannot be denied.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers held a boat parade Wednesday to celebrate their first NFL title in 18 years on a sun-splashed day with thousands of fans lining the Hillsborough River near downtown Tampa.

At one point, Brady was captured on video tossing the NFL's Lombardi Trophy from his boat across the water to a shirtless Cameron Brate in another boat. That brought wild cheers from fans and players.

Brady threw two of his three touchdown passes in the team's 31-9 Super Bowl victory over the Kansas City Chiefs to Rob Gronkowski, who teamed with Brate to form one of the best tight end tandems in the NFL this season.

As the parade came to a close, coach Bruce Arians said the Bucs could easily repeat as champions if the team stays intact. Brady has already said he'll be back, and Arians is determined to hold on to several other key players, too.

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"We have the best coaching staff in the NFL. And we damn sure have the best players in the NFL," Arians said. "We're going to keep the band together."

Mayor Jane Castor had emphasized that people attending the parade needed to wear masks outdoors and observe social distancing rules.

It appeared many abided by the mask order but many others did not. There were also dozens of people on private boats, kayaks and other watercraft crowding the river to catch a glimpse of the team. They were directed to stay at least 50 feet (15 meters) from the boats carrying players.

After Tampa Bay's win in Sunday's title game, throngs of people gathered in the city's entertainment districts. Many were seen maskless despite the orders requiring them.

For Tampa Bay players and the team's fans, celebrating their first Super Bowl win since the 2002 season was the main attraction on Wednesday.

"We just made history in all the world," said linebacker Jason Pierre-Paul. "This means so much to me, I'll do it again. We're gonna do it again."

Wide receiver Chris Godwin said the team came together at the right time. After a sluggish start, the Buccaneers reeled off eight straight wins to claim the championship.

"We fought all year. We stuck together. And now we're world champions," Godwin said.

Brian Ford, chief operating officer of the Buccaneers, said in video announcement that fans should heed the rules as they celebrate the team's victory.

"It's essential we do it the right way," Ford said. "We want to do our part to ensure it's done in a safe and responsible manner."

Also Wednesday, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis lashed out at the news media when he suggested there is bias in coverage of the pandemic, particularly at the Super Bowl in Tampa.

"You don't care as much when it's a peaceful protest," he said at an appearance in the city of Venice, south of Tampa. "You don't care as much if you're celebrating a (President Joe) Biden election. You only care about if it's people you don't like."

DeSantis attended the Super Bowl and was photographed at times not wearing a mask despite a requirement to do so.

Associated Press writer Curt Anderson in St. Petersburg contributed to this report.

Springsteen charged with drunken driving; Jeep ad on pause

HIGHLANDS, N.J. (AP) — Bruce Springsteen is facing a drunken driving charge in New Jersey, prompting Jeep to put on pause the Super Bowl television commercial that features him.

Springsteen was arrested Nov. 14 in a part of the Gateway National Recreation Area on the New Jersey coast, a spokesperson for the National Park Service confirmed Wednesday.

The park is on a narrow, beach-ringed peninsula, with views across a bay to New York City. It is about 15 miles north of Asbury Park, where Springsteen got his start as a musician and bandleader and which was later made famous with his debut album, "Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J." Springsteen lives in Colts Neck, about 12 miles from the site of the arrest.

Springsteen received citations for driving while under the influence, reckless driving and consuming alcohol in a closed area. The spokesperson said Springsteen was cooperative.

A message was left seeking comment with Springsteen's publicist.

The news of the arrest came on the heels of two high-profile appearances by Springsteen. On Jan. 20, Springsteen performed as part of President Joe Biden's inauguration, singing "Land of Hope and Dreams" in front of the Lincoln Memorial. While during Sunday's Super Bowl, he appeared in a Jeep ad filmed in Kansas that urged people to find common ground.

Jeep released a statement saying it "would be inappropriate for us to comment on the details of a matter we have only read about and we cannot substantiate." But the company said, "it's also right that we pause our Big Game commercial until the actual facts can be established."

The arrest was first reported by TMZ.com.

Is one day a week enough? Biden's school goal draws blowback

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

President Joe Biden is being accused of backpedaling on his pledge to reopen the nation's schools after the White House added fine print to his promise and made clear that a full reopening is still far from sight.

Biden's initial pledge in December was to reopen "the majority of our schools" in his first 100 days in office. In January he specified that the goal applied only to schools that teach through eighth grade. And this week the White House said that schools will be considered opened as long as they teach in-person at least one day a week.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki defended the goal Wednesday, calling it part of a "bold ambitious agenda." But she also said it's a bar the administration hopes to exceed.

"Certainly, we are not planning to celebrate at 100 days if we reach that goal," she said. "We certainly hope to build from that."

The White House had faced increasing pressure to explain the goal as the reopening debate gains urgency. Biden had never detailed what it meant to be reopened or how he would define success. Pressed on the question Tuesday, Psaki clarified that one day a week of in-person learning would meet the mark.

"His goal that he set is to have the majority of schools — so, more than 50% — open by day 100 of his presidency," she said. "And that means some teaching in classrooms. So, at least one day a week. Hopefully, it's more."

The goal drew criticism from Republicans who said Biden is setting the bar too low. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy called it unacceptable and said schools are ready to open now. Rep. Vicky Hartzler, R-Mo., a former teacher, said the goal falls short of what students need.

"Having only 51% of our schools reopen for as little as one day a week is not a 'success,'" she said. "We should be working to safely get all of our children back to full-time, in-person learning"

With the new caveat, the pledge appears much less ambitious than what Biden signaled when he first made it. In December, it seemed his promise was to reopen half of the nation's more than 130,000 schools. When it was narrowed to K-8 schools only, the scope decreased to include the roughly 90,000 schools below high school.

Now, critics say, the goal has been moved so low it may already have been met. Data from Burbio, a service that tracks school opening plans, recently reported that 58% of K-12 students are learning in-person to some degree.

"The administration doesn't have to exert much effort to meet this goal," said Jonathan Butcher, an education fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

Tracking progress on the goal has been difficult due to a lack of federal data on the topic. Last week the Biden administration said it will begin collecting data from 7,000 schools showing whether they are operating online, in-person or in a combination. The Trump administration declined to gather that data, saying it wasn't the federal government's responsibility.

Some companies and researchers have sought to collect the data on their own, including Burbio, which reported some recent progress on schools returning to in-person classes. About 42% of students were learning entirely online late last month, the company found, down from 55% during the first week of the year.

Biden's pledge is part of his broader plan to fight COVID-19 and jump start the economy. His \$1.9 trillion plan includes \$130 billion to help schools fix ventilation systems, stock up on protective gear and take other steps to open. Getting students back into the classroom is seen as a key step in getting parents back to work.

But reopening efforts have faced roadblocks due in part to slow vaccine rollouts and standoffs with teachers. While schools in some areas are teaching in-person, many remain mostly or entirely online. In cities including Chicago and San Francisco, districts have faced resistance from teachers who refuse to

return until their demands are met.

Before Biden's goal was clarified this week, even some of his top health officials expressed doubt that it would be reached. Talking to teachers last month, Dr. Anthony Fauci said Biden's school reopening goal "may not happen because there may be mitigating circumstances," including new strains of COVID-19.

The delays have frustrated many parents, including some whose children have been learning from home for nearly a year. In Congress, debate on reopening has become increasingly heated as Republicans oppose further school relief and say there's evidence that schools are safe to reopen now.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a study last month finding that, with mask wearing and other precautions, it's generally safe to have schooling in-person. CDC director Dr. Rochelle Walensky later added that vaccinating teachers "is not a prerequisite for safe reopening of schools."

Republicans saw the statement as further support to reopen, but the White House declined to take a firm stance on the issue, saying Walensky made the comment "in her personal capacity." Psaki said the White House would await updated school guidance that Biden requested from the CDC.

The CDC's guidance, which is likely to recommend safety measures and indicate when it's safe to operate in-person, is expected to be released soon.

Prominent Saudi women's rights activist released from prison

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — One of Saudi Arabia's most prominent political activists was released from prison Wednesday, her family said, after serving nearly three years on charges that sparked an international uproar over the kingdom's human rights record.

Loujain al-Hathloul, who pushed to end a ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to almost six years in prison last December under a broad counterterrorism law. Held for 1001 days, with time in pre-trial detention and solitary confinement, she was accused of crimes such as agitating for change, using the internet to cause disorder and pursuing a foreign agenda — charges that rights groups describe as politically motivated.

"Loujain is at home!!!!!!" her sister Lina al-Hathloul declared on Twitter alongside a screenshot showing a flushed Loujain beaming on a family video call.

There was no immediate comment from Saudi authorities on her release.

Her release this year was widely expected as the judge suspended two years and 10 months of her sentence and gave her credit for time already served, putting her release date sometime in March.

The release Wednesday, earlier than anticipated, comes as Saudi Arabia faces new scrutiny from the United States, where President Joe Biden has vowed to reassess the U.S.-Saudi partnership and stand up for human rights and democratic principles.

"I have some welcome news that the Saudi government has released a prominent human rights activist," Biden said in a speech at the Pentagon. "She was a powerful activist for women's rights and releasing her was the right thing to do."

Biden had labeled Saudi Arabia a "pariah" on the campaign trail and promised to reverse former President Donald Trump's policy of giving the country "a blank check to pursue a disastrous set of policies," including the targeting of female activists.

The harsh crackdown against women who had pressed for the right to drive before the kingdom lifted the ban in mid-2018 came to symbolize the dual strategy of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The young, ambitious prince has sought to portray himself as a liberalizing reformer while also silencing and detaining activists who long had pushed for change.

The United Nations welcomed al-Hathloul's release but U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said "it is important that others who are in the same condition as her, who have been jailed for the same reasons as her, also be released and that charges be dropped against them."

Prince Mohammed cultivated close relations with the Trump administration, which members of Congress say largely shielded the kingdom from censure over its human rights record and instead sought to priori-

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tize lucrative weapons deals.

The suppression of perceived critics and potential rivals has intensified under Prince Mohammed, increasingly attracting international ire since the killing of Saudi critic Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul at the hands of Saudi agents in late 2018.

Although released, al-Hathloul will remain free under strict conditions, her family has said, including a five-year travel ban and three years of probation.

"Loujain is at home, but she is not free. The fight is not over," her sister Lina wrote on Twitter. "I am not fully happy without the release of all political prisoners."

Many human rights activists applauded al-Hathloul's release from prison but urged caution amid the remaining restrictions on her freedom.

"If she is not allowed to leave Saudi Arabia, or is forced to remain on probation, there is no reason to believe she will not be arrested again or forced to remain subject to her country's draconian laws that prevent her from speaking out and demanding her basic rights," said Abdullah Alaoudh, Gulf research director at Democracy for the Arab World Now, the organization founded by Khashoggi.

The 31-year-old Saudi activist rocketed to prominence in Saudi Arabia for her criticism of the kingdom's guardianship system, which bars women from travel without a male relative, and her outspokenness on human rights issues. She was first detained in 2014 for 70 days when, in an act of defiance, she posted a video online of herself attempting to drive from the United Arab Emirates into the kingdom.

From behind bars al-Hathloul launched hunger strikes to protest her prison conditions and joined other female activists in testifying to judges that she was tortured and sexually assaulted by masked men during interrogations. The women reported that they were caned, electrocuted and waterboarded. Some said they were groped and threatened with rape. Saudi Arabia denies that any were mistreated.

Al-Hathloul's family said that an appeals court Tuesday rejected her claims of torture, citing a lack of evidence. While some activists and their families have been pressured into silence, al-Hathloul's siblings, who reside in the U.S. and Europe, have launched a high-profile campaign calling for her release.

Al-Hathloul's release follows that of two dual Saudi-U.S. citizens who had been detained since 2019: Badr al-Ibrahim, a writer and physician, and Salah al-Haidar, the son of a prominent women's rights activist.

Following intense pressure from Congress, they were both set free, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee announced last Friday, calling it a "positive, but long overdue step."

Al-Haidar, who has a family home in Vienna, Virginia, had faced up to 33 years in prison for alleged Twitter posts criticizing the Saudi government. The Freedom Initiative, a prisoners' rights group, stressed that the release of the men was temporary, pending trial on what it described as "unsubstantiated" terrorism charges.

Associated Press writer Darlene Superville in Washington contributed to this report.

Powell stresses commitment to full employment and low rates

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell on Wednesday underscored the Fed's commitment to reducing unemployment to multi-decade lows, where it stood before the pandemic, while signaling little concern about the risk of potentially high inflation or financial-market instability.

Powell stressed during a webcast to the Economic Club of New York that the U.S. job market remains weak despite having improved from the depths of the pandemic-induced recession.

And he signaled that the Fed isn't considering any increase in its benchmark short-term interest rate from its level near zero. He also said the central bank is not currently considering any reductions to the size of its \$120 billion in monthly bond purchases, which are intended to keep longer-term interest rates low.

The chairman did not refer to the surging stock market or to recent signs of market froth, like the explosive volatility in the prices of GameStop and other stocks targeted by ordinary day traders.

He emphasized, as he frequently has before, that the loss of millions of jobs has fallen disproportionately

on the least-advantaged households.

"Despite the surprising speed of recovery early on, we are still very far from a strong labor market whose benefits are broadly shared," Powell said.

Powell's language "would sound remarkable to an earlier generation of central bankers," said Krishna Guha, an analyst at the investment bank Evercore ISI, in a note to clients. His speech "placed restoring a strong labor market at the heart of the central bank's agenda to a greater extent than perhaps ever before while playing down concerns about potential excess inflation."

He noted that roughly 4 million people who are out of work have stopped looking for jobs, which means they aren't counted as unemployed. If they were, the unemployment rate would be closer to 10%.

And while the job losses among the highest-earning one-quarter of Americans have been just 4%, job losses among the poorest one-quarter have been "a staggering 17%," Powell said.

The Fed last year refined its definition of maximum employment as a "broad and inclusive" goal that includes consideration of the unemployment rate of Black and Hispanic Americans as well as overall joblessness.

President Joe Biden is pushing a \$1.9 trillion economic rescue package that has raised concern among some economists about potential inflation, in part because millions of Americans who have been fortunate enough to keep jobs have accumulated significant savings. Once vaccines are more widely distributed, those savings could fuel a burst of spending beyond what still-decimated businesses could handle, spurring higher prices.

Powell, however, showed little concern that such a dynamic would occur. Last month, he suggested that any high inflation that resulted would likely be temporary.

Powell was also asked by Peter Blair Henry, an economics professor at New York University, how Biden's proposed rescue plan compares to estimates issued by some analysts, such as the Congressional Budget Office, of the gap between the economy's current output and what it would be if it were back to full health. Most estimates of that gap are much smaller than Biden's \$1.9 trillion package.

The Fed Chair said that questions about the amount of economic aid should be determined by Congress and the White House. But he also suggested such calculations are imprecise and may not be helpful guides for policy.

Powell also highlighted the fact that just before the virus intensified, inflation remained low even when unemployment fell to 3.5%.

"There was every reason to expect that the labor market could have strengthened even further without causing a worrisome increase in inflation were it not for the onset of the pandemic," he said.

For now, there is little sign of rising prices. Consumer prices rose just 1.4% in January compared with a year earlier, the government said Wednesday.

Aging desktop source of attorney's accidental cat filter

By JOHN L. MONE and JILL BLEED Associated Press

RICHMOND, Texas (AP) — Texas attorney Rod Ponton's appearance as a fluffy kitten during an online court hearing provided a moment of levity to a pandemic- and Zoom-fatigued world.

But that specific, adorable filter may be tough to find for anyone looking to replicate the viral moment.

Ponton told The Associated Press that he was using his assistant's 10-year-old desktop Dell computer when he logged in for a routine civil forfeiture hearing Tuesday in Presidio County, Texas, where he serves as prosecutor.

Ponton says his appearance looked normal on the webcam as he waited to be let into the Zoom hearing in Judge Roy Ferguson's court. But when the hearing began, to his shock and dismay, he was a cat.

"I think everybody in the world's seen the video now and heard me trying as I struggled to try to un-cat myself," he said.

Ponton said he's still trying to untangle the mystery, but he believes the computer's software and the assistant's young child are the likeliest culprits.

Texas-based Dell Technologies says the aging desktop was likely in need of a software update.

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"Mr. Ponton was likely running an outdated driver which may have held him in cat filter limbo a little too long," said Glen Robson, chief technology officer at Dell's client solutions group. "While those of us techies were probably cringing watching that video, I'm sure cat lovers everywhere were celebrating."

Video filters and virtual backgrounds have exploded in popularity as much of the world's activities moved online during the pandemic. One commonly used program is Snap Camera, which lets users download all kinds of filters, including one that makes a person appear like a potato (as one woman famously did early in the pandemic).

Separately, Zoom offers filters of its own through its app, though none as realistic as Ponton's attorney-cat. Mishaps in online courtrooms have occurred throughout the pandemic as the legal community adjusts to remote proceedings. A Georgia case last year was disrupted by hold music, background noise and the neglected mute button. And in Florida, a judge told attorneys they must get out of bed and put on clothing before appearing on video for proceedings.

Ferguson, the judge who oversaw Tuesday's hearing and posted the video online, told The Associated Press he had no idea the clip would become an instant hit.

"My phone started to melt within about two minutes, and I realized that this was going to take on a life of its own," Ferguson said.

In one of the more hilarious moments, Ponton tells the judge: "I'm prepared to go forward" with the hearing, despite his feline appearance. Ferguson said everyone involved was committed to maintaining the dignity of the court, despite the absurdity of the situation.

Ponton was good-humored about his new notoriety, telling the AP: "I'm happy to give the world a laugh because I think we needed it after the last few months."

Bleed reported from Little Rock, Arkansas.

AP-NORC poll: A third of US adults skeptical of COVID shots

By MIKE STOBBE and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — About 1 in 3 Americans say they definitely or probably won't get the COVID-19 vaccine, according to a new poll that some experts say is discouraging news if the U.S. hopes to achieve herd immunity and vanquish the outbreak.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that while 67% of Americans plan to get vaccinated or have already done so, 15% are certain they won't and 17% say probably not. Many expressed doubts about the vaccine's safety and effectiveness.

The poll suggests that substantial skepticism persists more than a month and a half into a U.S. vaccination drive that has encountered few if any serious side effects. Resistance was found to run higher among younger people, people without college degrees, Black Americans and Republicans.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's leading infectious-disease scientist, has estimated that somewhere between 70% and 85% of the U.S. population needs to get inoculated to stop the scourge that has killed close to 470,000 Americans. More recently, he said the spread of more contagious variants of the virus increases the need for more people to get their shots — and quickly.

So is 67% of Americans enough?

"No. No, no, no, no," said William Hanage, a Harvard University expert on disease dynamics. He added: "You're going to need to get quite large proportions of the population vaccinated before you see a real effect."

About 33.8 million Americans, or 10% of the population, have received at least one dose, and 10.5 million have been fully vaccinated, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

The poll of 1,055 adults, taken Jan. 28 through Feb. 1, provides insight into the skepticism.

Of those who said they definitely will not get the vaccine, 65% cited worries about side effects, despite the shots' safety record over the past months. About the same percentage said they don't trust COVID-19 vaccines. And 38% said they don't believe they need a vaccine, with a similar share saying that they don't

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know if a COVID-19 vaccine will work and that they don't trust the government.

Of those who probably will not get the vaccine but have not ruled it out completely, 63% said they are waiting to see if it is safe, and 60% said they are concerned about possible side effects.

"I don't trust pharmaceuticals. I really don't. And it doesn't sound like it's going to be safe," said Debra Nanez, a 67-year-old retired nurse from Tucson, Arizona.

Nanez said she has gotten flu and pneumonia shots but is concerned about rumors about what's in the coronavirus vaccine, and her friends have the same hesitation.

"It would take a while for me to do research on it to make sure it's safe. I just don't want to take anything that's going to harm me," she said.

Baron Walker, a 42-year-old laid-off insulation installer from Parkersburg, West Virginia, said he is in the "probably not" column, at least for now.

He said that if he were elderly, or lived in a densely populated area, he might consider the vaccine more strongly. But he is in rural part of the country, he has been wearing a mask and social-distancing, and he feels there is a good chance the nation will achieve herd immunity, he said.

"I feel like I have plenty of time before I get a chance to get (the vaccine) anyway, to find out if there are bad side effects and whether it's even worth getting it," Walker said.

In interviews, some Americans expressed concerns about the revolutionary speed with which the vaccines were developed — less than a year.

"I feel like they rushed it," Walker said.

That was echoed by Matt Helderman, 31, of Greer, South Carolina.

"I'd like to see more safety data," said Helderman, a video editor and associate producer for a Christian TV program. He also said that he would like to see more clarity on whether the vaccine is effective against new variants.

Health officials are trying to counter concerns about the vaccine with science.

The latest evidence indicates that the two vaccines being used in the U.S. — Pfizer's and Moderna's — are effective even against the variants, Fauci said.

Also, while the development of the vaccines was unusually fast, it was the culmination of many years of research. And the vaccines went through clinical trials involving thousands of people who were monitored for 60 days after their last dose. Studies of other vaccines have found that harmful side effects almost always materialize within 45 days.

"Safety certainly was not compromised, nor was scientific integrity compromised," Fauci said. "Many have reason for skepticism. But I think that when you explain the facts and the data to them, you can win them over."

The survey found that older Americans, who are more vulnerable to COVID-19, are especially likely to say they have received a shot or will probably or definitely get vaccinated. Four in 10 of those under 45 say they will probably or definitely not get a vaccine, compared with a quarter of those older.

Black Americans appear less likely than white Americans to say they have received the shot or will definitely or probably get vaccinated, 57% versus 68%. Among Hispanic Americans, 65% say they have gotten or plan to get the vaccine.

Public health experts have long known that some Black Americans are distrustful of the medical establishment because of its history of abuses, including the infamous Tuskegee study, in which Black patients with syphilis were left untreated so that doctors could study the disease.

Americans without a college degree are more likely than college-educated ones to say they will definitely or probably not get vaccinated, 40% versus 17%. And Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that, 44% versus 17%.

Fingerhut reported from Washington.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,055 adults was conducted Jan. 28-Feb. 1 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The

margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.

Online:

AP-NORC Center: <http://www.apnorc.org/>.

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Georgia prosecutor investigates election after Trump call

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A Georgia prosecutor said Wednesday that she has opened a criminal investigation into "attempts to influence" last year's general election, including a call in which President Donald Trump asked a top official to find enough votes to overturn Joe Biden's victory in the state.

In a Jan. 2 telephone conversation with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Trump repeatedly argued that Raffensperger could change the certified results of the presidential election, an assertion the secretary of state firmly rejected.

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

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, a Democrat elected to the job in November, did not specifically mention Trump in the letters she sent to state officials Wednesday announcing her investigation. But the former president has been under intense criticism for the call.

Willis spokesman Jeff DiSantis told The Associated Press that while he could not name the subjects under investigation, he confirmed that Trump's call to Raffensperger was "part of it" and said "the matters reported on over the last several weeks are the matters being investigated." In her letters, Willis also remarks that officials "have no reason to believe that any Georgia official is a target of this investigation."

The letters, sent to Raffensperger, Gov. Brian Kemp, Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan and Attorney General Chris Carr, instruct the four Republican officials to preserve all records related to the election, particularly those that may contain evidence of attempts to influence elections officials.

Representatives for Raffensperger, Duncan and Carr acknowledged receiving the letters but declined to comment. Kemp spokesman Cody Hall declined to comment in a text message.

Senior Trump adviser Jason Miller decried the district attorney's announcement, saying "the timing here is not accidental given today's impeachment trial."

"This is simply the Democrats' latest attempt to score political points by continuing their witch hunt against President Trump, and everybody sees through it," Miller said.

U.S. Rep. Nikema Williams, who is also chair of the state Democratic Party, applauded Willis "for holding Donald Trump accountable for attempting to influence our elections and throw out the votes of Georgia voters."

"Let's be clear — we know Trump and his cronies' attacks on our elections were the direct result of Black and brown voters making their voices heard," Williams said in a statement. "Now, it is the responsibility of every leader of this state, regardless of party, to put protecting the rights of Georgia voters above letting Donald Trump get away with his crimes."

David Shafer, chair of the state Republican Party, did not immediately respond to a text or phone call seeking comment.

Noah Bookbinder, the executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, said the watchdog group last month sent a criminal complaint to Willis' office outlining laws that it said Trump appeared to have broken on his call with Raffensperger. The group asked Willis to begin a criminal investigation.

"Trump's conduct violates not only the law, but the foundation on which our democracy is built," Bookbinder wrote in an emailed statement. "He may have been able to evade facing criminal charges as presi-

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dent, but he is no longer president. We applaud Fulton County District Attorney Willis for launching this investigation and showing that no one is above the law.”

Willis’ letters note the investigation is looking into “potential violations of Georgia law prohibiting the solicitation of election fraud, the making of false statements to state and local government bodies, conspiracy, racketeering, violation of oath of office and any involvement in violence or threats related to the election’s administration.”

The district attorney added that she will request subpoenas for the investigation in March when the next Fulton County grand jury is set to meet.

After the November general election, Trump refused to accept that Biden had beaten him. His loss by about 12,000 votes in the state, a longtime Republican stronghold, seemed especially troubling to him. He and his allies made unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud in Georgia and repeatedly insulted Raffensperger and Kemp for not taking action to overturn his loss.

State and federal officials have repeatedly said the election was secure and that there is no evidence of systemic fraud.

Prior to his call last month to Raffensperger, Trump had tried to pressure others in Georgia. While election officials were verifying signatures on absentee ballot envelopes in one metro-Atlanta county in December, Trump told a lead investigator in a phone call to “find the fraud,” saying it would make the investigator a national hero. Also in December, he called Kemp and tried to persuade him to order a special session of the state legislature to overturn Biden’s victory.

Earlier this week, Raffensperger’s office opened an administrative investigation after a third party filed a complaint alleging that Trump’s call to Raffensperger violated Georgia laws.

Investigators with the secretary of state’s office who look into such complaints typically present their findings to the state election board, which then decides how to proceed. If the board believes there’s evidence that a crime occurred, it can take action ranging from issuing a letter of reprimand to referring the case to Georgia’s attorney general or to a local district attorney such as Willis.

Associated Press reporter Ben Nadler contributed to this report.

Did someone say impeachment? Biden avoids wading into debate

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The searing images once again claimed center stage: a mob storming the U.S. Capitol, Trump flags held aloft as violent rioters fought with police and targeted lawmakers.

But as the traumatic video footage from Jan. 6 grips viewers of the impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, there is one place where, publicly, the trial is being studiously ignored: the White House.

President Joe Biden stressed to reporters in advance that he would not be watching the proceedings and his team’s message is clear: Their focus is on the business of governing and not the historic events unfolding at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki has dodged question after question about the trial, declining to offer Biden’s opinion on the proceedings. And Biden’s calendar this week is meant as counterprogramming to the trial: events focused on getting aid to those suffering amid the COVID-19 pandemic and bolstering vaccine distribution to control the virus.

The message discipline reflects both the political and practical realities of the moment for the president.

Privately, White House aides note that the president would gain little politically from weighing in on the trial and that any comment he makes would draw the focus away from his predecessor’s misconduct and onto Biden’s own views.

And they say that, on a practical level, staying above the fray allows Biden to focus on his COVID-19 relief package and remain on cordial terms with Republicans as he tries to steer the \$1.9 trillion bill through Congress.

“Presidents have their peak political capital immediately after they’re elected, and they need to decide

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what to spend it on. Containing COVID is President Biden's No. 1 priority, so I don't think it's a surprise that that's where the focus has been and will remain until that package has passed," said former Obama campaign press secretary Ben LaBolt.

LaBolt also noted that if Democrats' ultimate goal is to win GOP support for indicting the president, it's unlikely that "having President Biden out there continuing to make statements about impeachment would serve that effort."

Among some Biden aides, there is a sense that the president will need to weigh in at the end of the trial, particularly if an expected acquittal prompts Trump to break his silence and further inflame a deeply divided nation.

For now, however, the White House's public approach to the proceedings has been: Impeachment? What impeachment?

"I am not," Biden said when asked if he would be watching the trial. "Look, I told you before: I tell people that I have a job. ... The Senate has their job and they are about to begin it, and I am sure they are going to conduct themselves well. And that's all I am going to have to say about impeachment."

Psaki at times has all but twisted herself in knots at the White House podium to dodge saying much of anything about the trial, simply referring to Biden's previous condemnations of the Jan. 6 riot and past criticisms of Trump.

"Joe Biden is the president. He's not a pundit. He's not going to opine on back-and-forth arguments, nor is he watching them," she said Tuesday.

On Wednesday, she insisted that Biden would "not be a commentator" and would instead focus on jump-starting the vaccination program and getting his COVID-19 relief bill through Congress.

Biden's schedule this week echoes that message.

He met with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and business leaders on Tuesday to push for his economic recovery package. On Wednesday, he announced sanctions on Myanmar's military regime in the wake of the coup there and then visited the Pentagon. On Thursday, he planned a trip to the National Institutes of Health to discuss the nation's vaccination program.

White House aides knew the president's events would be overshadowed by the proceedings in the well of the Senate, but wanted to be certain to show Biden working and driving home the contrast with his predecessor on trial.

It's all in keeping with Biden's overall approach to Trump throughout the 2020 campaign: Avoid getting bogged down in each new attack or controversy from the president and stay focused on his own overarching message about a return to competent leadership in the White House. It also reflects a belief among White House aides that the chattering classes in Washington and on Twitter are often far removed from the realities of everyday Americans.

"I think the biggest news story for most Americans is getting the virus under control, and President Biden has shown, both on the campaign trail and in the White House, that his focus is what the American people are waking up thinking about every day," LaBolt said.

With the Senate occupied by impeachment, White House legislative affairs staffers were working with House committee members on crafting the massive COVID-19 legislation.

But while the administration's outward focus was on the pandemic, the trial was inescapable within the West Wing.

The televisions mounted on office walls were tuned to cable news channels broadcasting the proceedings for hours on end. Aides kept one another updated and briefed the president. And preliminary work was underway for Biden to weigh in at the end of the trial in an effort to lower the temperature of a divided nation overheated by Trump.

Biden's public silence during the trial was echoed by Trump, whose Twitter account has been suspended and who followed aides' advice to keep a low profile for fear of endangering an acquittal.

In Trump's previous impeachment, a year ago, he relentlessly weighed in on the trial on Twitter and mixed in a variety of events. The prior president to be impeached, Bill Clinton, also made a show of focusing on his day job, scheduling a flurry of events opposite the 1999 trial that ended up improving his

approval ratings.

The clearest historical precedent for the moment in which Biden finds himself may be that of President Gerald Ford seeking to unify the nation after the damaging Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's resignation. Like Biden, Ford sought to move the country past his predecessor in part by ignoring him and focusing on his own agenda. In a move that was controversial at the time but one that presidential historian Jeff Engel said was ultimately seen as beneficial for the national mood, Ford pardoned Nixon.

Engel suggested that Biden continue to focus his message on Americans, rather than wade into fights on Capitol Hill.

"Joe Biden, I think, will by his very nature feel responsible for and speak to Americans of all stripes," he said. "That's not going to cure our problems by any measure, but it will provide a balm, if you will, to allow things to quiet down."

Associated Press writer Alan Fram in Washington contributed to this report.

Biden orders sanctions against Myanmar after military coup

By AAMER MADHANI and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday ordered new sanctions against the military regime in Myanmar, taking action after the military this month staged a coup in the Southeast Asian country and arrested de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior politicians.

Biden said he was issuing an executive order that will prevent Myanmar's generals from accessing \$1 billion in assets in the United States. Biden added that more measures are to come.

"The military must relinquish power it seized and demonstrate respect for the will of the people of Burma," Biden said.

Biden said the new sanctions will allow his administration to freeze U.S. assets that benefit Myanmar's military leaders while maintaining support for health care programs, civil society groups and other areas that benefit the country's people. He said the administration planned to identify specific targets of the sanctions later this week.

"The people of Burma are making their voices heard, and the world is watching," Biden said, using an alternate name for Myanmar. "We'll be ready to impose additional measures and we'll continue to work with our international partners to urge other nations to join us in these efforts."

Before Biden spoke from the White House, large crowds demonstrating against the military takeover again took to the streets in Myanmar, even after security forces ratcheted up the use of force against them and raided the headquarters of Suu Kyi's political party.

It remains to be seen what, if any, impact the U.S. action will have on Myanmar's military regime. Many of the military leaders are already under sanctions because of attacks against the Muslim Rohingya minority.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a supporter of Suu Kyi, said he appreciated Biden's "ongoing engagement with Congress on prompt and practical steps to restore democracy in Burma. I hope all nations that respect democracy and the rule of law will join the U.S. in imposing meaningful costs and accountability on the junta."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters shortly before Biden's announcement that "there's certainly a recognition that this will need to be a coordinated effort" with the international community to press change in Myanmar.

The U. N. Human Rights Council was set to hold a special session on Myanmar on Thursday.

The protesters in Myanmar are demanding that power be restored to Suu Kyi's deposed civilian government. They're also seeking freedom for her and other governing party members detained by the military after it blocked the new session of Parliament on Feb. 1.

Witnesses estimated that tens of thousands of protesters, if not more, turned out Wednesday in Yangon and Mandalay, the country's biggest cities. Rallies also took place in the capital, Naypyitaw, and elsewhere.

The military cited the government's failure to act on unsubstantiated allegations of widespread voter

fraud as part of the reason for the takeover and declaration of a one-year state of emergency. The generals maintain the actions are legally justified, and have cited an article in the constitution that allows the military to take over in times of emergency.

Suu Kyi's party has said it's effectively a coup. The Biden administration also was quick to officially determine the takeover was a coup, setting the stage for Wednesday's announcement.

The U.S. first imposed sanctions in 1998 after the military there violently suppressed a protest. These were tightened over the following decades because of what Washington deemed human rights violations by the ruling military regime.

The restrictions were gradually eased in response to reforms and after the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2010.

But in 2019, President Donald Trump introduced new sanctions against Myanmar's military leaders over the killings of Rohingya Muslims.

Madhani reported from Chicago.

Ancient shell horn can still play a tune after 18,000 years

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A large conch shell overlooked in a museum for decades is now thought to be the oldest known seashell instrument — and it still works, producing a deep, plaintive bleat, like a foghorn from the distant past.

The shell was found during the 1931 excavation of a cave with prehistoric wall paintings in the French Pyrenees and assumed to be a ceremonial drinking cup. Archaeologists from the University of Toulouse recently took a fresh look and determined it had been modified thousands of years ago to serve as a wind instrument. They invited a French horn player to play it.

"Hearing it for the first time, for me it was a big emotion — and a big stress," said archaeologist Carole Fritz.

She feared that playing the 12-inch (31-centimeter) shell might damage it, but it didn't. The horn produced clear C, C sharp and D notes.

The researchers estimate it to be around 18,000 years old. Their findings were published Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*.

Conch shells have been used widely in musical and ceremonial traditions, including in ancient Greece, Japan, India and Peru. The shell instrument found in the Marsoulas cave is now the oldest known example. Previously, a conch shell instrument found in Syria had been dated to about 6,000 years old, said another Toulouse archaeologist, Gilles Tosello.

The latest discovery was made after a recent inventory at the Natural History Museum of Toulouse. The researchers noticed some unusual holes in the shell. Crucially, the tip of the shell was broken off, creating a hole large enough to blow through. Microscopic inspection revealed the opening was the result of deliberate craftsmanship, not accidental wear, according to Tosello.

By inserting a tiny medical camera, they found that another hole had been carefully drilled in the shell's inner chamber. They also detected traces of red pigment on the mouth of the conch, matching a decorative pattern found on the wall of Marsoulas cave.

"This is classic, really solid archaeology," said Margaret Conkey, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who was not involved in the research. "This discovery reminds us that their lives were much richer and more complex than just stone tools and big game."

Marsoulas cave is not located near an ocean, so the prehistoric people must have either moved around widely or used trading networks to obtain the shell, Conkey and the researchers said.

"What makes conch shells so interesting is that the spiral cavity formed by nature is perfectly adept at resonating musically," said Rasoul Morteza, a composer in Montreal who has studied conch shell acoustics, and was not involved in the paper.

Using a 3D replica, the archaeologists plan to continue studying the horn's range of notes. Tosello said he hopes to hear the ancient instrument played inside the cave where it was found.

"It's amazing when there's an object forgotten somewhere, and suddenly it comes again into the light," he said.

Follow Christina Larson on twitter: @larsonchristina

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Government investigating massive counterfeit N95 mask scam

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal authorities are investigating a massive counterfeit N95 mask operation in which fake 3M masks were sold in at least five states to hospitals, medical facilities and government agencies. The foreign-made knockoffs are becoming increasingly difficult to spot and could put health care workers at grave risk for the coronavirus.

These masks are giving first responders "a false sense of security," said Steve Francis, assistant director for global trade investigations with the Homeland Security Department's principal investigative arm. He added, "We've seen a lot of fraud and other illegal activity."

Officials could not name the states or the company involved because of the active investigation.

Nearly a year into the pandemic, fraud remains a major problem as scammers seek to exploit hospitals and desperate and weary Americans. Federal investigators say they have seen an increase in phony websites purporting to sell vaccines as well as fake medicine produced overseas and scams involving personal protective equipment. The schemes deliver phony products, unlike fraud earlier in the pandemic that focused more on fleecing customers.

3M, based in Maplewood, Minnesota, is among the largest global producers of the N95 mask, which has been approved by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and is considered the gold standard in protection against the coronavirus. The company delivered some 2 billion N95 masks in 2020 as the pandemic soared, but in earlier months of the pandemic, when masks were in short supply, fraudsters starting popped up.

"They're not coming from authorized distributors," said Kevin Rhodes, 3M's vice president and deputy general counsel. "They're coming from companies really just coming into existence."

Rhodes encouraged medical facilities and even workers to look on the company's website for tips on how to spot fakes, namely through packaging or faulty trademarks.

"These products are not tested to see if they make the N95 standards," he said "They're not interested in testing them. They're interested in making as many as they can as cheaply as possible."

During the pandemic, Homeland Security Investigations has used its 7,000 agents in tandem with border officials, the Food and Drug Administration and the FBI to investigate scams, seize phony products and arrest hundreds of people to help stop fraud. The effort is based at the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center, a government watchdog aimed at enforcing international trade laws and combating intellectual property theft.

There have been already more than 1,250 raids by law enforcement that resulted in the seizure of 10 million counterfeit 3M masks alone. The company has filed more than a dozen lawsuits over reports of fraud, counterfeiting and price gouging.

There are many other reports of fraudulent masks that have reached frontline workers.

In the latest matter, Homeland Security investigators sent an email warning of potential fraud to certain states. The email, viewed by The Associated Press, said 3M N95 mask models 1860 and 1860S may have been provided by a company called Q2 Solutions and the masks may be fraudulent. The masks have a seal that says "Peru," which is not used outside of Latin America. The company is based in Miami and has

offices around the U.S. and globally. It did not respond to requests for comment.

Officials in Washington state examined their mask supply, which had come from a different company, and discovered that 300,000 masks they had purchased for about \$1.4 million were counterfeit. Officials are investigating.

Beth Zborowski of the Washington State Hospital Association said the fraud has the potential to affect 1.9 million masks but they are mostly in stockpile now rather than general circulation.

She said the mask supplier had been vetted and the masks "passed all the physical and visual inspection test." Zborowski said that for a time, the association could not get the masks directly from 3M, but the company now is expediting its order after learning of the fraud.

Health care workers "have plenty of anxieties on a day-to-day basis. They don't need to also worry about whether their masks are fake," she said.

Nursing home protections limit families who want to sue

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

In her room at a Georgia nursing home, Bessie Burden was so concerned about the coronavirus that she wore a mask — sometimes two — even when she slept.

With the home closed to visitors because of the pandemic, Burden's daughters worried about their spunky 77-year-old mother, who decades earlier had survived a stroke and had persevered despite heart disease, diabetes and a leg amputation. When Burden told them by phone that she felt ill and was being treated with supplemental oxygen — and her roommate had been taken away by ambulance days earlier — they became alarmed. A call with a nurse who sounded confused about Burden's care increased their sense of urgency.

The daughters called an ambulance to take their mother to a hospital. Once admitted, Burden tested positive for COVID-19. She died 10 days later, one of at least two residents of the Westbury Conyers nursing home to perish in an outbreak.

Burden's daughters blame the Conyers, Georgia, nursing home for their mother's death, saying administrators kept the family in the dark about Burden's being exposed to the virus and quarantined as a presumptive case. But the state has essentially blocked them from going to court.

Georgia is one of at least 34 states that have shielded nursing homes — along with other health providers and private businesses — from lawsuits over coronavirus deaths and infections during the pandemic, citing unforeseen challenges and economic hardships.

Many laws say providers can be sued only for COVID-19 deaths resulting from "gross negligence" — a legal standard that's greater than ordinary negligence, which can include carelessness, but falls short of causing intentional harm.

"They're saying negligent care is OK," said Sam Brooks of the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care, which advocates for nursing home residents. "This creates a standard that every nursing home resident could be subjected to harmful care without repercussions."

The day that Burden died, Oct. 22, government inspectors reported her nursing home had done such a poor job controlling infections that residents were in "immediate jeopardy" of injury or death. Inspectors found the home had failed to report an outbreak that sickened at least 23 residents, placed infected residents in rooms close to uninfected ones and botched coronavirus test processing.

Ron Westbury, one of the nursing home's owners who assumed administrator duties after the outbreak, said by email that Westbury Conyers has taken corrective actions since then and shared a letter from state regulators saying a visit Jan. 21 found the home in "substantial compliance."

Burden's family called multiple law firms, hoping one would help them file suit. But each time they heard the same response: Attorneys weren't taking cases involving the coronavirus in nursing homes because Georgia's governor had granted them immunity from most lawsuits by executive order in April. Legislators later wrote that protection into state law.

"My aunt, she was so heartbroken, and she kept asking, 'Is there anybody who will help us? They need

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to be held accountable," said Theresa Burrough, one of Burden's daughters.

Atlanta attorney Jeff Harris said his firm gets about 10 calls a day related to coronavirus deaths and injuries but Georgia's law makes such cases nearly impossible to win.

"The worst thing you can do for somebody is give them false hope," Harris said. "But it's hard to tell them you've got no case."

Nursing homes say they have worked tirelessly, with limited staff and resources, to protect residents who are particularly vulnerable. According to the COVID Tracking Project, the virus has killed roughly 162,000 nursing home residents and workers — more than 1 in 3 U.S. virus deaths.

"Compounded with an excessive litigation environment, thousands of long-term care facilities would be forced to close their doors, in turn, displacing tens of thousands of vulnerable residents," said Beth Martino, spokeswoman for the American Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes.

The AARP says it's working to defeat proposals in 11 states that would either enact new legal shields or extend the effective dates of existing ones.

In Kansas, lawmakers are considering a proposal to grant nursing homes immunity from coronavirus-related lawsuits that would apply retroactively to any cases filed since March 12, the day after the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic.

"It's obviously not fair," said Gordon Grohmann Jr., who has a lawsuit pending against an assisted living facility in Prairie Valley, Kansas, where his father got infected with the coronavirus.

He said staff at the Brighton Gardens long-term care home failed to notice 88-year-old Gordon Grohmann Sr. had become sick until relatives heard him wheezing and gasping on the phone and learned he was too weak to walk. Within a couple of days, on April 29, Grohmann's family insisted he be taken to a hospital, where he tested positive for COVID-19. He died May 1.

On May 11, the Kansas agency that oversees nursing homes reported Brighton Gardens put residents in "immediate jeopardy" when a nurse's aide worked an entire shift in mid-April after reporting coughing and other virus symptoms as well as exposure to an infected person. Under CDC protocols, the worker should have been sent home. The worker tested positive for the coronavirus a few days later, and infections were confirmed in at least three residents in the period Grohmann got sick.

Grohmann had been on lockdown inside his two-room apartment since March, his son said, with no visitors except for staff bringing his medication and cleaning the room.

"They brought it to him, for crying out loud," Grohmann said. "Nobody had access to him but them."

Brighton Gardens' parent company, Sunrise Senior Living, declined to comment on Grohmann's death, citing the pending lawsuit. In a statement, Denise Falco, Sunrise's vice president of operations, said "appropriate, corrective action" had been taken in response to any problems identified by inspectors.

At the Georgia nursing home, Burden had been known as a social ambassador, zipping from room-to-room in her motorized wheelchair to visit residents who couldn't leave their beds. When the pandemic struck and her daughters could no longer visit, she assured them by phone she was wearing a mask at all times.

"She slept in it. She wouldn't take it off," Burrough said. "And sometimes she would wear two."

Burrough said the family later learned that her mother's roommate had been hospitalized with the virus before Burden became ill and they weren't told Burden had been quarantined as a presumed coronavirus case.

She said she sees little incentive for nursing homes to improve if they're absolved from liability and has considered suing Westbury Conyers for just \$1.

"I just want a judge to tell them they were wrong," she said.

WHO expert group recommends use of AstraZeneca vaccine

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Independent experts advising the World Health Organization about immunization on Wednesday recommended the use of AstraZeneca's vaccine even in countries that turned up worrying coronavirus variants in their populations.

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The WHO experts' advice is used by health care officials worldwide, but doesn't amount to a green light for the United Nations and its partners to ship the vaccine to countries that have signed up to receive the shots through a global initiative. That approval could come after separate WHO group meetings on Friday and Monday to assess whether an emergency-use listing for the AstraZeneca vaccine is warranted.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is important because it forms the bulk of the stockpile acquired so far by the U.N.-backed effort known as COVAX, which aims to deploy coronavirus vaccines to people globally. COVAX plans to start shipping hundreds of millions of doses of the vaccine worldwide later this month, but that is contingent on WHO approval for the shot, vaccine stocks and countries' readiness to receive it.

But the vaccine has faced rising concerns. After an early study suggested that it might be less effective against a variant first seen in South Africa, the South African government scrambled to tweak its COVID-19 vaccination program.

"Even if there is a reduction in the possibility of this vaccine having a full impact in its protection capacity, especially against severe disease, there is no reason not to recommend its use even in countries that have the circulation of the variants," said Dr. Alejandro Cravioto, chair of the WHO's expert group.

Instead of rolling out 1 million AstraZeneca doses as planned, South Africa's health minister said Wednesday that the government would start immunizing health workers with the still-unlicensed shot from Johnson & Johnson.

The expert group's recommendations about the AstraZeneca vaccine, which was developed at Oxford University in Britain, largely mirror those issued earlier by the European Medicines Agency and Britain's drug regulator.

Cravioto said the AstraZeneca vaccine should be used in older age groups despite the lack of solid data, similar to advice from the EMA and Britain.

"That means people over 65 years of age should be given the vaccination," he said.

Countries including Germany, France and Belgium, however, have said the AstraZeneca vaccine should not be used in older people, citing insufficient evidence.

The WHO's chief scientist, Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, noted that the AstraZeneca shot requires storage at refrigerator temperatures — not the far colder temperatures required of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine that the group has already recommended for use.

So far, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is the only one to receive a WHO emergency use listing.

The expert group noted that "preliminary analyses" showed the AstraZeneca vaccine had a reduced effectiveness against coronavirus variants that have emerged in Britain and South Africa. Still, the studies were too small to produce definitive results and scientists think the vaccines might still be helpful in reducing severe disease, which would greatly slow the pandemic.

"Any decision to leave vulnerable populations completely unprotected is a risky decision at this point in time," said Michael Head, a senior research fellow at the University of Southampton. "Therefore, it is good to see the WHO recommend the use of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine in all ages groups, including older populations," he said in a statement.

The WHO's expert group also said international travelers shouldn't get preference for vaccine doses, saying that would "counter the principle of equity" while adding there was no evidence yet about whether vaccinations reduced transmission.

Follow AP coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at:

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Russia wants Navalny ally arrested abroad; Lithuania refuses

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Moscow court on Wednesday ordered the arrest of a top ally of Russian opposition

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leader Alexei Navalny, but Lithuania, where the associate lives, bluntly rejected the demand to take him into custody.

The action against Leonid Volkov by the Basmany District Court was seen as part of an effort by authorities to squelch demonstrations demanding the release of Navalny, a top Kremlin foe who has been jailed since Jan. 17.

Volkov, a chief strategist for Navalny, was charged with encouraging minors to take part in unauthorized rallies, which could land him in jail for up to three years. He had already been put on an international wanted list.

Volkov, who has lived abroad since 2019, has rejected the charges, and Lithuania's government has refused to carry out the Russian court's order.

"Using international tools for politically motivated prosecution is a wrong practice," Lithuanian Interior minister Agne Bilotaite said.

"This raises serious doubts about Russia's membership in these organizations," she said, referring to the Russian arrest warrant sent through Interpol.

Navalny, 44, an anti-corruption investigator who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's most prominent critic, was arrested upon returning from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusation.

Protests across Russia drew tens of thousands of people to the streets for two straight weekends in January in the largest show of discontent in years. More protests rocked Moscow and St. Petersburg after a Moscow court on Feb. 2 sentenced Navalny to two years and eight months in prison for violating terms of his probation while recuperating in Germany.

That stems from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that Navalny has rejected as fabricated and the European Court of Human Rights has ruled to be unlawful. He described his new imprisonment as "Putin's personal revenge" for surviving and exposing the assassination plot.

The authorities responded to protests with a sweeping crackdown, detaining about 11,000 people across Russia, many of whom were later fined or handed jail sentences ranging from 7 to 15 days. They also have moved to isolate key members of Navalny's team, putting several of his top associates under house arrests for two months without access to the internet.

In a shift of strategy amid the crackdown, Volkov said last week that the pro-Navalny demonstrations should pause until the spring, arguing that an attempt to maintain rallies each weekend would only lead to thousands more arrests and wear out participants.

On Tuesday, however, he announced a new form of protest, urging residents of big cities to briefly gather in residential courtyards on Sunday with their cellphone flashlights turned on. He argued that the new tactics — similar to ones used by anti-government protesters in neighboring Belarus — would prevent Russian riot police from interfering and allow more people to participate without fearing repressions. The Belarus protests follow the reelection in August of the country's longtime autocratic President Alexander Lukashenko in balloting widely seen as rigged.

Navalny's arrest and the crackdown on protests has further stoked tensions between Russia and the West. The United States and the European Union have urged Russia to release Navalny, but the Kremlin has accused them of meddling in Russia's internal affairs and warned that it won't listen to Western criticism of Navalny's sentencing and police actions against his supporters.

Associated Press writer Liudas Dapkus in Vilnius, Lithuania, contributed.

Bezos and Bloomberg among top 50 US charity donors for 2020

By MARIA DI MENTO and BEN GOSE of The Chronicle of Philanthropy
The Chronicle of Philanthropy
As the world grappled with COVID-19, a recession and a racial reckoning, the ultrawealthy gave to a broader set of causes than ever before — bestowing multimillion-dollar gifts on food pantries, historically Black colleges and universities and organizations that serve the poor and the homeless, according to the

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Chronicle of Philanthropy's annual rankings of the 50 Americans who gave the most to charity last year. Another cause that got outside attention from billionaire philanthropists: Climate change. Jeff Bezos topped the list by donating \$10 billion to launch the Bezos Earth Fund. Bezos, who last week announced he was stepping down as Amazon CEO to devote more time to philanthropy and other projects, also contributed \$100 million to Feeding America, the organization that supplies more than 200 food banks.

No. 2 on the list was Bezos's ex-wife, MacKenzie Scott, who gave \$5.7 billion in 2020 by asking community leaders to help identify 512 organizations for seven- and eight-figure gifts, including food banks, human-service organizations, and racial-justice charities.

Another donor who gave big to pandemic causes and racial-justice efforts was Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter, who ranked No. 5. He put \$1.1 billion into a fund that by year's end had distributed at least \$330 million to more than 100 nonprofits.

The financier Charles Schwab and his wife, Helen (No. 24), gave \$65 million to address homelessness in San Francisco. Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings and wife, Patty Quillin (No. 14), gave \$120 million for financial aid for students at historically Black colleges and universities. Michael Jordan, the basketball great (No. 31), pledged \$50 million to racial and social-justice groups.

"When I look at the events of the last year, there was an awakening for the philanthropic sector," says Nick Tedesco, president of the National Center for Family Philanthropy. "Donors supported community-led efforts of recovery and resiliency, particularly those led by people of color."

Giving experts say they think the trend toward broader giving is likely to persist.

"I don't think this approach is just a 12-month moment that started with COVID and continued following George Floyd and is going to recede," says Melissa Berman, president of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, which counsels donors around the world. "There has been change building among private donors."

All told, the 50 biggest donors contributed \$24.7 billion in 2020, compared with \$15.8 billion in 2019. Still, those gifts come from a small share of the billionaire class. Only 23 of the people on the Forbes 400 gave enough to qualify for the list. Many of the multimillion-dollar donations came from people far less wealthy, like Gordon Rausser, a former dean of natural resources at the University of California at Berkeley.

The Chronicle's rankings are based on the total amount philanthropists awarded in 2020. The information is based on extensive research with donors, their beneficiaries, and public records.

The No. 3 donor was Michael Bloomberg, who contributed \$1.6 billion to arts, education, public health, and many other causes. Nike founder Phil and Penelope Knight were next, donating \$1.4 billion, \$900.7 million of it to their Knight Foundation.

The \$1 billion-plus of giving by each of the top five on the Philanthropy 50 matches last year's record. No more than three donors gave \$1 billion or more in any of the previous years.

Sixteen donors in this year's list — nearly a third of the Philanthropy 50 — made their fortunes in technology, and 20 of them live in California.

Joe Gebbia (No. 47), the 39-year-old co-founder of Airbnb, has seen his net worth shoot up to around \$12 billion following his company's initial public offering in December. During 2020, he gave \$25 million to two San Francisco charities that are tackling homelessness and helping people who have suffered economically due to the pandemic.

"I've been incredibly fortunate and believe that comes with the responsibility of giving back," Gebbia says. "Where will I take it? The sky is the limit."

At a time when tech billionaires' wealth is compounding and many working people are still suffering from the pandemic's fallout, philanthropic expectations have never been higher. David Beasley, executive director of the United Nations World Food Program, highlighted the disparate effects of the pandemic in a January interview on the PBS NewsHour.

"During the pandemic, billionaires made \$5.2 billion in increased wealth per day," he said. "All we are asking for is \$5 billion to avert famine around the world. I don't think that's too much to ask."

Elon Musk, whose \$180 billion fortune puts him neck-and-neck with Bezos for richest person in the world, is not on the Philanthropy 50. Musk has faced criticism for his meager lifetime donations, estimated in a recent Vox article at just 0.05 percent of his current net worth.

If small and midsize charities were the notable winners in 2020, does that make large universities the losers? Hardly. Colleges and universities received \$2.2 billion from Philanthropy 50 donors in 2020.

But Benjamin Soskis, a research associate in the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, says the most striking change with this year's Philanthropy 50 list is that it presents a plurality of options for giving.

"There's a big difference between a hypothetical 'Why didn't you give to an HBCU instead of Harvard?' and today's list, where you can point to donors who actually did that."

More details about the Philanthropy 50 are available at philanthropy.com.

This article was provided to The Associated Press by the Chronicle of Philanthropy. Maria Di Mento is a senior reporter at the Chronicle. Email: maria.dimento@chonicle.com. The AP and the Chronicle receive support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The AP and the Chronicle are solely responsible for all content.

Virus dims Carnival joy and commerce on a New Orleans street

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — During last year's Carnival season, tourists at the Elysian Fields Inn gathered over breakfast to talk about parades from the night before. At NOLA Art Bar, they sipped cocktails and watched a parade go by. At Kajun's Pub, many revelers started and ended Fat Tuesday in the bar.

Not this year. COVID-19 is tamping down the joy — and the revenue — associated with Carnival season in New Orleans. Parades that normally draw thousands in the weeks before Fat Tuesday — which falls on Feb. 16 this year — have been canceled.

In this city where music, food and cultural celebrations are interlocking blocks of the hospitality industry, bars and restaurants that usually overflow with free-spending customers are closed or operating at limited capacity. Live music is all but dead.

The toll of this year's toned-down Mardi Gras is evident on St. Claude Avenue, an off-the-beaten-track stretch that has become a destination in recent years. Many of the street's small business owners have weathered so much already that even as coronavirus vaccinations ramp up, they're prepared for a long wait before business gets back to normal.

Michelle Hagan and her husband own the nine-room inn just steps off St. Claude. Last year, one of the groups known as a krewe paraded right by the house with a procession called Chewbacchus — an homage to a "Star Wars" character. She described it as one of the best nights since the couple bought the inn.

"I was really hoping for that again this year. But obviously, that's not happening," she said. "It'll be very different."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Small businesses around the world are fighting for survival amid the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Whether they make it will affect not just local economies but the fabric of communities. Associated Press journalists tell their stories in the series "Small Business Struggles."

It's difficult to measure the exact economic effect of a holiday that stretches from Jan. 6 and ends on a Tuesday in February or March. A Tulane University study looked at the 12-day period leading up to Fat Tuesday in 2014 and determined that Mardi Gras had a roughly \$164 million direct economic impact on the New Orleans economy.

Jennifer and Matt Johnson bought what is now the Carnival Lounge on St. Claude in summer 2019, and the 2020 Mardi Gras season was their first as business owners. The lounge was becoming popular for live music and Brazilian food.

Hundreds of people passed through on Fat Tuesday. By the time St. Patrick's Day rolled around, the pandemic shut everything down. They still have the Guinness beer that was never served.

They cautiously reopened after Labor Day at restricted capacity and without live music. That lasted until

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about November, when they started to notice a renewed cautiousness in customers. So they closed yet again and likely won't reopen until it's clear that live music can resume.

The two are optimistic about vaccines and the passage of the Save Our Stages legislation, which aims to get money to struggling music venues. They also understand that live music will probably be one of the last things to return after the virus is fully defeated.

"I think people who didn't realize music had an impact on their life now do," Jennifer said.

DJ Johnson's business — NOLA Art Bar — opened just six weeks before the pandemic-related shutdowns last March. It's been a struggle, but he's still open nearly a year later.

He's offering food — something that wasn't originally part of the business plan. And bit by bit, he's continued construction on a combined bookstore and coffeeshop next door that he plans to open Feb. 20. But he said there's no rhyme or reason as to which days are good and which are bad.

"It's harder because no matter how late I stay up, no matter how many different ideas I throw out, no matter how innovative I am," it's still a pandemic, he said.

Mardi Gras wasn't a huge business event for Kristopher Doll's Shank Charcuterie. The butcher shop and restaurant opened in 2015 and was mostly frequented by locals, Doll said. But one customer — a local musician — came in each year two months ahead of Fat Tuesday to order a full prime rib rack so it could be properly aged before a big pre-Lent feast.

After a months long struggle, Doll closed his doors in November and is now looking for work. He said he was able to stay afloat until late summer, when a weekly boost in unemployment benefits ran out and business plummeted. October's Hurricane Zeta was the last straw. The storm cut power for five days and forced him to throw out thousands of dollars in meat.

"It's a sort of black swan set of circumstances," he said. "I did literally everything I could think of to try to keep that place open."

JoAnn Guidos opened Kajun's Pub on St. Claude in 2004, closed for a few months after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, and then literally never closed again. The bar was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week until the pandemic.

"It's the eeriest feeling, you know, when you stick the key in the door and lock it, because the last time that door's been locked was two weeks after Katrina," she said.

Guidos has been doing needed renovations while thinking about how to reopen — slowly — and talking with the restaurant owner next door about how to use the patio they share. It will take a while before things are back to normal, not just because of the virus' unpredictability, but also because her customer base has been financially hammered by the pandemic.

"We're a service industry city," she said. "A lot of service industry people are hurting very badly."

Since 2012, Catherine James has owned Faubourg Wines, a high-quality wine store that prides itself on not being snooty. Before the pandemic, she employed eight people and often socialized with customers who came in for wine tastings or for \$5 glasses. Now a staff of four takes orders online or at a counter set up on the street so customers don't have to come inside.

She got a \$15,000 grant under the CARES Act, which allows her to pay people if they need to stay home — for example if they think they've been exposed to the coronavirus. Her goal is to find a way forward.

"This shop is my only source of income, and I've got a young child to take care of," she said. And her employees would be hard pressed to find other jobs if she closed.

Back at the Elysian Fields Inn, Hagan misses her regular guests. Many return each year for Mardi Gras parades or Jazz Fest, which was canceled last year and postponed this year.

She has considered closing. But she gets joy from running the business and helping people experience New Orleans.

"There have been moments where I thought, 'Oh, you know, I could just enjoy my grandson and live a normal ... life,'" she said. But then she thinks: "I want my guests to come back ... I want to keep doing this."

Learn more about how small businesses around the world are coping with the pandemic at: <https://>

apnews.com/hub/small-business-struggles

Follow Santana on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/ruskygal>

'Emaciated' survivors hint at worse in Ethiopia's Tigray

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — "Many, many severe cases of malnutrition" are being reported in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region, Red Cross officials said Wednesday, as 80% of Tigray's 6 million people are unreachable in the fourth month of fighting and "emaciated" women and children fill displacement camps.

Reports of people already starving to death might just be a handful, but "after a month it will be in the thousands," warned Ethiopian Red Cross president Ato Abera Tola. After two months, he said, it will be tens of thousands.

Fighting continues between Ethiopian and allied forces and those of the now-fugitive Tigray government that had dominated the country's leadership for nearly 30 years.

The conflict broke out just before the harvest in the largely agricultural region and in the midst of a locust outbreak. Much of the Tigray population has been living off whatever resources they have since early November, and many people are on the run, leaving possessions behind.

Nearly 3.8 million people in Tigray need help, Abera said.

He described seeing displaced women and children in the northern town of Shire who were "all emaciated ... their skin is really on their bones." And these are the people who were able to escape to the camps, he said.

Once humanitarian workers are able to reach Tigray's rural areas, "there we will see a more devastating crisis," Abera said. "We have to get prepared for the worst, is what I'm saying."

The Tigray regional capital, Mekele, "is, a paradox to say, a very lucky place," added Francesco Rocca, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It now hosts a quarter-million displaced people.

Rocca described a "very difficult visit" to Tigray in which accessible hospitals are "barely working" with no medicines, no food for patients and no psychosocial support — "something surreal" after being looted or damaged.

"I have never seen a place where a simple antibiotic is not present," he later told The Associated Press in an interview, expressing shock at "the systematic aggression to health facilities."

Vaccines have expired. There are no HIV or tuberculosis drugs. "This is unacceptable," Rocca said. In the camps for displaced people, "there is a high risk of an outbreak of cholera or other diseases."

And it is "ridiculous" to speak of the COVID-19 pandemic when some 30 displaced people are forced to live in a classroom, he said.

Rocca repeated the plea for more access for humanitarian workers. "Slowly, slowly, support is arriving but it's still not enough," he said.

Asked what it will take for the conflict to end, he told the AP that "I think it will take a long time. The wounds of this conflict are very deep, this is my feeling. ... Given the complexity of the crisis and presence of other actors on the ground, it's really difficult to predict how this will end and how long it will be protracted."

This version corrects the second reference to the Ethiopian Red Cross president to Abera.

Surging virus in French African outpost reveals inequalities

By SONY CHAMSIDINE and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

MAMOUDZOU, Mayotte (AP) — Mayotte's main tourist office stands nearly empty, a lonely tropical outpost overlooking a people-less port. Its only hospital, however, is overwhelmed.

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The demand for intensive care beds is more than quadruple the supply, as medical workers fight to contain the French Indian Ocean territory's worst coronavirus outbreak yet.

The Mayotte islands are the poorest corner of the European Union, tucked between Madagascar and the mainland coast of Mozambique in southern Africa - and were the last spot in France to receive any coronavirus vaccines.

Local authorities feel forgotten and say their difficulties in fighting the virus reflect long-standing inequalities between France's majority-white mainland and its far-flung multiracial former colonies.

The French army is sending in medical workers and a few ICU beds, and President Emmanuel Macron's government pledged Wednesday to step up vaccine deliveries. But the aid will only go so far on the islands where masks are a luxury, where nearly a third of the region's 300,000 people have no running water and where a new lockdown is suffocating livelihoods.

"We used to work at the big market to sell things, to have money to feed our families," said Ahamada Soulaïmana Soilihi, a 40-year-old father of six living in a shantytown in Mayotte's capital city of Mamoudzou.

Then last week, authorities shut down Mayotte's economy, ordering people to stay home to combat fast-growing cases of the virus variant dominant in South Africa.

"How can we live without work, without being able to move, without anything?" Soilihi asked.

While ocean waves lap empty beaches and police patrol the quiet streets of Mamoudzou's business district, many people in Soilihi's Bandrajou neighborhood seem unaware of lockdown rules or social distancing measures. Clusters of children play barefoot on the dusty ground, girls carry buckets on their heads to fetch water from a collective pump, an older woman at an informal street stall braids a younger woman's hair. Almost no one wears a mask.

Health workers acknowledge there's no easy solution.

The virus is attacking Mayotte in a "brutal and rapid" way, Dominique Voynet, the head of the regional health service, told The Associated Press. "All indicators are getting darker and darker ... people are dropping like flies."

Mayotte's weekly infection rate is now nearly four times higher than the national French average. The territory has registered 11,447 virus cases since the pandemic began — a third of them over the past two weeks — and at least 68 deaths, double the per capita virus death rate nationwide. Many cases and deaths are believed to go uncounted.

That made it all the more disappointing that Mayotte was the last French overseas region to get a vaccine shipment, a month after the first doses landed in Paris, more than 8,400 kilometers (5,000 miles) away.

"We were equipped much later than other (French) regions, to my great dismay," Voynet said.

The French Foreign Legion delivered the super-freezer needed to store Mayotte's initial deliveries of 950 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines. More shipments have trickled in, and the territory has so far vaccinated 2,400 people, or less than 1% of its population.

In Paris, government spokesman Gabriel Attal initially argued that Mayotte's young population — just 4% are over 60 — meant the region was a low priority for vaccination, noting its "demographic and geographic realities which are obviously different" from the mainland.

But now that infections are raging, France's central government is increasingly worried.

Doctors are transporting several ICU patients per day to nearby Reunion island. The French military on Sunday flew in medical workers. The regional health service is organizing water deliveries to encourage the poorest to stay home.

Many Indian Ocean islands and countries on Africa's mainland are facing similar — or worse — outbreaks and vaccine delays.

Madagascar, with 27 million people, does not yet have vaccines. Mozambique, with 30 million people, has imposed a curfew to battle a surge driven by the variant dominant in South Africa, and doesn't have any vaccines either. Neither do the nearby Comoros islands for its population of 850,000.

The largest country in the region, South Africa, with 60 million people, has reported more than 1.47 million cases, including over 46,800 deaths. Its health minister announced Wednesday the government

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will be giving out the as-yet unapproved Johnson & Johnson vaccine to health care workers after a small test showed that the AstraZeneca vaccine offers only minimal protection against the variant dominant in the country.

Mayotte lawmaker Mansour Kamardine doesn't understand why his homeland is in such dire straits.

When the rest of the Comoros islands chain voted in the 1970s for independence from France after a century-and-a-half of colonial rule, Mayotte residents voted overwhelmingly to stay French.

Today, Mayotte has the same administrative status as any region on mainland France — one of the world's richest countries. The territory uses the euro as currency and is represented in the European Parliament. A 2003 law promises "liberty, equality and fraternity" to all people on France's overseas lands.

But when the virus hit, "Mayotte was forgotten," Kamardine told the AP. "We are far from the eyes, we are far from the heart" of French power.

He wrote to the government to plead for more permanent ICU beds, to no avail. The whole territory has just 16.

Mayotte is among nine territories — mostly French — with a special status in the EU as an "outermost region," which have access to development funds aimed at reducing the economic gap with the European continent left over from colonial times.

But with Europe now facing its own vaccine woes and protracted economic crisis, Mayotte's prospects look dim.

Piles of red plastic Coca-Cola chairs collect dust in a Mamoudzou cafe, shaded by palm trees, where a sign points toward Tokyo, 11,230 kilometers (nearly 7,000 miles) away. Metal grates hide storefronts. Business travel and tourism have plunged as the pandemic wears on.

At the Caribou restaurant, bar and hotel, Chaima Nombamba manages the takeout counter — the only piece of the business still allowed to operate.

The hotel shut down because of "a flood of cancellations." Most of the restaurant staff is on temporary unemployment — a French government coronavirus program that those in the informal economy don't enjoy.

"Yes, the health crisis is very serious, and there is a deadly impact for some of us. But is it the moment to punish small businesses, notably our sector of activity, which is really hit hard, which is being killed bit by bit by little fires?" she asked.

"We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We can't make plans or anticipate certain things because it's changing every day," she said. "So where is the solution?"

Angela Charlton reported from Paris. Andrew Meldrum in Johannesburg contributed to this report.

Ethnic clashes in Darfur could reignite Sudan's old conflict

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sayid Ismael Baraka, a Sudanese-American visiting from Atlanta, was playing with his three children, and his wife was making tea, when the gunmen stormed into his family village in Sudan's Darfur region.

The gunmen went through the village of Jabal, shooting people. The 36-year-old Baraka was shot to death as he rushed to help a wounded neighbor, his wife said. The attack on Jan. 16 left more than two dozen dead in and around the village.

They were among 470 people killed in a days-long explosion of violence between Arab and non-Arab tribes last month in Darfur. The bloodletting stoked fears that Darfur, scene of a vicious war in the 2000s, could slide back into conflict and raised questions over the government's efforts to implement a peace deal and protect civilians.

Baraka's wife, Safiya Mohammed, blamed the attack on "militias and janjaweed" — a name that harkens back to dark times for Darfur.

The Arab militias known as janjaweed became notorious in 2003 and 2004 for their terror campaigns, killing and raping civilians, when the Khartoum government unleashed them to put down an insurgency

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by Darfur's non-Arab residents. Some 300,000 people were killed and 2.7 million were displaced, before the violence gradually declined.

Sudan is on a fragile path to democracy after a popular uprising led the military to overthrow longtime autocratic President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. A transitional military-civilian government is now in power, trying to end decades-long rebellions in various parts of the country.

The latest burst of violence came just two weeks after the joint U.N.-African Union peacekeeping force that had been in Darfur for a decade ended its mandate, at the request of the transitional government. It was replaced with a much smaller, political mission.

"Anyone could have predicted that as soon as the U.N. troops departed, some of these militias would begin attacking," said John Prendergast, co-founder of The Sentry, an organization that tracks corruption and human rights violations in Africa.

The bloodshed followed a familiar scenario: a dispute between two people or a minor crime turning into all-out ethnic clashes. It first grew out of a fistfight on Jan. 15 between two men in a camp for displaced people in Genena, the capital of West Darfur province. An Arab man was stabbed to death. The suspect, from the African Massalit tribe, was arrested, but the dead man's family, from the Arab Rizeigat tribe, subsequently attacked people in the Krinding camp and other areas across Genena.

Three days later, clashes renewed in South Darfur province between Rizeigat and the non-Arab Falata tribe over the killing of a shepherd in al-Twaiyel village.

The fighting in the two provinces killed around 470 people, including Baraka and three aid workers, according to the United Nations and local officials. More than 120,000 people, mostly women and children, fled their homes, including at least 4,300 who crossed into neighboring Chad, the U.N. said. The transitional government deployed additional troops to West Darfur and South Darfur to try to contain the situation.

Mohammed Osman, a Sudan researcher at Human Rights Watch, said witnesses said the government forces' response was too little, too late. "The government repeated promises of protecting civilians and holding perpetrators accountable," he said.

A government spokesman didn't answer repeated calls and messages seeking comment.

War first erupted in Darfur in 2003 when non-Arab Africans rebelled, accusing the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum of discrimination. Al-Bashir's government is accused of retaliating by arming local nomadic Arab tribes and unleashing the janjaweed on civilians — a charge it denies.

The International Criminal Court charged al-Bashir with war crimes and genocide over Darfur, but it remains unclear whether the transitional government will hand him over to face justice in The Hague, Netherlands.

In December, the joint U.N.-African Union envoy for Darfur, Jeremiah Mamabolo, cautioned that mistrust still runs deep in Darfur.

The people of Darfur "have been betrayed," Mamabolo told The Associated Press. "A lot of crimes and injustice have been committed against them, so they feel insecure."

Last year, the transitional government struck a peace deal in October with the Sudan Revolutionary Front, a coalition of several armed rebel groups — including from the Darfur region.

The government and rebel groups have said they will deploy a 12,000-strong Civilian Protection Force to the region. But some worry it could include former militia members who may have taken part in atrocities.

Baraka's brother, Usumain Baraka, who settled in Israel, is skeptical the interim rulers can bring about peace. "The current government of Sudan is run by former generals who designed and carried out the genocide in 2003," he said.

Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the deputy head of Sudan's ruling sovereign council, leads the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, which grew out of the Darfur militias. Rights groups say his forces burned villages and raped and killed civilians during a series of counterinsurgency campaigns over the last decade.

A report by U.N. experts covering March to December said tribal clashes and attacks on civilians increased sharply "in both frequency and scale," particularly in South Darfur and West Darfur. Acts of sexual and gender-based violence continue to be committed daily and go unaddressed, the report found.

For Baraka's family, his death has shattered their plans for the future.

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Baraka fled Darfur when the war began, going first to Chad, then Libya and Ghana. From there, he was resettled as a refugee in the U.S., where he gained citizenship in 2015. In Atlanta, he ran a trucking business, his brother said, through which he supported his extended family in Sudan. He was also studying to become a medical assistant.

"He was the backbone of our family," said his brother.

Baraka had married his wife on a trip home to Jabal, where she had their children. He had arrived in December to register his newly born third child at the American Embassy and start the process of bringing all of them to the United States — now that the Trump administration ban on travel from Sudan has ended.

Now those plans are gone, said his wife.

"Nothing remains but memories," she said.

This story was first published on February 9, 2021. It was updated on February 10, 2021 to make clear that only Baraka's wife said Baraka was killed as he was trying to help a neighbor.

In an anxious winter, the garden still offers consolation

By JULIA RUBIN Associated Press

Deep into this pandemic winter, it can be hard to remember what a refuge gardens were last spring and summer.

In those frightening early days of COVID-19, victory gardens and household vegetable plots sprang up all over. Seed companies reported shortages. Hardware stores saw a run on garden tools. Millions found comfort, release and a sense of safety outdoors with their hands in the dirt.

That feels like a long time ago. We dreaded this winter, and we weren't wrong: January was the deadliest month yet from the virus. Political violence shook Americans' sense of security and shared purpose. Businesses and household incomes are struggling. And the human interactions that might help us process all this anxiety and grief are discouraged.

Yet the garden is still there, hunkering down too. And it can still help. Even in winter, it can provide solace, inspiration and perspective. Fresh air. And an assurance that spring is coming.

"From December to March, there are for many of us three gardens — the garden outdoors, the garden of pots and bowls in the house, and the garden of the mind's eye," Katherine S. White, an editor and writer at *The New Yorker* and an avid gardener, wrote several decades ago.

As we round the bend into February, and with the hope that vaccines will bring real change, all three of those gardens offer a promise of light.

THE GARDEN OUTDOORS

To the eye, there's little in a winter garden that can compare to spring and summer's binge-worthy drama of growing, blooming and buzzing. Only the most serious gardeners (or those in warmer climates) can keep the growing going outside, using cold frames, fabric or plastic tunnels, and other techniques.

But there are smaller joys to be had. The trees' bare branches make for beautiful silhouettes, and better views of birds and sunsets. Landscape photographer Larry Lederman, author of the recent book "Garden Portraits," recommends getting to know your garden better in the winter, when "everything is bare and you can see the bones of the landscape."

More significantly, gardens remind us that winter is just one season in a cycle. Death is everywhere in a garden, all year round, but it makes rebirth possible. The species keep going.

"The return of spring each year can be endlessly relied on, and in (plants) not dying when we die, we have a sense of goodness going forward," Sue Stratis-Smith writes in her new book, "The Well-Gardened Mind: The Restorative Power of Nature."

"This," she says, "is the garden's most enduring consolation."

Of course, the constancy of the seasons these days can't be taken for granted as in the past. So winter is also a good time for reevaluating our own yard-size battles against climate change. We can start or continue composting. And we can research services, products and methods to help make next year's

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garden — and those beyond — more sustainable.

THE GARDEN INDOORS

Houseplants are hot now, and Instagram is full of plant influencers posting photos.

New technologies make it easier to grow plants anywhere indoors, with or without soil. The plants offer not only beauty, but the rewards of caring for living things and seeing them grow.

Indoor vegetable gardening, too, has become especially popular both as a food source and as a family activity. For instance, you can buy organic mini-farms in Mason jars, cans and boxes — all intended for the windowsill. You can grow mushrooms in their cardboard box with just a spritzer, or set up a large jar of tomatoes adding nothing but water.

Sales of backyard greenhouses and grow lights are up, and seed companies are already reporting another year of high demand. Johnny's Selected Seeds, a high-end, mail-order seller based in Winslow, Maine, recently suspended orders from home gardeners temporarily, saying that because of COVID, order volume "has exceeded our capacity to pack seed and to ship orders quickly."

Some gardeners have already started planting the seeds of cold-weather vegetables in flats indoors — seeing the sprouts of cabbage, onions, spinach and more. In just a couple months, perhaps, they can think about transplanting them outdoors if they have the space.

As the Vermont Bean Seed Company says in its 2021 spring catalog: "In each seed and seed-bearing fruit, there is a promise of a new beginning."

THE GARDEN OF THE MIND'S EYE

Which brings us to the third garden: the one we imagine and plan.

"I shall never have the garden I have in my mind, but that for me is the joy of it; certain things can never be realized and so all the more reason to attempt them," the author/gardener Jamaica Kincaid once said.

The new seed catalogs carry the promise that, this year, you can make your garden better. Maybe that means converting more lawn to flowers and vegetables, choosing more native plants, reducing water use, putting in paths and water features. A garden is never finished.

Planning it is creative and hopeful. And as our second pandemic spring approaches, those hopes are being buoyed by the rollout of vaccines, too.

As Amanda Gorman said in her inauguration poem last month, in a shoutout to Lin-Manuel Miranda, who was quoting George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, who were quoting the Bible: "Everyone shall sit under their own vine, and fig tree, And no one shall make them afraid."

The garden as metaphor for peace, safety, prosperity, calm. Not a bad place for the mind's eye to rest, particularly in this most unsettling of winters.

Julia Rubin is an editor and writer in the Lifestyles and Entertainment departments of The Associated Press. Follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/ruliejubin>

Chinese spacecraft enters Mars' orbit, joining Arab ship

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese spacecraft went into orbit around Mars on Wednesday on an expedition to land a rover on the surface and scout for signs of ancient life, authorities announced in a landmark step in the country's most ambitious deep-space mission yet.

The arrival of Tianwen-1 after a journey of seven months and nearly 300 million miles (475 million kilometers) is part of an unusual burst of activity at Mars: A spacecraft from the United Arab Emirates swung into orbit around the red planet on Tuesday, and a U.S. rover is set to arrive next week.

China's space agency said the five-ton combination orbiter and rover fired its engine to reduce its speed, allowing it to be captured by Mars' gravity.

"Entering orbit has been successful ... making it our country's first artificial Mars satellite," the agency announced.

The mission is bold even for a space program that has racked up a steady stream of achievements and

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brought prestige to China's ruling Communist Party.

If all goes as planned, the rover will separate from the spacecraft in a few months and touch down safely on Mars, making China only the second nation to pull off such a feat. The rover, a solar-powered vehicle about the size of a golf cart, will collect data on underground water and look for evidence that the planet may have once harbored microscopic life.

Tianwen, the title of an ancient poem, means "Quest for Heavenly Truth."

Landing a spacecraft on Mars is notoriously difficult. Smashed Russian and European spacecraft litter the landscape along with a failed U.S. lander. About a dozen orbiters missed the mark. In 2011, a Mars-bound Chinese orbiter that was part of a Russian mission didn't make it out of Earth orbit.

Only the U.S. has successfully touched down on Mars — eight times, beginning with two Viking missions in the 1970s. An American lander and rover are in operation today.

China's attempt will involve a parachute, rocket firings and airbags. Its proposed landing site is a vast, rock-strewn plain called Utopia Planitia, where the U.S. Viking 2 lander touched down in 1976.

Before the arrival this week of the Chinese spacecraft and the UAE's orbiter, six other spacecraft were already operating around Mars: three U.S., two European and one Indian.

All three of the latest missions were launched in July to take advantage of the close alignment between Earth and Mars that happens only once every two years.

A NASA rover called Perseverance is aiming for a Feb. 18 landing. It, too, will search for signs of ancient microscopic life, collecting rocks that will be returned to Earth in about a decade.

China's secretive, military-linked space program has racked up a series of achievements. In December, it brought moon rocks back to Earth for the first time since the 1970s. China was also the first country to land a spacecraft on the little-explored far side of the moon in 2019.

China is also building a permanent space station and planning a crewed lunar mission and a possible permanent research base on the moon, though no dates have yet been proposed.

While most contacts with NASA are blocked by Congress and China is not a participant in the International Space Station, it has increasingly cooperated with the European Space Agency and countries such as Argentina, France and Austria. Early on, China cooperated with the Soviet Union and then Russia.

EU chief: Bloc was late, over-confident on vaccine rollout

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — As the European Union surpassed 500,000 people lost to the virus, the EU Commission chief said Wednesday that the bloc's much-criticized vaccine rollout could be partly blamed on the EU being over-optimistic, over-confident and plainly "late."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen defended the EU's overall approach of trying to beat the pandemic with a unified vaccine plan for its 27 nations, even if she admitted mistakes in the strategy to quickly obtain sufficient vaccines for its 447 million citizens.

"We are still not where we want to be. We were late to authorize. We were too optimistic when it came to massive production and perhaps we were too confident that, what we ordered, would actually be delivered on time," von der Leyen told the EU parliament.

On the vaccine authorization, which left the EU three weeks behind Britain in starting its vaccination campaign, von der Leyen promised action. She said the EU would launch a clinical trial network and adapt the approval process to get doses quicker from the labs into the arms of a needy population.

"It's true there are also lessons to be drawn from the procedure we have followed. And we are already drawing them," she told legislators.

The European Medicines Agency has approved three coronavirus vaccines for the bloc so far — from Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford-AstraZeneca — and is reviewing others.

Despite weeks of stinging criticism as the EU's vaccine campaign failed to gain momentum compared to Britain, Israel and the United States, the main parties in the legislature stuck with von der Leyen's approach of moving forward with all member states together.

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"The key decisions were right," said Manfred Weber, the leader of the Christian Democrat European People's Party.

The Socialists and Democrats party leader Iratxe Garcia said "Fiasco, catastrophe, disaster: they ring very true to our citizens," but added her party will stick with von der Leyen on the bloc moving together. "Criticism is necessary but with a constructive spirit."

Von der Leyen's assessment came as the bloc's death toll passed a landmark of 500,000, a stunning statistic in less than a year that fundamentally challenges the bloc's vaunted welfare standards and health care capabilities.

It came as the bloc was fighting off the remnants of a second surge of COVID-19 that has kept nations from Portugal to Finland under all kinds of lockdowns, curfews and restrictions as authorities race to vaccinate as many people as possible.

The last official weekly figures from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control are expected Thursday but Johns Hopkins University produced a daily tally showing EU virus deaths at over 500,800 on Wednesday.

The United States, with a population of 330 million, leads the world's national virus toll with more than 468,000 deaths.

Von der Leyen stuck with her promise to have 70% of the EU's adult population vaccinated by the end of summer and blamed big pharmaceutical companies for not keeping vaccine production up high enough.

"Indeed, industry has to match the groundbreaking pace of science," von der Leyen said. "We fully understand that difficulties will arise in the mass production of vaccines. But Europe has invested billions of euros in capacities in advance, and we urged the member states to plan the vaccine rollout. So now we all need predictability."

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 11, the 42nd day of 2021. There are 323 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On Feb. 11, 2020, the World Health Organization gave the official name of COVID-19 to the disease caused by the coronavirus that had emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan. A group of 195 evacuees was cleared to end a two-week quarantine at a Southern California military base, where they had been staying since flying out of China amid the coronavirus outbreak.

On this date:

In 1812, Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry signed a redistricting law favoring his Democratic-Republican Party — giving rise to the term "gerrymandering."

In 1847, American inventor Thomas Alva Edison was born in Milan, Ohio.

In 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln bade farewell to his adopted hometown of Springfield, Ill., as he headed to Washington for his inauguration.

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin signed the Yalta Agreement, in which Stalin agreed to declare war against Imperial Japan following Nazi Germany's capitulation.

In 1975, Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of Britain's opposition Conservative Party.

In 1979, followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (hoh-MAY'-nee) seized power in Iran.

In 1990, South African Black activist Nelson Mandela was freed after 27 years in captivity.

In 2006, Vice President Dick Cheney accidentally shot and wounded Harry Whittington, a companion

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during a weekend quail-hunting trip in Texas.

In 2008, the Pentagon charged Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (HAH'-leed shayk moh-HAH'-med) and five other detainees at Guantanamo Bay with murder and war crimes in connection with the Sept. 11 attacks.

In 2009, All-Star shortstop Miguel Tejada pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about steroids in baseball. (He was sentenced to a year's probation.) Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., who first went to Congress in 1955, became the longest-serving member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 2012, pop singer Whitney Houston, 48, was found dead in a hotel room bathtub in Beverly Hills, California.

In 2013, with a few words in Latin, Pope Benedict XVI did what no pope had done in more than half a millennium: announced his resignation. The bombshell came during a routine morning meeting of Vatican cardinals. (The 85-year-old pontiff was succeeded by Pope Francis.)

Ten years ago: Egypt exploded with joy after pro-democracy protesters brought down President Hosni Mubarak, whose resignation ended three decades of authoritarian rule.

Five years ago: Surrounded by FBI agents in armored vehicles, the last four occupiers of a national nature preserve in Oregon surrendered, ending a 41-day standoff that left one man dead. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders battled for the crucial backing of black and Hispanic voters during a Democratic debate in Milwaukee.

One year ago: Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders won New Hampshire's Democratic presidential primary, edging moderate Pete Buttigieg. Entrepreneur Andrew Yang and Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet each dropped out of the Democratic presidential race. The four lawyers on the Justice Department team that prosecuted longtime Trump ally Roger Stone quit the case after the department overruled them and said it would seek a reduced amount of prison time for Stone. Actor Jussie Smollett was indicted for a second time on charges of lying to police about a racist and anti-gay attack he allegedly staged on himself in downtown Chicago. A standard poodle named Siba won top honors at the Westminster Kennel Club show in New York.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Conrad Janis is 93. Gospel singer Jimmy Carter is 89. Fashion designer Mary Quant is 87. Bandleader Sergio Mendes is 80. Actor Philip Anglim is 69. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is 68. Actor Catherine Hickland is 65. Rock musician David Uosikkinen (aw-SIK'-ken-ihn) (The Hooters) is 65. Actor Carey Lowell is 60. Singer Sheryl Crow is 59. Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is 57. Actor Jennifer Aniston is 52. Actor Damian Lewis is 50. Actor Marisa Petraro is 49. Singer D'Angelo is 47. Actor Brice Beckham is 45. Rock M-C/vocalist Mike Shinoda (Linkin Park) is 44. Singer-actor Brandy is 42. Country musician Jon Jones (The Eli Young Band) is 41. Actor Matthew Lawrence is 41. R&B singer Kelly Rowland is 40. Actor Natalie Dormer is 39. Singer Aubrey O'Day is 37. Actor Q'orianka (kohr-ee-AHN'-kuh) Kilcher is 31. Actor Taylor Lautner is 29.