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Denim & Dust February 4-H Minutes

Denim & Dust 4-H club had their February Zoom meeting on the 14th 2021 at 2:00. Members were encouraged to Re-enroll and use the link that was sent out in the Newshound. Fruit Sales are taking place online. All members who will be showing any type of animal will need to complete the YQCA training either in person or online. The dates are in the Newshound. Members will participate in Make and Take projects. One is a photography challenge, painting snowman boards and/or DIY photo coasters. Please let Debi know ASAP if you would like a kit. Random Acts of Kindness will be making a cake in a mug for teachers. Club members will assemble at the Warner Community Center on Feb. 26 at 7:00. The next meeting will be at 2:00 through zoom on March 14, 2021. Reporter Kennadee Wagner



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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South Dakota Dropping COVID-19 Vaccination Age to those Residents Age 65 and Over Starting Monday

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Health announced today that starting on Monday, February 22, 2021, the vaccination age of those who qualify to receive their COVID-19 vaccination will be dropping to those who are 65 and over in age. The announcement comes as the Department of Health and Phase I vaccinators have been making significant progress within Group D of the state's vaccination plan over the past few weeks.

"It is exciting that given our orderly and well planned vaccination strategy, coupled with the dedication of our medical professionals across our state, we are in such a strong position when it comes to vaccination efforts," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. "These factors, in addition to increased vaccine allocations, has allowed us to progress through Group D efficiently and open up vaccination statewide to those over 65 starting Monday."

This follows two weeks in which the vaccination age has been dropped by 5-year increments in the State of South Dakota. Over this period, the state's federal vaccine allocation has increased to 17,660 weekly doses—not including those received by the VA and IHS. Additionally, the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program was activated and additional new tools were unveiled for the public's use regarding vaccination planning and general information.

Krueger Brothers gets gravel bid

The Groton City Council voted to not accept the low bid for gravel for the upcoming year at its meeting Tuesday night. Bids were submitted by Krueger Brothers Gravel & Dirt for \$17.49 per yard. Jensen Rock & Sand for \$17.25 per yard. Hanlon Brothers Construction for \$18.75 per yard. According to the minutes, the council accepted the bid from Krueger Brothers.

The logo for the water tower was reviewed and was sent back to the contractor for revisions.

The council agreed to proceed with a Land and Water Conservation Fund Grant (60/40 City/grant) for resurfacing the tennis court and pickle ball court.

Conde National League

Team Standings: Mets 27, Giants 25, Braves 22, Cubs 20, Pirates 19, Tigers 7

Men's High Games: Lance Frohling 193, Butch Farmen 182, Ryan Bethke 179.

Men's High Series: Lance Frohling 535, Ryan Bethke 485, Butch Farmen 466

Women's High Games: Vickie Kramp 184, 183; Nancy Radke 166; Sam Bahr 163

Women's High Series: Vickie Kramp 519, Sam Bahr 445, Mary Larson 424

Girls NEC Standings

Hamlin.....	10-0
Roncalli	9-1
Redfield	6-2
Sisseton	5-3
Groton	5-4
Webster.....	5-4
Clark/Willow Lake ...	4-5
Milbank	4-6
Deuel	1-8
Tiospa Zina	1-8
Britton-Hecla.....	0-8

Boys NEC Standings

Groton	7-2
Clark/Willow Lake	7-2
Sisseton	5-2
Tiospa Zina	4-2
Milbank	5-3
Roncalli	5-4
Hamlin.....	6-4
Redfield	4-4
Deuel	2-8
Webster.....	1-8
Britton-Hecla.....	0-8

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Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Feb. 18

Junior High Basketball hosts Mobridge-Pollock in the Arena. 7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m. Both games sponsored by The Johnson Agency of Groton.

Friday, Feb. 19

Basketball Doubleheader with Deuel in Groton. JV girls (Bob & Genni Neisen of Mahanomen, Minn., grandparents of Emily Clark) at 4 p.m., JV boys (Craig and Tasha Dunker) 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 (Kent & Darcy Muller) 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 (Gordon & Dorene Nelson) at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Tuesday, March 2: BBB Region

Thursday, March 4: GBB SoDAK 16

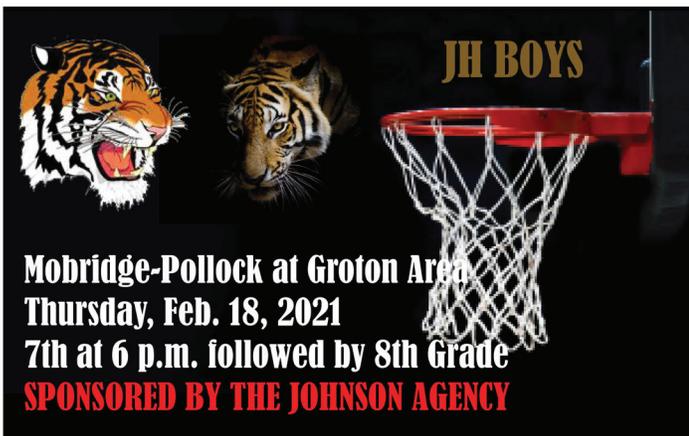
Friday, March 5: BBB Region

Tuesday, March 9: BBB SoDAK 16

March 11-13: State Girls Basketball Tournament in Watertown

March 18-20: State Boys Basketball Tournament

Coming up on GDLIVE.COM



JH BOYS

Mobridge-Pollock at Groton Area
Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021
7th at 6 p.m. followed by 8th Grade
SPONSORED BY THE JOHNSON AGENCY



Doubleheader

Deuel at Groton Area
Friday, Feb. 19, 2021, 4 p.m.
JV Girls, JV Boys, Varsity Girls, Varsity Boys



**Region 1B
Wrestling
Tournament
Sat., Feb. 20
10 a.m.
Mat A**



**Region 1B
Wrestling
Tournament
Sat., Feb. 20
10 a.m.
Mat B**

Summer Camping Reservations in State Parks Open Feb. 20

PIERRE, S.D. – Beginning Feb. 20, campers can begin making reservations for summer stays in South Dakota State Parks.

Feb. 20 is the first day to make camping reservations for a Friday, May 21, arrival. This is the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks' Open House and Free Fishing Weekend and traditional kick-off to the summer season.

Reservations for other summer dates will follow in succession, becoming available 90 days before arrival. More than 40 parks offer camping reservations on the 90-day schedule. The exception is Custer State Park, which offers reservations one year before arrival.

State Parks Director Scott Simpson reminds new and seasoned campers to keep an eye on the calendar and make reservations for camping trips as soon as possible.

"The sooner you can plan your camping trip, the better," said Simpson. "Campsites at popular parks go quickly."

Note the following reservation dates for popular summer camping weekends. Reservations dates are for a Friday arrival:

Memorial Day: February 27; Father's Day: March 20

Fourth of July: April 3; Labor Day: June 5

We encourage campers to venture out to new parks or camp during the week to avoid peak demand.

Campsites become available at 7 a.m. Central Time on the first day of the 90-day window, but reservations for available campsites can be made until the day you arrive. The 90-day window calendar can be found online at campsd.com. Reservations can be made 24 hours a day, both online and by calling 1.800.710.2267. Taxes and reservation fees may apply.

Groton Area Staff Spotlight!

Name: Tasha Dunker

Occupation: Elementary Librarian

Although it may sound like a relatively simple position, working as a librarian can be strenuous. Not only do librarians have to keep track of due dates and missing books, they must also order new books, recommend books that fit the tastes of their clientele, and make sure that each book is in proper condition. As the elementary school librarian, Tasha Dunker does her best to educate students about reading and literature.

Mrs. Dunker, in addition to working as a librarian at the Groton Area Elementary School, also works as a paraprofessional educator, providing RtI services for both English and Math to 1st and 2nd grade students. RtI stands for Response to Intervention, a teaching strategy that provides education on a personal level for struggling students. She graduated from Northern State University with a major in Elementary Education, along with a minor in Coaching. She has been working as the school librarian for two years. When she is not recommending literature to students or ordering books for the library, Mrs. Dunker spends her time watching sports and playing with her three kids on her family farm located south of Groton.

Editor's Note: This is a continuing series compiled by Benjamin Higgins. Higgins who is working for the Groton Independent through the Project Skills program.



Groton Area Staff Spotlight!

Name: Sue Wattier

Occupation: Secretary



For each student in Groton Area, there are several documents and records that must be actively maintained. Identification documents, health records, and grade transcripts all must be carefully tracked and updated for the faculty and students to draw upon at a moment's notice. It is the job of one of Groton Area High School's resident secretaries, Sue Wattier, to organize and maintain the records and transcripts of each local student.

As part of her duties as the secretary to Principal Sombke, Sue Wattier often works with tracking of student attendance, updating grades, sending out and receiving grade transcripts, and other tasks related to bookkeeping and information management. Before working at Groton Area High School, Mrs. Wattier worked at the local bank in Bristol and later worked as a school secretary in Bristol for a total of thirteen years. After her tenure in Bristol, she moved her work to Groton, where she has worked as the resident secretary for seventeen years. With the change in status quo brought by the outbreak of COVID-19, Sue has spent much more time on the phone communicating with parents and teachers rather than meeting with staff and guardians in person. In the face of changed circumstances brought by the pandemic, Mrs. Wattier has continued working as hard as she can to ensure the faculty and students can continue working in a safe and productive environment.

In the face of the Herculean tasks given to her, "Super Sue", so christened by students and staff, continues to be helpful and kind to everyone she interacts with on a day-to-day basis. Her perpetual cheery demeanor and willingness to help others have cemented her role as the go-to source of information for students and staff alike. When she is not working, Mrs. Wattier can be found quilting or spending time with her grandkids.

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Groton City February 16, 2021 Meeting Minutes

The Groton City Council met on the above date at 7:00 pm at the Community Center for their second monthly meeting with the following members present: Kappes, Wells, Fliehs, Babcock, Blackmun, Cutler and Hanlon presiding. Also present were: Attorney Drew Johnson, and Finance Officer Hope Block.

Moved by Cutler and seconded by Kappes to adjourn into executive session for personnel and legal items 1-

25-2 (1) & (3) at 7:00pm. All members voted aye. Council reconvened into regular session at 7:45pm. Attorney Drew Johnson left the meeting at 7:30pm.

Hanlon stepped out of the room while Blackmun opened and read sealed gravel bids. Krueger Brothers Gravel & Dirt submitted a bid for \$17.49 per yard. Jensen Rock & Sand submitted a bid for \$17.25 per yard. Hanlon Brothers Construction submitted a bid for \$18.75 per yard. Moved by Cutler and seconded by Fliehs to accept the bid from Krueger Brothers Gravel & Dirt for \$17.49 per yard. All members voted aye.

Public comments were welcomed pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1, but none were received.

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved on a motion by Blackmun and seconded by Wells. All members voted aye.

Moved by Babcock and seconded by Cutler to authorize the following bills for payment. All members voted aye.

Payroll	\$21,039.95	Employee salaries
Executive		
Administrative	\$3,787.54	
Public Safety	\$7,524.41	
Public Works	\$9,054.69	
Culture & Recreation	\$673.31	
Dacotah Bank	\$6,849.43	SS and WH
Dacotah Bank	\$495.82	HSA contributions
Dacotah Bank	\$10,000.00	Earnest money-escrow acct for 120 N Main
Consolidated Fed Credit Union	\$650.00	Employee savings
Groton Ford	\$47.43	17 Ford battery check and tpms light check
Web Water	\$13,633.92	Water 1/20
Full Circle Ag	\$60.00	Sewer pump station generator rent
United States Postal Service	\$207.52	Utility billing postage
Auto Zone	\$599.30	Oil, filters, hose, lights, deicer
Aramark	\$55.23	Rug rent
A&B Solutions	\$310.61	Copier rent
JVT	\$687.09	Phone and internet
Midwest Rental Properties	\$158.33	Utility bill refund
Ken's Food Fair	\$79.34	Gas, paper products, unclog gel
Grand Slam	\$109.00	Nordic backup PD
MJ's Sinclair	\$1,264.30	Gas, oil
Lori's Pharmacy	\$67.00	Funeral flowers
Stan Houston	\$2.70	Cut off wheel blade
Ferguson	\$840.87	Seal roll, patch asphalt, adapters

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Traffic Parts \$70.64 Flashers
Cannon Technologies \$989.40 Repeater
Irby \$93.83 Glove testing
WAPA \$24,652.07 Power 1/21
Heartland \$56,015.88 Power 1/21
Galls \$132.33 PD uniforms
Share Corp \$315.29 Car shampoo, sewer dynasty liquid
Paul Kosel \$300.00 Med flex
Border States \$253.14 Conduit, tape
Dan Sunne \$17.00 Med flex

The January finance report was approved on a motion by Fliehs and seconded by Wells. All members voted aye.

AB Contracting Application for Payment Number 2 for \$111,671.86 was approved on a motion by Blackmun and seconded by Cutler. All members voted aye.

Maguire Iron provided a proof of what the new water tower logo will look like. The group discussed possible revisions to the logo.

Moved by Blackmun and seconded by Fliehs to close CD #30164 for \$1,500 being held at Dacotah Bank. All members voted aye.

Moved by Wells and seconded by Kappes to approve Mayor Hanlon to sign the Land and Water Conservation Fund Grant (60/40 City/grant) application for resurfacing the tennis court and pickle ball court. All members voted aye.

Applications for summer employment will be due March 16th on a motion by Wells and seconded by Cutler. All members voted aye.

The first reading of the 2021 Summer Salary Ordinance #741 was approved with changes on a motion by Blackmun and seconded by Babcock. All members voted aye.

The first reading of the 2021 Supplemental Appropriation Ordinance #742 was approved on a motion by Blackmun and seconded by Cutler. All members voted aye.

The board was reminded that petitions need to be submitted by February 26th at 5:00pm at City Hall.

Application details from SD Housing Authority for Paint – South Dakota for 2021 were disbursed. Applications will be kept at City Hall if the public is interested.

Moved by Blackmun and seconded by Wells to adjourn into executive session for personnel items 1-25-2 (1) at 9:00pm. All members voted aye. Council reconvened into regular session at 9:25pm.

Moved by Babcock and seconded by Cutler to adjourn the meeting at 9:25 pm. All members voted aye.

Update on Carter Jondahl

A CaringBridge page has been created for Carter Jondahl. Updates on Carter's condition are posted there. Here is the initial statement.

Carter sustained a severe traumatic brain injury from a fall down the basement stairs on 2/13/21. Carter's mom - Lana and his brothers - Andy and Landon, want to be sure you are getting updated on his current condition. Carter and his family have been on a rollercoaster ride the past six months with Andy's injury in July, Lana's breast cancer diagnosis in October, Craig's passing in November, Dexter's passing in January, Shelley's passing in February and Lana's ongoing treatment. Please pray for Carter, Lana, Andy, Landon and their family during this difficult time.

Feb. 17 Entry: Carter had an uneasy night (after I posted of course) and seemed easily agitated. The medical staff was quick to try to help make Carter comfortable. They did do another chest x-ray around 10:30 pm due to slightly decreased O2 stats. The x-ray did not change much but was starting to show signs of pneumonia. Also, one of the cultures did show some growth today which means some type of an infection is starting. They immediately started a general antibiotic and continued sedation.

Doctors put in orders to have a chest CT performed - thankfully it ruled out any pulmonary embolisms (clots). He got a PICC line today as a couple of his IVs went bad. We're learning things are quick to change in his body. The medical staff is trying to hit a moving target and Carter's body is still throwing them curveballs. But the staff continues to stress he is young and healthy - which is a big positive.

Over the past few days, I've heard the medical staff talk about how strong and muscular Carter is. If they reposition him, they are sure to have a couple extra hands ready. Even though its been awhile since he's played high school football, I can't help but think back to those days when he was on the field. Our family received so many compliments about how great of a teammate, athlete, and opponent he was. He would go the extra mile to support his team, help other guys get up, and think of the team's overall goal - not just his desire to make "the play".

We are still in awe and extremely thankful with the amount of love, support and donations, Carter, is receiving. In addition to the GoFundMe, the Jungle Lanes in Groton is putting on a benefit for him on Saturday 2/27. All of the information is on their FaceBook page (I will share the link in the comments too.)

So for now, we continue to wait patiently for signs he is ready to conquer another hurdle. He has already overcome so much and in such a little amount of time! Please continue to pray for patience, healing, and guidance.

Governor Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Wednesday, Governor Kristi Noem signed eighteen bills into law.

If the links work, you should be able to click on the bill number and the details should show up.

[SB 6](#) corrects technical errors in statutory cross-references related to the Department of Social Services.

[SB 20](#) places certain controlled substances on the controlled substances schedule.

[SB 22](#) corrects a technical error concerning a cross-reference regarding a certain energy conservation program.

[SB 29](#) revises certain training and testing requirements for entry level driver applicants for a commercial driver license.

[SB 30](#) extends the issuance period for commercial learner's permits.

[SB 32](#) revises certain provisions regarding access critical nursing facilities.

[SB 39](#) repeals the registration requirements for certain amusement devices.

[SB 41](#) revises certain requirements for contesting certificates of assessment.

[SB 42](#) requires all documentation supporting a tax refund claim regarding the accidental mixing of undyed and dyed diesel fuel to be submitted to the Department of Revenue within a certain time period.

[SB 43](#) modifies certain provisions related to motor vehicles.

[SB 63](#) corrects technical errors and outdated provisions regarding the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

[SB 73](#) revises provisions regarding the sale of certain government owned vehicles by an auction agency.

[SB 78](#) modifies certain provisions related to trusts.

[HB 1031](#) revises certain provisions relating to the South Dakota Retirement System.

[HB 1032](#) revises the minimum cost of living adjustment and revises terminology of the South Dakota Retirement System.

[HB 1033](#) updates certain provisions relating to the South Dakota Retirement System and revises certain provisions relating to reemployment after retirement with the South Dakota Retirement System.

[HB 1037](#) authorizes the increase of certain fees by the State Electrical Commission.

[HB 1046](#) limits liability for certain exposures to COVID-19.

Governor Noem has signed 60 bills into law this legislative session.

Varsity teams post NEC wins over Milbank

Groton Area varsity basketball teams posted big wins over Milbank in home action last week.

The girls held off a fourth quarter rally to post a 35-27 win. The lead changed hands twice and the game was tied once in the first quarter before Groton Area secured a 6-5 lead at the end of the first quarter. Both teams doubled their score in the second quarter; thus, Groton Area held a 12-10 lead at half time. Groton, again, doubled its score in the third quarter but Milbank was unable to keep up and the Tigers held a 24-16 lead after three periods. Milbank closed to within three, 25-22, with 5:48 left in the game, but then the Tigers scored seven straight points to take a 33-22 lead with 2:47 left and went on to win.

Groton Area made nine of 20 two-pointers for 45 percent, four of 23 in three-pointers for 17 percent, made five of 10 free throws for 50 percent, had 31 rebounds, 14 turnovers, eight assists, five steals, 11 fouls and two blocks.

Gracie Traphagen led Groton Area with 14 points, eight rebounds, one steal and two blocks. Alyssa Thaler had seven points, five rebounds, two assists and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had five points, nine rebounds, one assist and one steal. Allyssa Locke had four points, five rebounds and three assists. Sydney Leicht added three points and had one rebound. Kenzie McInerney had two points, two rebounds, two assists and two steals. Aspen Johnson had one rebound.

Milbank made six of 13 free throws for 46 percent, made 10 of 44 field goals for 22 percent, had 10 turnovers and 11 team fouls.

Both varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bierman Farm Service, Jark Real Estate, Harr Motors - Bary Keith, Bahr Spray Foam, Allied Climate Professionals- Kevin Nehls, S.D. Army National Guard, John Sieh Agency, Groton Vet Clinic, Blocker Construction, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting, Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

Groton Area knocked off Milbank for NEC contention with a 55-34 win. Groton Area never trailed and the game was tied just once at three. The Tigers jumped out to a 22-9 lead after the first quarter after making nine of 12 field goals for 75 percent. The Tigers took a 32-19 lead at halftime and a 49-29 lead after three quarters.

It was a perfect varsity night for senior recognition night in Groton.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 15 points, two rebounds, five assists and four steals. Tate Larson was four of six in shooting and finished with 14 points, six rebounds, one assist, one steal and one block. Jayden Zak rounded out the trio of double-figure scorers with 13 points, three rebounds, one assist and one steal. Jacob Zak had nine points, 10 rebounds, two assists and four steals. Tristan Traphagen had four points, seven rebounds and two blocks. Cole Simon had three rebounds and one steal. Wyatt Hearnen had two rebounds, Isaac Smith had one rebound and one steal, Lucas Simon and Chandler Larson each had one rebound. Chandler, who has not been able to play due to an injury, took to the court on senior recognition night.

Groton Area made 16 of 31 in two-pointers for 52 percent, made five of 21 three-pointers for 24 percent, made eight of 15 free throws for 53 percent, had 36 rebound, 14 turnovers, nine assists, 12 steals, 14 fouls and three blocks.

Groton Area won the girls junior varsity game, 24-14. Kennedy Hansen led the Tigers with nine points followed by Jerica Locke, Sydney Leicht and Emma Schinkel with four each, Faith Traphagen had three and Jaedyn Penning added two points. Trent and Heather Traphagen were the sponsors of the game on GDILIVE.COM.

The boys junior varsity team suffered a 50-43 overtime loss to Milbank. Milbank held a 7-4 lead after the first quarter and Groton Area led at half time, 15-12, and took a 25-20 lead after three quarters. Groton Area led for most of the fourth quarter until Milbank took the lead, 39-37, with 25 seconds left. Taylor Diegel made a three-pointer right at the end to tie the game and send it into overtime, Milbank scored the first four points of the overtime and went on to win.

Diegel led the Tigers with 12 points followed by Wyatt Hearnen with 10, Cole Simon had eight, Logan Ringgenberg seven and Colby Dunker and Jackson Cogley each had three points.

The White House Inn was the sponsor of the game on GDILIVE.COM.

Varsity hoop teams split with Faulkton

The boys won and the girls lost to Faulkton in basketball action played in Groton. The boys posted a 58-43 win while Faulkton won the girls game, 52-35.

Lane Tietz had a hot night with four three-pointers to have a season high 29 points in Groton Area's win over Faulkton.

Groton Area held a 14-12 lead after the first quarter with the lead changing hands three times in the first quarter. The game was tied once and Faulkton got the upper hand in the second quarter to take a 23-20 lead at half time. Groton Area got the upper hand in the third quarter and took a 38-30 lead at the end of the third quarter. Groton Area outscored Faulkton, 20-11, in the fourth quarter for the win.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 29 points which included four of eight three-pointers, four of eight two-pointers and nine of 12 free throws. He has had one rebound, one assist and two steals. Jacob Zak had 12 points, eight rebounds, two assists and two steals. Wyatt Hearnen had five points, six rebounds and one steal. Tristan Traphagen had four points, 10 rebounds, one assist, one steal and one block. Jayden Zak had four points, three rebounds, five assists and five steals. Lucas Simon had four points and one rebound. Cole Simon had two rebounds and one assist. Favian Sanchez had one rebound and one steal.

Groton Area made 13 of 27 two-pointers for 48 percent, six of 24 three-pointers for 25 percent, 14 of 21 free throws for 67 percent, had 32 rebounds, 11 turnovers, 10 assists, 12 steals, 14 fouls and one block.

Nick Schlechter led Faulkton with 13 points while Hunter Niederbau had 12, Layne Cotton nine, Simon Bowar seven and Gus Kopecky added two points.

Faulkton made 17 of 46 field goals for 37 percent, seven of 12 free throws for 58 percent, had 13 turnovers and 19 team fouls.

The varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bierman Farm Service, Jark Real Estate, Harr Motors - Bary Keith, Bahr Spray Foam, Allied Climate Professionals- Kevin Nehls, S.D. Army National Guard, John Sieh Agency, Groton Vet Clinic, Blocker Construction, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting, Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

Faulkton jumped out to a 9-0 lead in the girls varsity game and never trailed in the game as the Trojans won, 52-35. Faulkotn led at the quarterbreaks, 9-3, 26-10 and 38-27.

Brooke Gengerke led the Tigers with nine points, one rebound, one assist and one steal. Allyssa Locke had seven points, two rebounds and six assists. Kenzie McInerney had six points. Sydney Leicht had six points, three rebounds, one assist and one steal. Gracie Traphagen had two points, five rebounds, one assist and one steal. Jerica Locke and Jaedyn Penning each had two points. Alyssa Thaler had one point, four rebounds, two assists and one steal. Aspen Johnson had four rebounds, Anna Fjeldheim had one assist and one steal.

Groton Area made six of 25 two-pointers for 24 percent, six of 23 three-pointers for 26 percent, five of six free throws for 83 percent, had 19 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 12 assists, five steals and 12 fouls.

Faulkton made 19 of 42 field goals for 45 percent, nine of 11 free throws for 82 percent, had 13 turnovers and seven team fouls.

Faulkton won the girls junior varsity game, 22-9, with Agtegra sponsoring the broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. Jerica Locke had seven points and Jaedyn Penning added two points.

The boys junior varsity team won, 41-17. Teylor Diegel led the Tigers with 14 points while Cole Simon had 11, Logan Ringgenberg eight and adding two points apiece were Favian Sanchez, Colby Dunker, Jackson Cogley and Holden Sippel.

Marilyn and Jerry Hearnen, grandparents of Wyatt Hearnen, sponsored the JV game on GDILIVE.COM.

— Paul Kosel

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Gengerke had double-double night against Tiospa Zina

Brooke Gengerke had a double-double night for Groton Area as the Lady Tigers defeated Tiospa Zina, 48-33.

Tiospa Zina held a 14-12 lead after the first quarter with the game being tied twice and the lead changing hands four times. The second quarter was an even match with five lead changes and the game tied three times including a 25-25 tie at half time. Groton Area got the upper hand in the third quarter and took a 34-30 lead into the fourth quarter. The Tigers outscored Tiospa Zina in the fourth quarter, 14-3, to secure the win.

Groton Area made 12 of 36 two-pointers for 33 percent, four of 20 three-pointers for 20 percent, 12 of 22 free throws for 55 percent, had 39 rebounds, 14 turnovers, 13 assists, 14 steals and 16 fouls.

Tiospa Zina made 10 of 38 field goals for 26 percent, 11 of 16 free throws for 69 percent, had 17 turnovers and had 15 team fouls.

Gracie Traphagen led the Tigers with 17 points, seven rebounds and one assist. Brooke Gengerke had 14 points, 12 rebounds, three assists and two steals. Sydney Leicht had eight points, five rebounds, one assist and two steals. Kenzie McInerney had five points, two rebounds, one assist and one steal. Alyssa Thaler had four points, four rebounds, one assist and two steals. Aspen Johnson had four rebounds and four steals.

Maria Gallardo led the Wambdi with nine points followed by Jeslyn Crawford with eight, Kennadee Bissonette had six, Omariya Bernard five, Jaia Bursheim three and Alexia Quinn two.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bierman Farm Service, Jark Real Estate, Harr Motors - Bary Keith, Bahr Spray Foam, Allied Climate Professionals- Kevin Nehls, S.D. Army National Guard, John Sieh Agency, Groton Vet Clinic, Grand Slam Computers, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting, Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 40-18. Mia Crank, Kennedy Hansen and Sydney Leicht each had eight points, Jerica Locke had six, Laila Roberts four, Faith Traphagen had three, Jaedyn Penning two and Anna Fjeldheim one.

Ed and Connie Stauch sponsored the broadcast on GDILIVE.COM.

— Paul Kosel

Democrats Call for investigation

Sioux Falls, SD (February 17, 2021) – South Dakota Democratic Party Chairman, Randy Seiler, Wednesday called on Attorney General, Jason Ravnsborg, to open a formal investigation into the breaking news story that Governor Kristi Noem has repeatedly broken South Dakota law by using the state-owned airplane for personal use.

Republican Governor Kristi Noem took advantage of her access to South Dakota's state airplane to fly to multiple partisan political events around the country--as well as for personal purposes within state borders--on South Dakota taxpayers' dime in 2019, according to a bombshell report from online news outlet Raw Story.

According to the news story, "the flight logs, published for the first time in this report, raise questions about the propriety of tens of thousands of dollars' worth of taxpayer-funded flights to out-of-state events hosted by groups such as the National Rifle Association, Turning Point USA, and an organization affiliated with the late GOP mega-donor Sheldon Adelson, South Dakota politicians and experts told Raw Story..."

South Dakota law expressly forbids political and personal use of the state-owned aircraft for political and personal purposes.

Reporters used Noem's own social media posts, press reports and flight logs uncovered by a public records activist to piece together the pattern of misuse including speaking slots in front of "conservative political interest groups and GOP power players." Among those trips were NRA and Turning Point USA conferences in Texas, a meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition at a Las Vegas casino owned by billionaire GOP mega-donor Sheldon Adelson, and multiple trips to an organization whose purpose is to elect Republican state governors.

State Senator Reynold Nesiba is quoted in the article. "This looks like somebody who is personally and politically benefiting from South Dakota state assets," Democratic State Senator Reynold Nesiba said. "Nobody should be politically or personally enriching themselves at the public trough."

Before his stint in the state legislature, Nesiba championed the successful 2006 Initiated Measure 5. That law forbids using state-owned or leased aircraft for anything other than official "state business." Offenders are subject to fines equaling ten times the value of the flight.

"Governor Noem is certainly entitled to have fun," Seiler said, "but she shouldn't be having it on the taxpayer dime, and she certainly shouldn't be doing it in violation of South Dakota law. The South Dakota Democratic Party calls on Attorney General Ravnsborg to immediately open a formal investigation into Governor Noem's apparent, numerous violations of South Dakota law. Refusing to do so would be a refusal to enforce the laws of our state which is, after all, his job."

Noem has also come under bipartisan scrutiny for using a state-funded security detail throughout much of 2020 while campaigning for national Republican candidates outside the state while COVID-19 infection and mortality rates skyrocketed in South Dakota. Republican lawmaker Taffy Howard brought a bill this session that would make the costs of that detail public.

Noem spokesman Ian Fury tried to justify the thousands of flight miles and potential hundreds of thousands of misspent state dollars. "One of Governor Noem's primary roles as Governor is to be South Dakota's top ambassador to the rest of the nation."

Former Republican governor Mike Rounds also tried to justify using the state's plane to attend his son's basketball games, arguing in 2005 that as governor, he was always on public business. South Dakota voters didn't buy that excuse, leading to IM 5's passage into state law.

Rounds both requested and approved the purchase of the state's King Air 200 propellor plane in 2005.

#360 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

A bit higher today. We are up to 27,868,000 total cases in the US today, which is 0.3% more than yesterday. There were 70,600 new cases reported today. We keep this up, and we'll be below the summer's seven-day peak, which would be fine with me. I'll update on this as conditions warrant. Hospitalizations declined today for the forty-first consecutive day to 64,533. And we've lost 590,054 Americans to this virus so far in the pandemic, which is 0.5% more than yesterday. There were 2426 new deaths reported today. It would be good to see a reduction in the dying.

This virus is going to keep costing us money for a good long while yet. The latest is a \$200 million investment the CDC is making in viral genome sequencing. If you've been with us here for very long, you know I welcome this move: I've been hollering about this need right along. They sequenced 9000 samples last week, and the goal is to get to where they are sequencing 25,000 per week. If our seven-day new-case average continues to decline from its current approximately 81,000 down to around 71,000, this would put us within the range of the 5 percent we should be sequencing to adequately track new viral variants. That done, then we need to gather those data and start linking them to contact tracing information so we can do the sort of large-scale computer analysis to know what we're looking at. (Remember when we did contact tracing? Quaint, huh? We need to start doing it again if we can ever get numbers down to where this is a feasible goal; without that, we're fighting a losing battle.) That knowledge is power. And yes, there will need to be ongoing investment in this program for the foreseeable future because, as we've discussed, it seems likely we're going to be living with this virus for quite some time to come, maybe forever, and tracking variants is how we stay ahead of the damned thing with vaccine updates, just the way we currently do with influenza vaccine.

Another sign of progress is that we've given around 9 million doses of vaccine per week in the last four weeks; we've averaged over 1.6 million per day for a week now, well above the Biden administration's promise of one million per day. Available doses should rise from 9 million per week to 13.5 million per week, which gets us very close to 2 million per day. This is a very good place to be, especially compared to where we've been.

There is a new report in the New England Journal of Medicine published today that offers some evidence that the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine protects against new variants, including B.1.351, the variant that emerged in South Africa and has shown some potential for resistance to the vaccines currently available. I was not able to view the paper (typical problem for the NEJM), so I am working from a summary here; but the news is good. The University of Texas Medical Branch researchers who wrote the paper genetically engineered the virus to carry some of the B.1. 351 mutations and then tested these against blood samples from vaccinated people. Even though the samples showed decreased levels of neutralizing antibodies, the titer was still sufficient to neutralize the virus. The finding was that, although these vaccinated people produced less neutralizing antibody than against older variants, they still neutralized the new variant. This piles on to some other studies which have indicated the same efficacy of antibodies in vaccinated persons. While we're not entirely sure what level of neutralizing antibodies is needed to protect you against SARS-CoV-2, it does appear that the level produced in response to vaccine is sufficient for this new variant. Pfizer said there is no evidence that the variant escapes protection from the vaccine; "Nevertheless, Pfizer and BioNTech are taking the necessary steps, making the right investments, and engaging in the appropriate conversations with regulators to be in a position to develop and seek authorization for an updated mRNA vaccine or booster once a strain that significantly reduces the protection from the vaccine is identified." So the vaccine appears to work now, and the company is poised to produce one that works in the future. I like that news.

According to one of the researchers in an interview with CNN, "Although we do not yet know exactly what level of neutralization is required for protection against COVID-19 disease or infection, our experience with other vaccines tells us that it is likely that the Pfizer vaccine offers relatively good protection against this new variant." The company announcement offers that there is no evidence that the variant can accomplish

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an immune escape. The NIH in separate tests concluded the same. There is also no reduction in efficacy against B.1.1.7, the possibly more deadly and certainly more transmissible variant originally noted in the UK.

The CDC has released its new ensemble projections for deaths in this pandemic, and it isn't pretty. They now are saying we can expect between 530,000 and 559,000 deaths by mid-March in the US from this pandemic. This is in line with the projections we've been seeing all along, and it is grim. It is important to remember that these are individual precious lives mourned by real people.

Seattle doesn't generally get much snow in the average winter; in fact, many winters, they don't see any at all. That means last Friday night's nearly nine inches of the white stuff was more than just a little bit unusual. It came in twelfth for most snow in a single day since records have been kept—late 1800s. The city has a lot of hills and a whole lot of drivers who are not, to say the least, accustomed to handling a car on slippery streets, so people tend to stay home after a significant snowfall.

But staying home wasn't really an option for Fran Goldman. You see, she, her daughter who lives in New York, and a friend in Arizona had been calling the state department of health several times a day and hanging out online, calling pharmacies, trying everything they could think of to get Goldman an appointment for a Covid-19 vaccination. Then Friday while she was online with Seattle Children's Hospital, magically an appointment appeared: Sunday morning at 9:10. She clicked on "Accept" in a big hurry. At last!

This, of course, happened before Mother Nature stepped in. Seattle woke up Saturday morning to all that snow, and Goldman realized she wasn't going to be able to drive as she had planned. It was going to be tough to make that appointment the next morning.

Tough. Not impossible. A woman as determined as Goldman, after all she went through to get that appointment, wasn't about to miss it. So Saturday morning she decided to test the waters and see how long it was going to take to get there. She put on warm clothing, got out her walking sticks, grabbed her cell phone, and struck out. She walked about two-thirds the distance, enough to figure out how early she was going to have to leave in order to be on time the next day, and went back home to plan, knowing she could make the trip on foot. After all, it was only three miles. Each way.

Did I mention Goldman was walking on a new hip installed just last year? She was. Did I mention she is 90 years old? She is.

So did she make it on time on Sunday? Not exactly: She was five minutes late. Good thing too because they weren't ready for her right on time and, if she'd been on time, they'd have asked her to wait in her car. Which she did not have with her. But that worked out since she walked. And was a little bit late.

She got her vaccine and headed home the same way she came, on foot. About the experience, she told the Seattle Times, "It was not easy going, it was challenging," then adding, "I knew how far it was, I knew how long it would take me. Had it been shorter, I would have been happier. But I made it." She went home, threw in a load of laundry, and heated up a can of soup; that should warm a person up.

Her daughter didn't seem to be terribly surprised at her mother's adventure. She told the Times, "My mother isn't going to let a little snow stop her from getting the vaccine. She was willing to walk however many miles there and back to get it. She . . . has the attitude of 'You don't let a little adversity get in your way.' She's someone who looks for solutions, not problems."

I guess you could say that. I'm glad she's getting protected. We can't afford to lose one like her. Be well. I'll be back tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	452	430	848	15	Minimal	14.3%
Beadle	2669	2563	5676	39	Substantial	12.4%
Bennett	380	364	1153	9	Minimal	2.4%
Bon Homme	1502	1474	2020	25	Minimal	6.3%
Brookings	3542	3416	11494	35	Substantial	3.5%
Brown	5071	4893	12347	83	Substantial	6.5%
Brule	686	670	1828	9	Minimal	17.9%
Buffalo	420	406	887	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	968	933	3135	20	Moderate	3.0%
Campbell	129	123	249	4	Minimal	25.0%
Charles Mix	1258	1197	3818	18	Substantial	13.2%
Clark	363	342	927	4	Substantial	6.1%
Clay	1775	1744	5064	15	Moderate	3.6%
Codington	3897	3687	9409	76	Substantial	13.8%
Corson	462	448	992	12	Minimal	13.3%
Custer	739	715	2634	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	2927	2831	6328	60	Moderate	4.7%
Day	647	591	1718	28	Substantial	20.0%
Deuel	471	451	1096	8	Moderate	16.1%
Dewey	1394	1367	3734	22	Minimal	2.4%
Douglas	420	407	886	9	Minimal	2.9%
Edmunds	477	450	1011	12	Moderate	5.3%
Fall River	517	494	2532	15	Moderate	4.4%
Faulk	353	328	678	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	948	881	2150	37	Substantial	16.7%
Gregory	525	479	1218	27	Substantial	6.4%
Haakon	246	233	520	9	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	687	626	1714	38	Moderate	8.8%
Hand	326	314	779	6	Minimal	3.8%
Hanson	351	336	691	4	Moderate	18.4%
Harding	91	90	179	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2256	2173	6353	34	Substantial	4.8%
Hutchinson	780	733	2274	24	Moderate	9.1%

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Hyde	136	133	397	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	275	258	903	14	Minimal	15.4%
Jerauld	268	249	546	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	83	82	213	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	624	594	1594	14	Moderate	9.7%
Lake	1167	1127	3175	17	Moderate	7.9%
Lawrence	2793	2716	8318	44	Moderate	6.8%
Lincoln	7617	7410	19663	76	Substantial	5.2%
Lyman	598	577	1840	10	Minimal	8.8%
Marshall	295	283	1140	5	Moderate	2.8%
McCook	732	698	1574	24	Moderate	7.0%
McPherson	237	231	541	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2542	2459	7440	31	Moderate	10.4%
Mellette	241	238	713	2	Minimal	0.0%
Miner	269	251	557	9	None	0.0%
Minnehaha	27600	26787	75634	325	Substantial	5.0%
Moody	610	585	1711	16	Minimal	7.7%
Oglala Lakota	2046	1968	6531	47	Minimal	2.2%
Pennington	12669	12262	38106	184	Substantial	8.2%
Perkins	343	319	780	13	Minimal	12.9%
Potter	363	347	812	3	Moderate	13.3%
Roberts	1135	1078	4017	35	Substantial	4.8%
Sanborn	326	319	665	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	793	748	2072	25	Substantial	7.4%
Stanley	326	319	900	2	Minimal	3.7%
Sully	136	132	295	3	Minimal	6.3%
Todd	1218	1178	4065	28	Moderate	9.8%
Tripp	681	647	1444	15	Moderate	18.4%
Turner	1053	989	2635	51	Moderate	8.3%
Union	1951	1864	6057	39	Substantial	9.0%
Walworth	717	690	1786	15	Moderate	14.3%
Yankton	2777	2717	9077	28	Moderate	1.7%
Ziebach	335	325	850	9	None	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1811	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	4393	0
10-19 years	12414	0
20-29 years	19774	4
30-39 years	18185	16
40-49 years	15793	34
50-59 years	15599	108
60-69 years	12662	243
70-79 years	6778	419
80+ years	5087	1020

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	57715	869
Male	52970	975

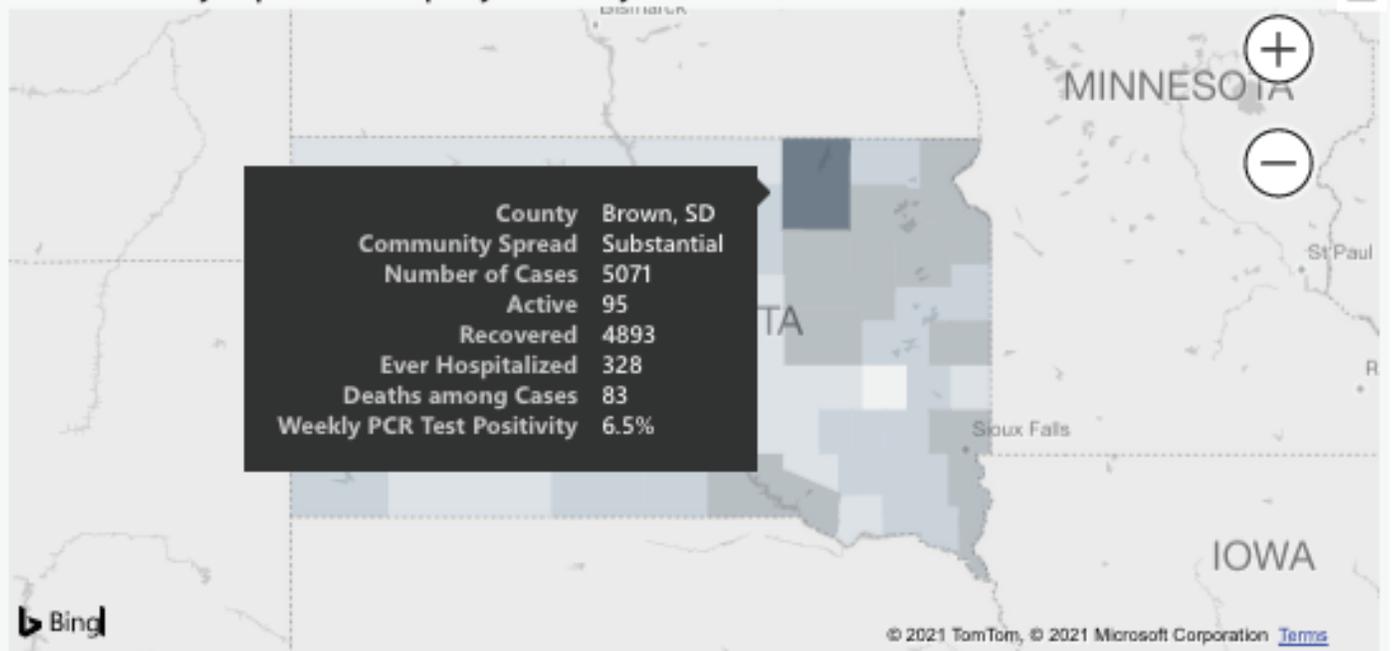
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



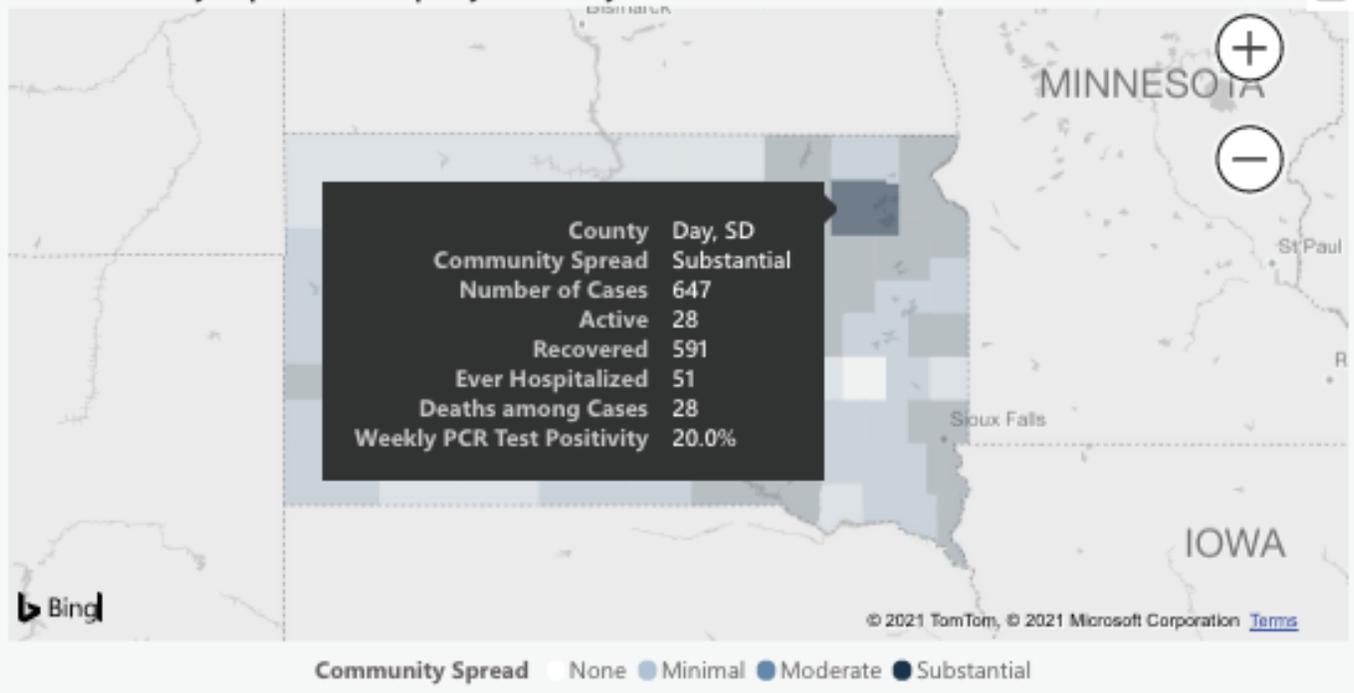
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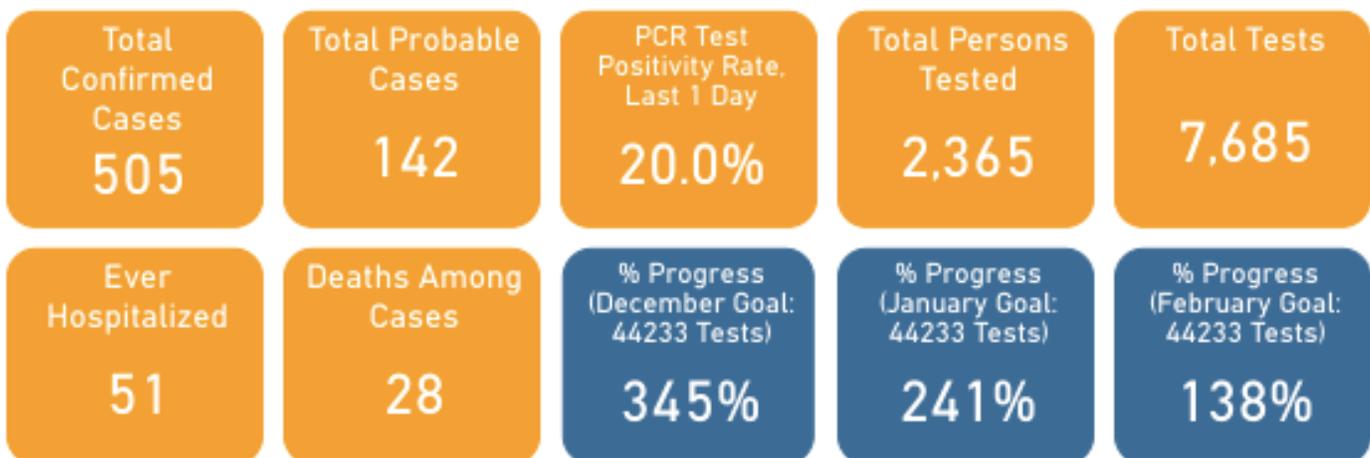
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

164,399

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

110,759

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

16%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	86,672
Pfizer	77,727

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	29,914
Moderna - Series Complete	28,379
Pfizer - 1 dose	27,205
Pfizer - Series Complete	25,261

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	16.05%
Series Complete	7.77%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	404	200	102	302
Beadle	3122	1,404	859	2,263
Bennett*	268	94	87	181
Bon Homme*	1680	790	445	1,235
Brookings	4314	1,608	1,353	2,961
Brown	8036	2,844	2,596	5,440
Brule*	1039	529	255	784
Buffalo*	91	81	5	86
Butte	897	443	227	670
Campbell	543	163	190	353
Charles Mix*	1689	781	454	1,235
Clark	598	254	172	426
Clay	2466	886	790	1,676
Codington*	5151	2,009	1,571	3,580
Corson*	124	88	18	106
Custer*	1362	650	356	1,006
Davison	4208	1,362	1,423	2,785
Day*	1190	510	340	850
Deuel	677	337	170	507
Dewey*	254	66	94	160
Douglas*	693	259	217	476
Edmunds	661	269	196	465
Fall River*	1272	544	364	908
Faulk	558	192	183	375

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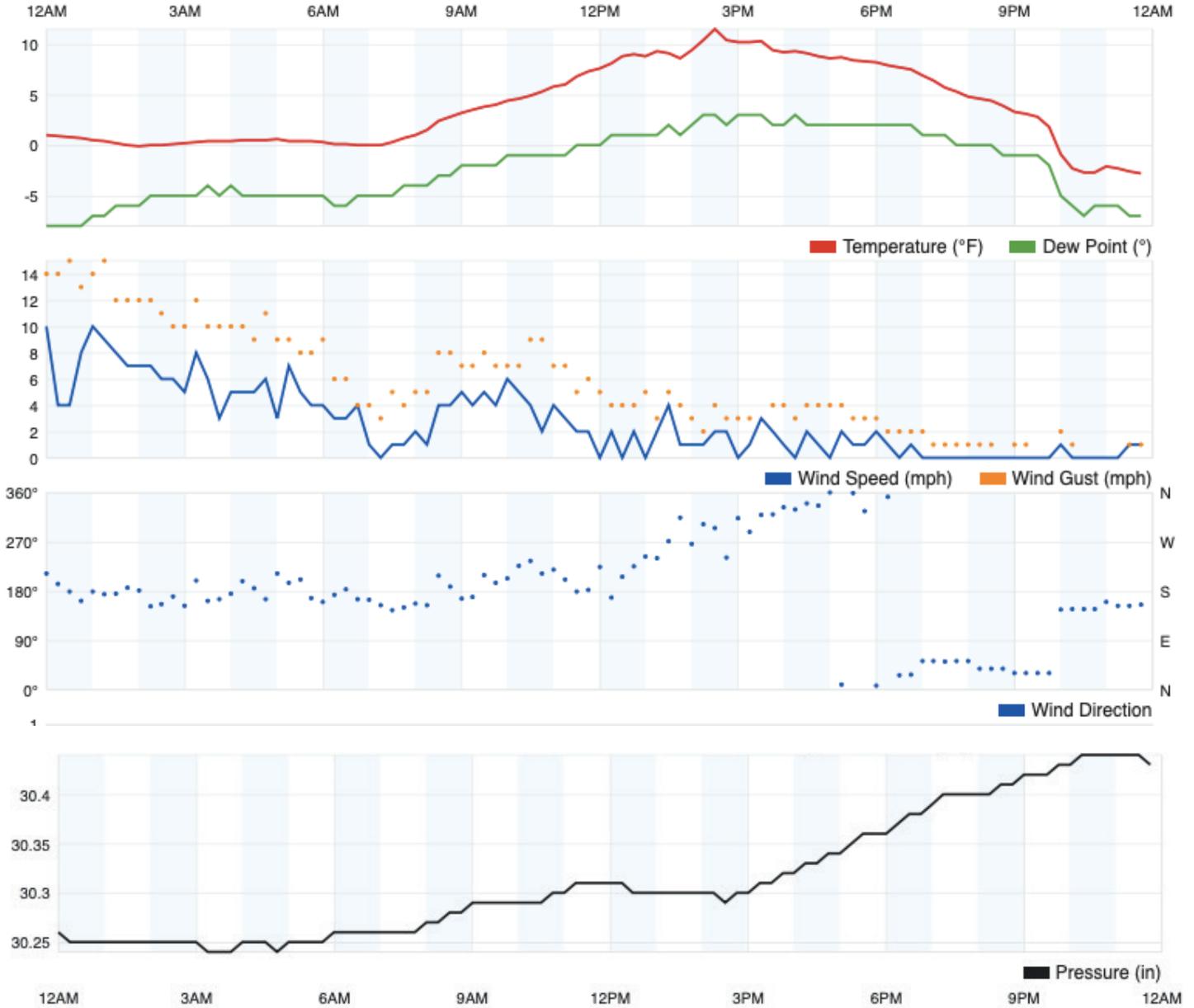
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Grant [^]	1206	370	418	788
Gregory [^]	889	403	243	646
Haakon [^]	316	114	101	215
Jones [^]	326	142	92	234
Kingsbury	1114	484	315	799
Lake	1867	777	545	1,322
Lawrence	3666	1,804	931	2,735
Lincoln	14764	4,046	5,359	9,405
Lyman [^]	367	225	71	296
Marshall [^]	817	357	230	587
McCook	1172	418	377	795
McPherson	107	57	25	82
Meade [^]	3001	1,211	895	2,106
Mellette [^]	24	12	6	18
Miner	445	183	131	314
Minnehaha [^]	43420	12,938	15,241	28,179
Moody [^]	845	331	257	588
Oglala Lakota [^]	88	44	22	66
Pennington [^]	19757	5,949	6,904	12,853
Perkins [^]	275	147	64	211
Potter	396	154	121	275
Roberts [^]	2202	1,006	598	1,604
Sanborn	506	210	148	358
Spink	1557	469	544	1,013
Stanley [^]	587	285	151	436
Sully	165	111	27	138
Todd [^]	86	30	28	58
Tripp [^]	1130	388	371	759
Turner	1856	612	622	1,234
Union	1380	736	322	1,058
Walworth [^]	952	458	247	705
Yankton	5200	1,494	1,853	3,347
Ziebach [^]	41	11	15	26
Other	3595	735	1,430	2,165

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thursday



Chance
Flurries and
Patchy Fog
then Partly
Sunny

High: 16 °F

Thursday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: -3 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 22 °F

Friday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 7 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 30 °F



National Weather Service, Aberdeen, SD Updated: 2/18/2021 4:50 AM Central

Slow Warming through the end of the week

Today

13 to 24°



Patchy AM Fog with some
light snow or flurries
through the day

Friday

15 to 30°

Sunny skies through the
morning with a few more
clouds in the afternoon
Warmest temps west

Saturday

26 to 42°

Partly Cloudy in the
morning, increasing clouds
in the afternoon

Another upper level disturbance will move through the area today and lead to some occasional light snow showers or flurries. Any accumulations will be fairly minimal. Temperatures will be a bit warmer than Wednesday but daytime readings will remain on the cool side. Another chilly night will set in tonight as temperatures fall back into the single digits above and below zero. A mix of sun and clouds are expected on Friday with highs warmest west across central South Dakota. Even warmer temps anticipated for the start of the weekend. Another disturbance will bring slight chances for light snow to portions of the area from late Saturday evening into Sunday morning.

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Today in Weather History

February 18, 1962: It started raining in the afternoon of the 18th, and by evening temperatures dropped to below freezing resulting in a glaze up to three-quarters of an inch on trees and power lines. Many utility lines were downed by the glaze or by falling trees and branches. Temperatures continued to drop during the night, changing the rain to snow by the 19th. Strong winds accompanied this snow causing local blizzard conditions.

1965: A massive avalanche kills 26 men at the Granduc Copper Mine in British Columbia on this day.

1992: A thunderstorm spawned an unusually strong F4 tornado for so far north for the time of the year in southern Van Wert County in Ohio. The tornado touched down just west of US Route 127 and traveled northeastward for about 3 miles. One house was completely leveled, and nine others experienced severe damage. Six people were injured.

1899 - While much of the central and eastern U.S. was recovering from the most severe cold wave of modern history, the temperature at San Francisco soared to 80 degrees to establish a record for month of February. (David Ludlum)

1959 - Some of the higher elevations of California were in the midst of a five day storm which produced 189 inches of snow, a single storm record for North America. (13th-19th) (David Ludlum)

1987 - A small but intense low pressure system combined with northerly upslope winds to produce eight inches of snow in five hours at Meeteetsie WY, located southeast of Cody. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms soaked the Central Gulf Coast Region with heavy rain. Totals in southern Louisiana ranged up to 8.50 inches near the town of Ridge, with 6.55 inches at Plaquemine. Thunderstorms in northern Florida drenched Apalachicola with 5.41 inches of rain in 24 hours, and produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Mayo. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Low pressure off the coast of North Carolina brought freezing rain and heavy snow to Virginia and the Carolinas. Snowfall totals in Virginia ranged up to 18 inches at Franklin. Freezing rain reached a thickness of two inches around Charlotte NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An intense but slow moving Pacific storm worked its way across Utah over a two day period. The storm blanketed the valleys with 4 to 12 inches of snow, and produced up to 42 inches of snow in the mountains. Heavy snow also fell across northern Arizona. Williams received 22 inches of snow, and 12 inches was reported along the south rim of the Grand Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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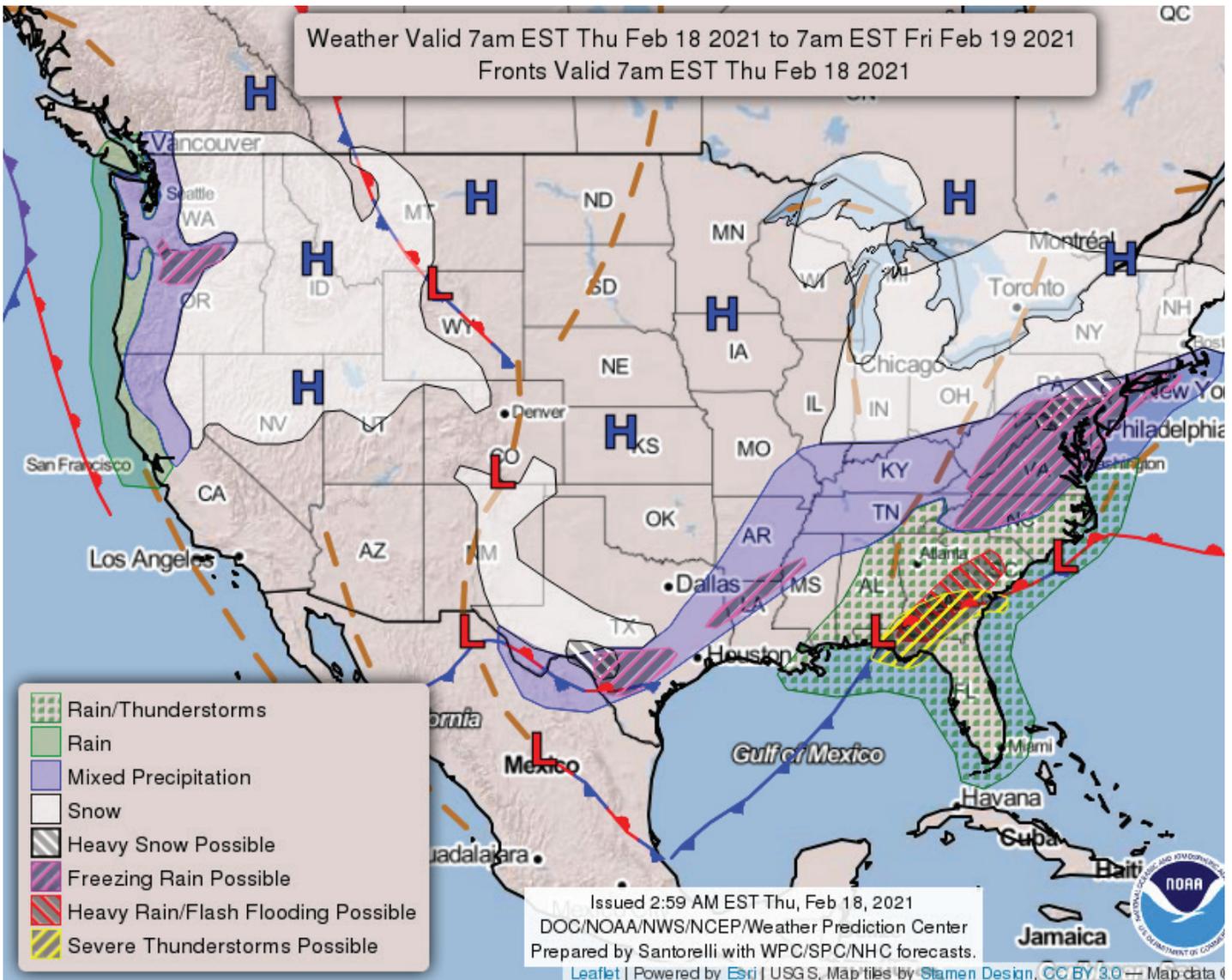
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 12 °F at 2:28 PM
Low Temp: -4 °F at 11:57 PM
Wind: 16 mph at 12:34 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 67° in 1913
Record Low: -32° in 1903
Average High: 29°F
Average Low: 8°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.29
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14
Average Precip to date: 0.76
Precip Year to Date: 0.14
Sunset Tonight: 6:06 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:28 a.m.



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CAN YOU SEE HIM NOW?

God has planted evidence of His existence on the pages of history, in the handiwork of nature, and in the beauty of the skies above us. We read of His faithfulness to care for His people from the beginning of recorded history to this very moment. We find nourishment for our bodies tucked away in plants, animals, and minerals. Sailors find directions in the stars He hung in the heavens above as they sail from one country to another. Wherever we look, we can find God's fingerprint on the planet or a signpost in the sky that directs us to His dwelling above us and beyond us.

However, it takes a willingness to see Him, an open mind to search for Him, a sensitive heart to accept Him, and a selfless life to follow Him.

Even those who do not want to believe in Him, use the mind He gave them to try to deny His existence. The arguments they offer and the logic they use, in the final analysis, comes from His grace. When we look at all the gods that have been created by man, not one of them has stood the test of time. They last only as long as their creator and then pass into the darkness of emptiness.

But the Creator, the God who is God, spoke through a Psalmist and said, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day...and night after night...there is no language where their voice is not heard."

Men may speak and argue, lecture and labor, write and work to erase the existence of God, but there is no way they can reach into the heavens and hide His stars.

Prayer: Thank You, God, our Creator, for making Your existence visible to those who desire to discover You. We ask that all may see Your splendor. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Psalm 19:1-3

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Father/Daughter Dance (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (Halloween)
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the  Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

08-10-12-27-34

(eight, ten, twelve, twenty-seven, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$33,000

Lotto America

02-11-16-46-50, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 2

(two, eleven, sixteen, forty-six, fifty; Star Ball: eight; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$3 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

01-15-21-32-46, Powerball: 1, Power Play: 3

(one, fifteen, twenty-one, thirty-two, forty-six; Powerball: one; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$66 million

Republicans kill bill requiring reporting on state airplane

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Senate Republicans on Wednesday rejected a proposal to require regular reporting on the use of the state's airplane fleet by Gov. Kristi Noem's administration.

The Republican governor has faced scrutiny for using state-owned airplanes to attend 2019 events hosted by political organizations like the National Rifle Association, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Women, Turning Point USA, and the Republican Jewish Coalition. State law does not allow the airplanes to be used for political purposes, but Noem's office defender her travel as part of "her official capacity as an ambassador for the state."

Democratic Sen. Troy Heinert proposed requiring a report on how state airplanes are used every three months. The Department of Transportation opposed his bill, saying it would add require "significant" work.

"The people of South Dakota deserve to know where this plane is going, whose on it, and for what purpose," Heinert told lawmakers. "They own the plane."

However, a GOP-dominated Senate committee dismissed his proposal. Assistant Republican leader Sen. Mike Diedrich argued it was "political," pointing out that flight logs are already available.

Lawmakers from both parties have also proposed requiring the governor to disclose the costs to provide security for her travel, but those proposals were dismissed by Republicans.

Noem's bill banning Down syndrome abortions gains support

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee on Wednesday unanimously approved Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to ban abortions when testing indicates a fetus may have Down syndrome, paving the way for it to sail through the Republican-dominated House.

The governor's office cast the bill as a way to protect people with Down syndrome but also part of a larger effort to eliminate legal abortions altogether. Proponents pointed to European countries such as Iceland where Down syndrome diagnoses lead to abortion at least 90 percent of the time. But abortions motivated by abnormalities with the fetus in South Dakota are rare. Over 97% of patients who had an abortion had no knowledge of abnormalities with the fetus during 2019, the most recent year for which

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data is available.

Advocates for abortion rights said the bill is part of a political effort to erode access to "sexual and reproductive health care" for patients who already have limited access to abortions. However, Dale Bartscher, who directs South Dakota Right to Life, described the bill as keeping with "a long-standing tradition of upholding a culture of life" in the state.

Similar laws passed in other states have faced legal challenges, but a federal judge last year upheld one such law in Tennessee.

The committee meeting drew emotional and charged testimony from people with Down syndrome and their families, who described the contributions they make to their communities.

"I hope I have helped many have a wonderful life," said Katie Shaw, a 35-year-old woman with Down syndrome from Indianapolis.

After proponents of the ban vilified abortions motivated by a Down syndrome diagnosis as "eugenics," the entire House committee, including two Democrats, pushed the bill to the full House. Because it received unanimous approval, it could breeze through the House without debate.

Two other bills making their way through the Legislature this year also appear to have widespread support in the Republican-dominated Capitol, but have been decried by abortion-rights advocates and medical groups. One proposal would add more severe penalties to any medical provider that does not provide medical care to babies born after botched abortions, as well as mandate reporting of such situations. It has passed the House and Senate.

Meanwhile, the House committee approved a bill that would require abortion clinics to give women who receive a two-dose abortion drug a statement telling them to seek medical attention if they change their mind on the abortion before they take the second dose of the drug.

"The bills go against the recommendations of medical experts and are another example of lawmakers politicizing reproductive health care and inappropriately intruding upon the vital patient-physician relationship," said Kristin Hayward, the manager of advocacy for Planned Parenthood Action Fund in South Dakota.

The state currently bans abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy, but the only clinic that regularly provides abortions in the state, Planned Parenthood in Sioux Falls, does not perform them after the 13th week of pregnancy. That would be too early for the proposed laws to have much effect on how abortions currently happen. Few tests can determine whether a fetus has Down syndrome that early in a pregnancy.

Hayward said such restrictions, termed "reason bans" by abortion-rights advocates, still take away the right for patients to get a safe abortion.

"It's legal for a woman to obtain an abortion and it should stay that way," she said. "When these restrictions are put on, it endangers the lives of the women and patients who are seeking abortions in the state."

Noem has defended the necessity of her bill, saying that some screenings for Down syndrome can be performed as early as 10 weeks into pregnancy.

"This legislation will protect preborn children that are diagnosed with Down syndrome from being discriminated against solely because God gave them an extra chromosome," she said last month.

A group of about 70 medical workers from across the state wrote to lawmakers in opposition to Noem's bill, saying it would put physicians and patients in an adversarial relationship, places severe penalties on doctors and makes no exception for conditions that would be lethal to the fetus.

While the South Dakota Medical Association, the state's largest group representing doctors, did not oppose Noem's proposed ban, it opposed the other two bills as an infringement on the doctor-patient relationship.

Charging decision on South Dakota AG expected Thursday

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A prosecutor has decided whether to file criminal charges against the state attorney general for hitting and killing a pedestrian with his car, another prosecutor helping with the case said Wednesday.

Pennington County State's Attorney Mark Vargo, who helped evaluate the case, said Hyde County State's Attorney Emily Sovell will announce Thursday morning whether Attorney General Jason Ravensborg should

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face court proceedings for the Sept. 12 death of 55-year-old Joe Boever. Vargo said he does not know Sovell's plans, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Representatives for Gov. Kristi Noem and the Department of Public Safety said they were not aware of the upcoming announcement.

Public safety officials have said Ravensborg was distracted before he drove onto a highway shoulder where he struck Boever, but they have not said what led Ravensborg to become distracted.

Ravnsborg called 911 that night and told a dispatcher that he hit "something" and that "it was in the middle of the road." When the dispatcher asked if it could have been a deer, Ravensborg initially said, "I have no idea" before adding, "It could be."

The attorney general has said he is confident he did not commit a crime. The attorneys deciding whether to charge Ravensborg have taken months to further assess the crash.

Sovell did not immediately respond to an email request seeking comment.

South Dakota to lower age minimum for COVID-19 vaccinations

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Department of Health will be lowering the age for COVID-19 vaccinations to those who are 65 and over, officials said Wednesday.

Health officials said those who qualify in that age bracket should be eligible for shots beginning Monday.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that South Dakota has received more than 189,000 doses of vaccine and administered nearly 163,000 of those, or about 18,500 doses per 100,000 people. That is one of the top rates in the country, according to the CDC.

About 16% of the South Dakota's population has received at least one dose of the vaccine and more than 7% has received two shots, according to state figures.

South Dakota's weekly federal vaccine allocation will increase next week by nearly 14%, to 17,660 doses., state health officials said. That does not those include doses targeted to Veterans Affairs and Indian Health Services.

The state reported 92 new COVID-19 tests in the last day, increasing the total number to 110,685 since the start of the pandemic. The death toll remained unchanged at 1,844. Hospitalizations fell by three, to 94.

The COVID Tracking Project reports there were 245 new cases per 100,000 people in South Dakota over the past two weeks, which ranks 40th in the country for new cases per capita.

One person has died in a house fire in Yankton

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — A house fire early Wednesday has left one person dead in Yankton.

According to fire officials, most of the house was engulfed in flames by the time crews arrived about 12:30 a.m.

Firefighters learned one person was still inside, but were unable to get to the victim. Three others escaped the burning home. Firefighters found the victim's body shortly after knocking down the flames, KSFY-TV reported.

Asst. Yankton Fire Chief Larry Nickles said the sub-zero temperatures prevented firefighters from tapping into a frozen hydrant, but they were able to get access to a second hydrant and had an ample supply of water on the trucks.

The house was destroyed by the fire.

Senate rejects loans for victims of disasters

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — State senators have rejected a bill that would have helped residents who lost their homes when the ground collapsed in a Black Hawk neighborhood and exposed an abandoned mine last year.

The legislation that failed Tuesday afternoon would have allowed residents affected by disasters to get low interest or no interest loans from the South Dakota Housing Authority.

Fifteen families lost their homes when when a sinkhole exposed an old gypsum mine in the Hideaway

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Hills neighborhood in April 2020.

Sen. David Johnson told colleagues that half the homeowners affected have filed for bankruptcy, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Sen. John Wiik said he wasn't comfortable with a provision in the bill that allows the Legislature to declare disasters.

Sen. Michael Diedrich said a better approach might be the creation of a residential disaster fund. He cautioned against passing the bill.

"The change in public policy is huge," Diedrich said.

But, Johnson argued the change in public policy fits within the mission of the housing authority.

"The South Dakota Housing Authority exists for a reason," he said. "This is the epitome of the reason." The bill was defeated in the Senate on a vote of 11-24.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press and Dakotan. February 9, 2021.

Editorial: Mask Measures And The Bigger Question

Technically, the Yankton City Commission spent time Monday night discussing the merits of extending its mask mandate during a first reading of an ordinance to do just that.

But in a broader sense, the discussion delved into a topic that every state, every municipality and county, every school district, every business and every individual will face sooner or later: When is it time to ease up on the COVID-19 rules and regulations that have, to varying degrees, guided our pandemic lives the past 11 months?

Monday's discussion was a reflection of the moment.

The current mask mandate, which was enacted in December, is scheduled to expire at the end of this month, and some commissioners want to extend it potentially to the end of May. However, with COVID numbers currently declining and vaccine dissemination (very slowly) gathering steam, at least a couple commissioners said it may be time to end the mandate and let personal responsibility again be the driving force. (However, since the current mandate has no penalty, personal choice is still the biggest driver of mask implementation.)

This leads to a few questions.

If a mask mandate is contributing to the recent slide in cases, is it wise to let that defensive measure lapse?

If neighboring states like Nebraska and Iowa are loosening their restrictions, is it reasonable to follow suit?

When will we really know if the coast is clear?

In truth, that last one may be the biggest of all, and there is no easy answer.

We saw what happened last spring when the U.S. government decided it was OK to open things up even though the coronavirus was not yet under control. Cases and deaths surged, and the virus roared out of control.

We've seen what's happened when places in New York and California tried to emerge from their lockdowns and other restrictions. Numbers climbed back up and restrictions have never completely gone away.

We don't know yet what will happen with the COVID variants that are growing rapidly and seem to be somewhat more formidable foes for the current coronavirus vaccines. This will be the next wave of worry, with the so-called UK variant, B.1.1.7, expected to become the dominant strain in this country by the end of next month.

And we still don't completely understand the current, original coronavirus and whether exposure to it creates permanent immunity or a fleeting wall of defense.

So, deciding whether to lift restrictions and lower defenses is a risky exercise. To date, evidence suggests that the restrictions will likely return because of potential surges down the road. Thus, perhaps not lifting those safety measures will help blunt the impact of what may come.

However, officials also know how frustrating these restrictions have been for everyone. For instance, it would be great if Yankton could do away with a mask mandate because it isn't needed. But the need — either now or next month or this summer — is the unanswerable question, an elusive unknown that clouds our forward view.

Monday's discussion was likely a precursor of discussions to come — probably more than once — in the days ahead. We don't have all the answers, and we keep collecting more question. Any answers we settle on now are far from definite.

Man pleads not guilty to killing 3 in South Dakota

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A man charged with killing three people in western South Dakota has pleaded not guilty to murder charges.

Thirty-six-year-old Arnon Absolu, of New York City, pleaded not guilty in Seventh Circuit Court to three counts of first-degree murder during a virtual arraignment hearing on Tuesday.

Absolu is charged in the deaths of Charles Red Willow, Ashley Nagy and Dakota Zaiser. If convicted, Absolu will be sentenced to death or life in prison without parole.

It would be up to the Pennington County State's Attorney's Office to decide whether it wants to pursue the death penalty if there's a conviction. A judge has set a March 30 deadline to make that decision, KOTA-TV reported.

Red Willow, a 26-year-old from Rapid City, and Nagy, a 29-year-old from Greeley, Colorado, were found dead Aug. 24 from multiple bullet wounds inside a car in a Rapid City park. The body of Zaiser, 22, of Rapid City, was found in some woods outside the city about a month later.

Police have said all three killings may be related to drugs.

2 Belarusian journalists sent to prison for covering protest

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A court in Belarus on Thursday sent two female journalists to prison on charges of violating public order after they covered a protest against the nation's authoritarian president.

The court in the Belarusian capital of Minsk handed two-year sentences to Katsiaryna Bakhvalava, 27, who goes by the name Andreyeva, and Daria Chultsova, 23 of the Polish-funded Belsat TV channel. They were arrested in November when police broke down the door of an apartment in Minsk from which they were doing a live stream of a protest and charged them with "organizing actions rudely violating public order," accusations they have denied.

The U.S. Embassy in Belarus has called for their release and urged Belarusian authorities to stop prosecuting journalists for doing their jobs.

Addressing the court before the verdict, Bakhvalava vowed to continue working for "building a Belarus that won't have political repressions."

"I'm not pleading. I'm demanding acquittal for me and my colleagues," she said in a reference to other Belarusian journalists who have been put into custody.

There have been more than 400 detentions of journalists in Belarus over the last six months. At least 10 of them have faced criminal charges and remain in custody.

"We consider the sentence politically motivated, its' goal is to scare all journalists to prevent them from fulfilling their professional duty to cover socially important events in the country," the Belarusian Association of Journalists said. "That effectively amounts to a professional ban."

The International Federation of Journalists' president, Younes Mjahed, denounced the ruling as "shameful and totally unfounded." "Today's verdict is a clear attack on press freedom and we all stand together against this mockery of justice," he said in a statement.

Belarus has been rocked by protests after official results from the Aug. 9 presidential election handed President Alexander Lukashenko a sixth term in office by a landslide. The opposition and some poll work-

ers have said the election was rigged.

Authorities in the Eastern European nation have responded with a sweeping crackdown on the demonstrations, the biggest of which attracted up to 200,000 people. According to human rights advocates, more than 30,000 people have been detained since the protests began, and thousands were brutally beaten.

The United States and the European Union have responded to the Belarus election and the crackdown by introducing sanctions against Belarusian officials.

Follow all AP stories about developments in Belarus at <https://apnews.com/Belarus>.

Seiko Hashimoto takes over as Tokyo Olympic president

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Seiko Hashimoto has appeared in seven Olympics, four in the winter and three in the summer — the most by any “multi-season” athlete in the games.

She made even more history on Thursday in Japan, where women are still rare in the boardrooms and positions of political power.

The 56-year-old Hashimoto was named president of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee after a meeting of its executive board, which is 80% male. She replaces 83-year-old Yoshiro Mori, a former Japanese prime minister who was forced to resign last week after making sexist comments about women.

Essentially, he said women talk too much.

“Now I’m here to return what I owe as an athlete and to return back what I received,” Hashimoto told the board, according to an interpreter.

Hashimoto had been serving as the Olympic minister in the cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. She also held a portfolio dealing with gender equality and women’s empowerment. She said she would be replaced as Olympic minister by Tamayo Marukawa.

She brought up the issue of gender equality repeatedly, and focused on problems at the organizing committee, which is male-dominated, has no female vice presidents and has an executive board made up of 80% men. It employs about 3,500 people.

“Of course, it is very important what Tokyo 2020 as an organizing committee does about gender equality,” she said, sitting between two males — CEO Toshiro Muto and spokesman Masa Takaya. “I think it will be important for Tokyo 2020 to practice equality.”

International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach said Hashimoto was “the perfect choice” for the job.

“With the appointment of a woman as president, the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee is also sending a very important signal with regard to gender equality,” Bach said in a statement.

Hashimoto competed in cycling in three Summer Olympics (1988, 1992 and 1996) and in speedskating in four Winter Olympics (1984, 1988, 1992 and 1994). She won a bronze medal — her only medal — at the 1992 Albertville Games in speedskating.

According to historian Dr. Bill Mallon, her seven appearances is the most by any “multi-season” athlete in the games.

Japan-born Naomi Osaka, speaking about Hashimoto after her semifinal victory over Serena Williams at the Australian Open, said “you’re seeing the newer generation not tolerate a lot of things.”

“I feel like it’s really good because you’re pushing forward, barriers are being broken down, especially for females,” Osaka said. “We’ve had to fight for so many things just to be equal. Even a lot of things we still aren’t equal.”

The new president is tied to the Olympics in many ways. She was born in Hokkaido in northern Japan just five days before the opening ceremony of the 1964 Tokyo Games. Her name “Seiko” comes from “seika,” which translates as Olympic flame in English.

According to widely circulated reports in Japan, Hashimoto was reluctant to take the job and was one of three final candidates considered by a selection committee headed by 85-year-old Fujio Mitarai of the

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camera company Canon.

The selection committee met for three consecutive days, a rushed appointment with the postponed Olympics opening in just over five months in the middle of a pandemic and facing myriad problems.

Polls show about 80% of the Japanese public want the Olympics canceled or postponed again. There is fear about bringing tens of thousands of athletes and others into Japan, which has controlled the coronavirus better than most countries.

There is also opposition to the soaring costs.

The official cost is \$15.4 billion, though several government audits say the price is at least \$25 billion, the most expensive Summer Olympics on record according to a University of Oxford study.

Naming a woman could be a breakthrough for gender equality in Japan, where females are under-represented in boardrooms and in politics. Japan ranks 121st out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's annual gender equality ranking.

Mori, before stepping down, tried to offer the job last week to 84-year-old Saburo Kawabuchi, a former head of the country's soccer federation. But reports of the behind-closed-door deal were widely criticized by social media, on Japanese talk shows, and in newspaper reports.

Kawabuchi quickly withdrew from further consideration.

Hashimoto is not without her critics. A Japanese magazine in 2014 ran photographs of her kissing figure skater Daisuke Takahashi at a party during the Sochi Olympics, suggesting it was sexual harassment, or power harassment. She later apologized, and Takahashi said he did not feel harassed.

"About my reckless actions, I feel regret for an action I took seven years ago," she said when asked about it on Thursday. "Back then as well as today, I am still reflecting on myself and what I have done — and what it has evolved into."

Two other former Olympians were also reported to have been in the running for Mori's job: Yasuhiro Yamashita, the president of the Japanese Olympic Committee who won gold in judo in 1984, and Mikako Kotani, who won two bronze medals in synchronized swimming at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Kotani is the sports director for the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee. That committee's leadership is dominated by men, who make up 80% of the executive board.

Japan began to roll out vaccines on Wednesday, a critical move that might boost the Olympics. It is several months behind Britain, the United States and other countries.

Widespread vaccination is unlikely in Japan when the Olympics open on July 23 with 11,000 athletes, followed by the Paralympics on Aug. 24 with 4,400 athletes. The plan is to keep the athletes in a "bubble" at the Athletes Village, at venues and at training areas. The IOC has said it will not require "participants" to be vaccinated, but is encouraging it.

In addition to the athletes, tens of thousands of officials, media, sponsors and broadcasters will also have to enter Japan. Many of them will operate outside the "bubble" in an Olympics that is driven by television and the billions the IOC receives from selling broadcast rights.

The first challenge for Hashimoto could be pulling off the torch relay that begins on March 25 in north-eastern Japan. It will crisscross the country with about 10,000 runners, and end at the opening ceremony in Tokyo.

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

US needs to brace itself for more deadly storms, experts say

By MATTHEW DALY and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Deadly weather will be hitting the U.S. more often, and America needs to get better at dealing with it, experts said as Texas and other states battled winter storms that blew past the worst-case planning of utilities, governments and millions of shivering residents.

This week's storms — with more still heading east — fit a pattern of worsening extremes under climate change and demonstrate anew that local, state and federal officials have failed to do nearly enough to

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prepare for greater and more dangerous weather.

At least two dozen people have died this week, including from fire or carbon monoxide poisoning while struggling to find warmth inside their homes. In Oklahoma City, an Arctic blast plunged temperatures in the state capital as low as 14 degrees below 0 (-25 Celsius).

"This is a different kind of storm," said Kendra Clements, one of several businesspeople in Oklahoma City who opened their buildings to shelter homeless people, some with frostbite, hypothermia and icicles in their hair. It was also a harbinger of what social service providers and governments say will be a surge of increased needs for society's most vulnerable as climate and natural disasters worsen.

Other Americans are at risk as well. Power supplies of all sorts failed in the extreme cold, including natural gas-fired power plants that were knocked offline amid icy conditions and, to a smaller extent, wind turbines that froze and stopped working. More than 100 million people live in areas under winter weather warnings, watches or advisories, and blackouts are expected to continue in some parts of the country for days.

The crisis sounded an alarm for power systems throughout the country: As climate change worsens, severe conditions that go beyond historical norms are becoming ever more common. Texas, for example, expects power demand to peak in the heat of summer, not the depths of winter, as it did this week.

The dire storms come as President Joe Biden aims to spend up to \$2 trillion on infrastructure and clean energy investment over four years. Biden has pledged to update the U.S. power grid to be carbon-pollution free by 2035 as well as weatherize buildings, repair roads and build electric vehicle charging stations.

"Building resilient and sustainable infrastructure that can withstand extreme weather and a changing climate will play an integral role" in creating jobs and meeting Biden's goal of "a net-zero emissions future," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

The storms are big news this week, especially in light of their effect on COVID-19 vaccinations as well as freezing Americans, but that doesn't mean they won't become more common, experts say.

"This definitely was an anomaly," but one that is likely to occur more frequently as a result of climate change, said Sara Eftekharnjad, assistant professor of electrical engineering and computer science at Syracuse University.

"There probably needs to be better planning, because we're starting to see more extreme weather events across the country," she said, whether it's severe cold in Texas or the intense heat wave in California last year that fueled deadly wildfires.

Better forecasting — both short-term and long-term — would help avoid catastrophic failures such as the current outages in Texas and other states, as would large-scale storage systems that can supply electricity when demand spikes and a greater diversity of power sources, Eftekharnjad and other experts said.

Climate change also is hurting military readiness. Damage from a 2018 hurricane at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida and 2019 flooding at Nebraska's Offutt Air Force Base, for example, led the Pentagon to send service members as far away as Britain to train.

Another 2018 hurricane that hit North Carolina's Camp Lejeune, home to one-third of the U.S. Marine Corps' capability, caused enough damage to degrade training overall, senior U.S. military authorities concluded.

Hardening military installations against worsening natural disasters will cost trillions. But it has to be done, said Joan VanDervort, a former longtime Defense Department climate expert now with the Center for Climate and Security think tank. "We have eyes overseas that are looking at our vulnerability and seeing how we respond. ... There are enemies out there that will certainly take advantage of it."

Michael Craig, an assistant professor of energy systems at the University of Michigan, said the events in California and Texas show that "what we have now is not going to do it in the face of climate change. It's only going to get worse from here."

The disaster in Texas and other states "is a reminder that our nation's critical infrastructure is vulnerable to extreme weather events and we can no longer turn a blind eye to the resiliency investments needed to protect it," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, who met with Biden at the White House last week.

"The cost associated with addressing climate change and improving our infrastructure's resilience is always going to be less than the cost of rebuilding or failing to act," Carper said.

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Meanwhile, federal regulators are looking into the operations of the bulk-power system during the severe winter storm that affected states from Louisiana to Minnesota.

In Texas, where wind power is a growing source of electricity, the wind turbines generally are not equipped to withstand extended low temperatures, as they are in Iowa and other cold-weather states. Modifying the turbines slightly to withstand freezing temperatures is one step needed to confront climate change, said Roy McCann, professor of electrical engineering at the University of Arkansas.

While some Republican politicians, including Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, have tried to pin blame on wind and solar power for the outages, traditional thermal power plants, which rely mostly on natural gas, provide the bulk of power in the state and were the larger problem.

"The entire system was overwhelmed," said Joshua Rhodes, a research associate on energy issues at the University of Texas.

Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City.

In surprise move, Facebook blocks news access in Australia

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — In a surprise retaliatory move Thursday, Facebook blocked Australians from sharing news stories, escalating a fight with the government over whether powerful tech companies should have to pay news organizations for content.

Australia's government condemned the step, which also blocked some government communications, including messages about emergency services, and some commercial pages.

The digital platforms fear that what's happening in Australia will become an expensive precedent for other countries as governments revamp laws to catch up with the fast changing digital world.

Facebook acted after the House of Representatives passed legislation that would make it and Google pay for Australian journalism, said Treasurer Josh Frydenberg. He said he was given no warning before Facebook acted. The legislation must be passed by the Senate to become law.

Australian news organizations could not post stories and people who tried to share existing news stories got notifications saying they were blocked from doing so.

"This post can't be shared," the website said. "In response to Australian government legislation, Facebook restricts the posting of news links and all posts from news Pages in Australia. Globally, the posting and sharing of news links from Australian publications is restricted."

The legislation mentioned by the notice has not yet been enacted.

"Facebook's actions were unnecessary, they were heavy-handed and they will damage its reputation here in Australia," Frydenberg said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison lashed out on his own Facebook page.

"Facebook's actions to unfriend Australia today, cutting off essential information services on health and emergency services, were as arrogant as they were disappointing," Morrison posted.

"These actions will only confirm the concerns that an increasing number of countries are expressing about the behavior of BigTech companies who think they are bigger than governments and that the rules should not apply to them. They may be changing the world, but that doesn't mean they run it," he added. "We will not be intimidated by BigTech seeking to pressure our Parliament."

Facebook said the proposed Australian law "fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between our platform and publishers who use it."

"This is an assault on a sovereign nation," Health Minister Greg Hunt told Parliament. "It is an assault on people's freedom and, in particular, it's an utter abuse of big technologies' market power and control over technology."

The government contends the proposed News Media Bargaining Code will ensure media businesses will be paid fairly for journalism linked online. Both Google and Facebook had threatened to retaliate.

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Australia's proposal requires a negotiation safety net through an arbitration panel. The digital giants would not be able to abuse their dominant negotiating positions by making take-it-or-leave-it payment offers to news businesses for their journalism. In case of a standoff, the panel would make a binding decision on a winning offer.

Google had threatened to remove its search functions from Australia because it said the proposed law was unworkable. But that threat has faded as Google has worked out licensing content deals with Australian media companies under its own News Showcase model.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. announced a wide-ranging deal with Google on Wednesday. Major Australian media organization Seven West Media reached a deal earlier in the week. Their rival Nine Entertainment is reportedly close to its own pact, and state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corp. is in negotiations.

The government accused Facebook of endangering public safety by temporarily blocking state emergency services messaging on a day when there were severe fire and flood warnings in various parts of Australia.

The Bureau of Meteorology's weather warnings, a Hobart women's shelter and the Betoota Advocate, a satirical website named after an Australian ghost town, were among those surprised to find their content blocked at least temporarily.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher said he told Facebook the government expects access to its pages to be restored.

"The fact that there are organizations like state health departments, fire and emergency services . . . who have had their Facebook pages blocked, that's a public safety issue," Fletcher said.

Facebook said in a statement: "Any pages that are inadvertently impacted, we'll look to reverse."

Health Minister Greg Hunt said the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne still didn't have its feed fixed after more than eight hours.

Frydenberg said he had "constructive" discussions with Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg after the content blocking began.

"He did explain to me that they had concerns with aspects of the code, and it goes to the interpretation of some of its elements. And he will come back to me with some more considered views," Frydenberg said.

He said the government remains committed to the code that is yielding generous payment deals with Google for Australian media.

"Other countries are watching, but also Google and Facebook and other digital giants are very focused on what it means, as far as a precedent goes, for other countries," Frydenberg said.

News Corp. said it would receive "significant payments" from Google under the three-year agreement, which includes heavyweight news organizations throughout the English-speaking world such as The Wall Street Journal and New York Post in the U.S., the Times and the Sun in the U.K., and The Australian and Sky News in Australia. The deal spans audio and video and News Corp. also will get an ad revenue share from Google.

Frydenberg said after weekend talks with Zuckerberg and Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Alphabet Inc. and its subsidiary Google, that he was convinced the platforms "do want to enter into these commercial arrangements."

"It's a massive step forward we have seen this week," Frydenberg said of the Google deals.

"But if this was easy, every other country in the world would have done it already. But they haven't," he said.

'Horrible': Witnesses recall massacre in Ethiopian holy city

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Bodies with gunshot wounds lay in the streets for days in Ethiopia's holiest city. At night, residents listened in horror as hyenas fed on the corpses of people they knew. But they were forbidden from burying their dead by the invading Eritrean soldiers.

Those memories haunt a deacon at the country's most sacred Ethiopian Orthodox church in Axum, where local faithful believe the ancient Ark of the Covenant is housed. As Ethiopia's Tigray region slowly resumes

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telephone service after three months of conflict, the deacon and other witnesses gave The Associated Press a detailed account of what might be its deadliest massacre.

For weeks, rumors circulated that something ghastly had occurred at the Church of St. Mary of Zion in late November, with estimates of several hundred people killed. But with Tigray cut off from the world and journalists blocked from entering, little could be verified as Ethiopian and allied fighters pursued the Tigray region's fugitive leaders.

The deacon, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he remains in Axum, said he helped count the bodies — or what was left after hyenas fed. He gathered victims' identity cards and assisted with burials in mass graves.

He believes some 800 people were killed that weekend at the church and around the city, and that thousands in Axum have died in all. The killing continues: On the day he spoke to the AP last week he said he had buried three people.

"If we go to the rural areas, the situation is much worse," the deacon said.

The atrocities of the Tigray conflict have occurred in the shadows. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for making peace with neighboring Eritrea, announced the fighting as the world focused on the U.S. election. He accused Tigray's regional forces, whose leaders dominated Ethiopia for nearly three decades before he took office, of attacking the Ethiopian military. Tigray's leaders called it self-defense after months of tensions.

While the world clamors for access to Tigray to investigate suspected atrocities on all sides and deliver aid to millions of hungry people, the prime minister has rejected outside "interference." He declared victory in late November and said no civilians had been killed. His government denies the presence of thousands of soldiers from Eritrea, long an enemy of the Tigray leaders.

Ethiopia's narrative, however, has crumbled as witnesses like the deacon emerge. The foreign ministry on Thursday acknowledged that "rape, plunder, callous & intentional mass killings" could occur in a conflict where "many are illegally armed." Its statement blamed Tigray forces for leaving the region "vulnerable" and said any serious offense will be investigated. It did not mention Eritrean soldiers.

Axum, with its ancient ruins and churches, holds major significance for the Ethiopian Orthodox faithful, who believe that the Ark of the Covenant, built to hold the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, is located there.

"If you attack Axum, you attack first of all the identity of Orthodox Tigrayans but also of all Ethiopian Orthodox Christians," said Wolbert Smidt, an ethnohistorian who specializes in the region. "Axum itself is regarded as a church in the local tradition, 'Axum Zion.'"

In a normal year, thousands of people would have gathered at the Zion church in late November to celebrate the day Ethiopians believe the Ark of the Covenant was brought there after it disappeared from Jerusalem in ancient times.

Instead, the church had become a refuge for people who fled the fighting elsewhere in Tigray. They sheltered there as worship services were underway two days before the anniversary.

Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers had arrived in Axum more than a week earlier, with heavy bombardment. But on Nov. 28 the Eritrean soldiers returned in force to hunt down members of the local militia who had mobilized against them in Axum and nearby communities.

The deacon recalled soldiers bursting into the church, cornering and dragging out worshippers and shooting at those who fled.

"I escaped by chance with a priest," he said. "As we entered the street, we could hear gunfire all over." They kept running, stumbling over the dead and wounded along with others trying to find places to hide.

Most of the hundreds of victims were killed that day, he said, but the shooting and looting continued the following day.

"They started to kill people who were moving from church to home or home to home, simply because they were on the street," another witness, visiting university lecturer Getu Mak, told the AP. "It was a horrible act to see." He watched the fighting from his hotel room, then ventured out as it eased.

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"On every corner, almost, there was a body," he said. "People were crying in every home."

Another witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, said soldiers killed a man at his home near the Zion church. "How can I tell you? So many dead," said the man, who has since escaped to the Tigray capital, Mekele.

After the killings in Axum came an uneasy period with soldiers roaming the streets and families searching for loved ones. At night, hyenas descended from nearby hills.

The city began to smell of death as some bodies went untouched for days.

"I saw a horse cart carrying around 20 bodies to the church, but Eritrean soldiers stopped them and told people to throw them back on the street," said Getu, the university lecturer.

Finally, when the soldiers left the city to pursue other fighters, residents mobilized to bury the bodies, the deacon said.

"We could not do a formal burial," he said. "We buried them en masse" in graves near the Zion church and others.

Some of the dead were among the hundreds of thousands of people in Tigray displaced by the conflict and not known to Axum residents. Their identity cards were collected in churches, where they await the discovery of loved ones.

The deacon said residents believe the Eritrean soldiers were taking revenge for the two-decade border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea that played out nearby and ended after Abiy became prime minister. Some of the soldiers told residents they had been instructed to kill people as young as 12, he said.

Another witness, a 39-year-old who gave only his first name, Mhretab, and escaped weeks ago to the United States, asserted that Ethiopian federal police did nothing to rein in the Eritrean soldiers.

"I said to them, 'Listen, you're Ethiopian, they're destroying Ethiopian cities. How is this possible?'" Mhretab recalled.

"They said, 'What can we do? This shouldn't have happened from the beginning. This is from above,'" indicating that it had been decided by senior officials, he said.

He said he ferried bodies to a mass grave by the Zion church and estimated that he saw 300 to 400 there.

The deacon believes that the Eritrean soldiers, in their hunt for Tigray fighters, have killed thousands more people in villages outside Axum. "When they fight and lose, they take revenge on the farmers and kill everyone they can find," he said. "This is what we've seen in the past three months."

Getu echoed that belief, citing his uncle, who survived such a rural confrontation.

The deacon has not gone to the villages outside Axum. His work remains with his church, where services continue even as he says the Tigray conflict is as fierce as ever.

"We're also protecting the church," he said. "Even now, I'm talking to you from there. We are not armed. What we do is mostly watching. And, of course, praying that God protects us."

The Latest: UK invests in studies of long COVID-19 syndrome

By The Associated Press undefined

LONDON — The British government is backing four new studies to investigate why some people continue to have symptoms months after becoming sick with COVID-19.

The Department of Health on Thursday announced 18.5 million pounds (\$26 million) in funding for research into the causes, symptoms and effects of the phenomenon known as "long COVID."

While most people recover from the coronavirus in a few weeks, about one in 10 still have symptoms 12 weeks later. Researchers around the world are trying to understand the causes and dozens of symptoms that include breathlessness, headaches, fatigue and "brain fog."

Britain's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus says the research is welcome but is not enough. The lawmakers are calling for long COVID-19 to be classed as an occupational disease of front-line workers so patients can receive compensation if they can't work because of the illness.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

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- U.S. life expectancy drops by a year in pandemic, the most since World War II
- Crippling winter weather in U.S. hampers vaccine deliveries, distribution
- New York's governor faces mounting pressure over COVID deaths at nursing homes
- One Good Thing: When coronavirus lockdowns shut down classes in a youth prison, a Greek math teacher created a DIY TV channel that broadcasts lessons 24 hours a day
- Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

HONG KONG — Hong Kong has approved the Chinese-developed Sinovac Biotech COVID-19 vaccine as health authorities in the semi-autonomous Chinese city prepare to begin large scale inoculations.

Hong Kong's Secretary for Food and Health said "the benefits of authorizing the use of the COVID-19 vaccine by Sinovac for protecting against COVID-19 outweigh the risks," in a news release Thursday.

The first batch around 1 million doses of the Sinovac vaccine will be delivered to Hong Kong "shortly," with vaccinations across the territory of almost 7.5 million people to begin "as soon as possible."

Even after vaccinations begin, the company will need to maintain a risk management program and provide the latest clinical data laboratory analysis certificates for each batch of vaccines, the statement said.

The announcement marks the latest piece of good news for the Asian financial hub as new daily cases fall into the single digits. Authorities on Thursday said they were reducing social distancing rules, including restarting indoor dining and reopening gyms, and plan to phase-in full judicial court services beginning on Monday.

THE HAGUE — Dutch lawmakers are holding a debate Thursday on hastily drawn up legislation underpinning the country's coronavirus curfew after a judge ordered the measure scrapped earlier this week.

The lower house of parliament is expected to support the legislation, which would then go to the senate on Friday — the same day that government lawyers go to court to appeal the order banning the 9 p.m.-to-4:30 a.m. curfew.

The curfew, which sparked rioting last month but is very broadly supported and followed, remains in force pending the outcome of that appeal.

A judge in The Hague banned the curfew, saying the law the government used when it introduced the measure last month can only be used in pressing emergencies such as a massive dike breach.

The government argues that the curfew became an urgent necessity because of the swift rise of new, more transmissible variants of the virus.

PARIS — European plane maker Airbus lost 1.1 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) last year amid an unprecedented global slump in air travel because of the pandemic, but expects to deliver hundreds of planes and make a profit in 2021 despite uncertainty about when people will resume flying en masse.

Airbus is also pushing to negotiate a "cease-fire" soon in its years-long trade dispute with U.S. rival Boeing, amid hopes that the Biden Administration will be more amenable than Trump's government to a deal. The dispute has led to billions of dollars in tit-for-tat cross-Atlantic tariffs on planes, cheese, wine, video games and other products.

Airbus CEO Guillaume Faury acknowledged Thursday that the company's performance last year was "far from expectations" and had to constantly adapt as airlines grounded planes — or folded altogether — because of travel restrictions. Airbus announced in June that it would cut 15,000 jobs, mostly in France and Germany.

"The crisis is not over. It is likely to continue to be our reality throughout the year," Faury said. "Airlines will continue to suffer" and to "burn cash."

Airbus doesn't expect the industry to recover to pre-pandemic levels until 2023-2025.

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COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lanka's Health Ministry has limited the number of guests at weddings and funerals as it seeks to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the capital and its suburbs.

The move comes as the health officials are calling for tougher action including imposing lockdowns after the local detection of a new variant that first emerged in the United Kingdom.

In January, Sri Lanka allowed 150 people to attend weddings. But on Thursday, it lowered that to 50 guests. Funerals are limited to 25 people.

Sri Lanka has banned all other public gatherings and imposed restrictions on public transport.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's daily increase in coronavirus infections has exceeded 600 for the second straight day, continuing an upward trend following last week's Lunar New Year's holidays.

The 621 new cases reported Thursday brought the national caseload to 85,567, including 1,544 deaths. The country reported 621 new cases Wednesday, which was the highest daily jump in more than a month.

More than two-thirds of the new cases were in Seoul area, home to half of South Korea's 51 million people. A plastic factory near the capital has emerged as a major cluster of infections, linked to more than 110 cases so far since a Cambodian worker first tested positive Saturday.

DENVER — The Denver Board of Ethics has unanimously dismissed an ethics complaint that was filed after the city's mayor flew to Texas for Thanksgiving despite urging Denver's residents to avoid holiday travel because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Denver Post reported Wednesday that board chairman Joseph Michaels acknowledged that Denver Mayor Michael Hancock's actions were concerning.

Michaels says the mayor disappointed and angered the city's residents. But he says the board found that the mayor had not specifically violated the city's code of ethics.

Michaels adds: "This board certainly does not condone that travel."

AVLONA, Greece — Setting up a television channel from scratch isn't the most obvious or easiest thing for a math teacher to do — especially without prior technical knowledge and for use inside a prison.

But that is exactly the task Petros Damianos, director of the school at Greece's Avlona Special Youth Detention Center, took on so his students could access the lessons that coronavirus lockdowns cut them off from.

Greek schools have shut, reopened, and closed again over the past year. Greek students have adapted to virtual classes, but the online world isn't accessible to all.

The Avlona detention center holds nearly 300 young men aged 18-21, and sometimes up to 25. The school Damianos founded there in 2000 now teaches primary grades through to college.

Damianos had an idea: he could reach his students through the televisions in their cells if he could figure out how to create a dedicated TV channel to broadcast their classes. Now that channel broadcasts lessons 24 hours a day on a loop.

"School is something different. It's a bit more human than the rest of the prison," said M.S., a 21-year-old who earned his high school diploma in Avlona.

RALEIGH, N.C. — North Carolina is shifting its vaccine distribution guidance to dissuade people from traveling long distances to receive a COVID-19 shot in the state.

Under updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention clarifying travel policies, North Carolina has enacted stricter vaccination policies to improve North Carolinians' access to the vaccine.

The move aims to give greater preference to in-state residents who have struggled to book appointments and come in for shots due to the high demand, but loopholes still allow for people to travel into the state without having to provide ID, proof of residency or proof of employment.

NEW YORK — New York is suing Amazon, claiming the company failed to provide workers with a safe environment at two warehouses as COVID-19 infections surged nationwide.

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The lawsuit from New York Attorney General Letitia James comes just days after Amazon preemptively sued to block it from happening. In its own lawsuit filed Friday, Amazon said that unannounced inspections by the New York City sheriff's office found its New York warehouse went above and beyond safety requirements.

On Wednesday, Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel added that the attorney general's lawsuit doesn't present an accurate picture of Amazon's response to the virus.

In the suit filed late Tuesday, New York claims Amazon showed a "flagrant disregard for health and safety requirements" and retaliated against employees who raised alarms.

The lawsuit involves two Amazon facilities in New York City that employ more than 5,000 workers.

TORONTO — Canada's largest city is asking the province of Ontario to extend a lockdown order for at least two more weeks instead of having it expired as planned on Monday.

Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, said she has never been as worried about the future as she is now because of coronavirus variants.

Toronto Mayor John Tory said leaders need to ensure the current lockdown is the city's last. Schools just reopened in Toronto while retail stores are scheduled to open Monday.

Canada is poised to receive millions of vaccine doses this spring.

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Pennsylvania is facing a temporary shortage of booster shots of the Moderna vaccine because providers inadvertently used them as first doses, setting back the state's already stumbling vaccine rollout.

The error could mean more than 100,000 people will need appointments rescheduled, state health officials said Wednesday.

Acting state health secretary Alison Beam said between 30,000 and 60,000 people who need the booster shot will have to wait one to two more weeks. Another 30,000 to 55,000 of the initial dose of the Moderna vaccine will also have to be delayed.

The second-dose shortage does not affect the Pfizer vaccine.

Second doses of the two-shot Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are typically administered 21 and 28 days apart, respectively, but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently updated its guidance to allow the time between shots to be delayed up to six weeks.

MADRID — Spain will place those arriving from Brazil and South Africa in quarantine for 10 days in a new bid to stem the propagation of coronavirus variants from those countries.

Health Minister Carolina Darias said Wednesday Spain has registered 613 cases of the British variant, six of the South African type and two of that from Brazil.

Spain has already restricted arrivals from all three countries to Spanish nationals and foreign residents in Spain. It also insists on negative PCR tests from within the previous 72 hours as well as anti-body tests on arrival.

The ministry Wednesday said Spain's COVID-19 pandemic figures continued their positive downward trend, with the 14-day incidence rate falling to 349 per 100,000 inhabitants, down from 385 a day earlier and far below the near 900-case high at the end of January.

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration says it will spend more than \$1.4 billion to boost testing supplies and coordination as U.S. officials aim to return more students to the classroom.

The White House says it will spend \$815 million to increase U.S. manufacturing of testing supplies that have been subject to frequent shortages for months, including materials used in laboratories and for rapid point-of-care tests.

Officials also announced \$650 million to setup regional testing "hubs" around the country to help coordinate testing at K-8 schools, universities, homeless shelters and other gathering places.

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The U.S. failure to provide fast, widespread testing is one of the most enduring stumbles in the federal government's response to COVID-19. As a candidate, Biden said his administration would deliver free, comprehensive testing at a national scale. He has asked Congress to provide \$50 billion for testing in the stimulus bill before lawmakers.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is vaccinating on average 1.7 million Americans per day for the coronavirus, up from under 1 million a month ago.

New figures from the White House show the steady increase in the pace of vaccinations over President Joe Biden's first month in office.

Much of the increase, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, comes from people receiving their second dose of the approved vaccines from Moderna and Pfizer.

The pace of first dose vaccinations has been largely steady over the past several weeks, hovering around an average of 900,000 shots per day.

Biden is on track to blow past his goal of 100 million injections in his first 100 days in office — though the pace must pick up even further to meet his plans to vaccinate nearly all adults by the end of the summer.

RIO DE JANEIRO — Rio de Janeiro halted new vaccinations against COVID-19 for a week starting Wednesday due to a shortage of doses, one of a growing number of Brazilian cities that have run low on supplies and are demanding help from Brazil's federal government.

City officials said they will continue to deliver second doses to those who have already been injected once, but have paused new shots for the elderly.

Officials say vaccines for new recipients ran out partly because they had pushed forward their schedule by one week after receiving a fresh lot of doses. Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes said on Monday that additional shots won't be delivered before next week.

"We are ready and we have already vaccinated 244,852 people," he said on his official Twitter profile. "We just need the vaccine to arrive."

Biden and congressional Democrats to unveil immigration bill

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration is joining Democrats on Capitol Hill to unveil a major immigration overhaul that would offer an eight-year pathway to citizenship to the estimated 11 million people living in the U.S. without legal status.

The legislation, to be released in detail Thursday morning, will reflect the broad priorities for immigration reform that Biden laid out on his first day in office, including an increase in visas, funding to process asylum applications and new technology at the southern border.

But while the plan offers one of the fastest pathways to citizenship of any proposed measure in recent years, it does so without offering any enhanced border security, which past immigration negotiations have used as a way to win Republican votes. Without enhanced security, it faces tough odds in a closely divided Congress.

The bill would immediately provide green cards to farm workers, those with temporary protected status and young people who arrived in the U.S. illegally as children. For others living in the U.S. as of Jan. 1, 2021, the plan establishes a five-year path to temporary legal status, if they pass background checks, pay taxes and fulfill other basic requirements. Then, after three years, they can pursue citizenship.

The plan would raise the current per-country caps for family and employment-based immigrant visas. It would eliminate the penalty barring those immigrants who live in the U.S. without authorization and who then leave the country from returning for three to 10 years. It also would provide resources for more judges, support staff and technology to address the backlog in processing asylum seekers.

The bill would expand transnational anti-drug task forces in Central America and enhances technology at the border. And it would try to reduce the burden at the border by setting up refugee processing in

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Central America, to try to prevent some of the immigrant caravans that have overwhelmed border security in recent years.

The plan includes \$4 billion spread over four years to try to boost economic development and tackle corruption in Latin American countries, to try to address some of the root causes of migration to the U.S.

A dozen Democratic lawmakers, including lead sponsors California Rep. Linda Sanchez and New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, are set to unveil the full text of the bill.

Comprehensive immigration reform has struggled to gain traction in Congress for decades.

Menendez was part of the bipartisan Gang of Eight senators who negotiated a 2013 immigration reform bill that ultimately collapsed. Prior to that, a bill backed by President George W. Bush failed in Congress as well, after multiple attempts at compromise.

While Biden is pushing a comprehensive bill, he suggested earlier this week he may be open to a more piecemeal approach. During a CNN town hall Tuesday night, Biden said that while a pathway to citizenship would be essential in any immigration bill, "there's things I would deal by itself." That could leave the door open to standalone bills focused on providing a pathway to citizenship for various populations.

Still, publicly the White House is emphasizing that its goal is a comprehensive plan.

"The president feels that all of these requirements that are in the bill — these components of the bill — are what makes it comprehensive," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said this week. "They all need to be addressed. That's why he proposed them together."

Even without listening, US lives in Limbaugh's media world

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — You didn't have to like or even listen to Rush Limbaugh to be affected by what he did.

Conservative talk radio wasn't a genre before him. Without Limbaugh, it's hard to imagine a Fox News Channel, or a President Donald Trump, or a media landscape defined by shouters of all stripes that both reflect and influence a state of political gridlock.

To his fans, Limbaugh's death Wednesday of lung cancer at the age of 70 was an occasion for deep mourning. For his foes, it was good riddance. Somewhere, Rush could surely appreciate it.

He left a legacy.

"He was the most important individual media figure of the last four decades," said Ian Reifowitz, professor of historical studies at the State University of New York and author of "The Tribalization of Politics: How Rush Limbaugh's Race-Baiting Rhetoric on the Obama Presidency Paved the Way for Trump."

That assessment was freely offered even though Reifowitz, as the title of his book suggests, isn't a fan. He blames Limbaugh for setting a blueprint for white identity politics and the dividing of the nation into uneasy tribes.

Limbaugh's death led Trump to call in to Fox News Channel for his first television interview since leaving office — and he did it twice.

Former Vice President Mike Pence told Fox he was inspired by Limbaugh to become a talk radio host himself, which launched his political career. Ex-White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany reminisced about riding as a child in her father's pick-up truck as Limbaugh's show played on the radio.

"I am the definition of a 'Rush baby,' and it's not just me," McEnany said on Twitter. "There are tens of thousands of us all across the conservative movement."

Radio hosts talked politics before Limbaugh, men like Jerry Williams in Boston and Barry Farber in New York.

But the idea of conservative talk radio didn't take hold until Limbaugh, after bouncing through DJ jobs in Pittsburgh, Kansas City and Sacramento, went national from a perch at New York's WABC in 1988, said Michael Harrison, publisher of Talkers magazine.

Limbaugh was a sensation among people who liked to tweak liberals, outraging with political incorrectness. Before Limbaugh, only 30 or 40 stations did "talk radio," and many weren't political, Harrison said. Now there are thousands.

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To the end, Limbaugh led the field. He reached an estimated 15.5 million people each week and lost in the ratings for three months only once in some three decades, to advice host Laura Schlesinger, Harrison said. Bumper stickers proclaimed, "Rush is Right."

"There is no talk radio as we know it without Rush Limbaugh. It just doesn't exist," said Sean Hannity, who has 15 million radio listeners beyond his Fox News Channel show. "And I'd even make the argument in many ways: there's no Fox News or even some of these other opinionated cable networks."

Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes launched Fox News in 1996. MSNBC started the same year.

Politics seemed second to entertainment in Limbaugh's early years.

"I'm trying to attract the largest audience I can and hold it for as long as I can so that I can charge advertisers confiscatory advertising rates," Limbaugh told Steve Kroft of "60 Minutes" in 1991. "This is a business."

But he soon became more than a business leader. Republicans credited Limbaugh for helping them win the House majority in 1994.

"It wasn't just that he transformed the media landscape, but he transformed the Republican Party," said Nicole Hemmer, author of "Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics." "He became a power player and someone who could move voters."

Conservative radio host Mark Levin called Limbaugh "a tremendous patriot." Once a universally accepted compliment, the term "patriot" has become more complicated through its use by some of the rioters at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

"He refused to accept the attacks that came against this country from within," Levin said on Fox News. "He refused to accept the ideological changes in this country. He defended the traditions of this country. And he spoke for tens of millions of us."

To SUNY's Reifowitz, Limbaugh led the way in getting people "scared about the browning of the country."

Some of Limbaugh's language was downright ugly. He invented the term "feminazi," called Chelsea Clinton a "dog" when she was 12 years old and had to apologize for calling a young woman a "slut" for arguing that birth control be covered by health insurance. He mocked the death of AIDS victims and played the parody song "Barack the Magic Negro" when Barack Obama was elected president.

The headline on HuffPost's obituary on Wednesday said Limbaugh "saturated America's airwaves with cruel bigotries, lies and conspiracy theories." The Root called him a "spouter of racist, hate-filled garbage."

On Foxnews.com, Limbaugh's obituary's headline was "Greatest of All Time."

Limbaugh didn't embrace Trump right away, but soon fell in line. Trump's appeal mystified many in politics at first, but "if you had been listening to Rush Limbaugh for 20 years, he sounded very familiar," Hemmer said.

As Limbaugh's political strength became evident, many Republican politicians felt they couldn't cross him, or run the risk of alienating his millions of listeners, Hemmer said.

"Many of these listeners didn't care if Rush Limbaugh crossed the line (of propriety)," she said. "They cared more about loyalty to him than any kind of underlying set of principles."

The economic lessons taught by Limbaugh are clear each night on Fox, CNN and MSNBC, routinely the three most-watched cable networks. They're not really news networks in prime time; they present political talk.

"It's hard," Hemmer said, "to overstate his importance."

Harrison, who interviewed Limbaugh several times over the years, said the talk show host "began to take himself more seriously" in his later years.

Limbaugh even appeared to measure words more carefully. After receiving social media blowback in December for suggesting that the nation was "trending toward secession," he later made clear he wasn't advocating that.

To the end, however, he remained loyal to Trump, who awarded Limbaugh a Presidential Medal of Freedom at the State of the Union address last year.

Limbaugh supported Trump's false claims that the election was stolen and, on Jan. 7, compared rioters at the Capitol to people who sparked the Revolutionary War.

EXPLAINER: What's up between Google, Facebook and Australia?

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — For two decades, global news outlets have complained internet companies are getting rich at their expense, selling advertising linked to their reports without sharing revenue.

Now, Australia is joining France and other governments in pushing Google, Facebook and other internet giants to pay. That might channel more money to a news industry that is cutting coverage as revenue shrinks. But it also sets up a clash with some of the tech industry's biggest names.

Google, a unit of Alphabet Inc., has announced agreements to pay publishers in Australia while Facebook said Thursday it has blocked users in the country from viewing or sharing news.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIA?

Facing a proposed law to compel internet companies to pay news organizations, Google has announced deals with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and Seven West Media. No financial details were released. The Australian Broadcasting Corp. is in negotiations.

Google accounts for 53% percent of Australian online advertising revenue and Facebook 23%, according to Treasurer Josh Frydenberg.

Google had threatened to make its search engine unavailable in Australia in response to the legislation, which would create a panel to make pricing decisions on news.

On Thursday, Facebook responded by blocking users from accessing and sharing Australian news.

Facebook said the proposed law "ignores the realities" of its relationship with publishers that use its service to "share news content." That was despite Frydenberg saying this week Google and Facebook "do want to enter into these commercial arrangements."

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

Australia's proposed law would be the first of its kind, but other governments also are pressuring Google, Facebook and other internet companies to pay news outlets and other publishers for material.

In Europe, Google had to negotiate with French publishers after a court last year upheld an order saying such agreements were required by a 2019 European Union copyright directive.

France is the first government to enforce the rules, but the decision suggests Google, Facebook and other companies will face similar requirements in other parts of the 27-nation trade bloc.

Google and a group of French publishers have announced a framework agreement for the American company to negotiate licensing deals with individual publishers. The company has deals with outlets including the newspaper Le Monde and the weekly magazine l'Obs.

Last year, Facebook announced it would pay U.S. news organizations including The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and USA Today for headlines. No financial details were released.

In Spain, Google shut down its news website after a 2014 law required it to pay publishers.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Developments in Australia and Europe suggest the financial balance between multibillion-dollar internet companies and news organizations might be shifting.

Australia is responding to complaints internet companies should share advertising and other revenue connected to news reports, magazine articles and other content that appears on their websites or is shared by users.

The government acted after its competition regulator tried and failed to negotiate a voluntary payment plan with Google. The proposed law would create a panel to make binding decisions on the price of news reports to help give individual publishers more negotiating leverage with global internet companies.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PUBLIC?

Google's agreement means a new revenue stream for news outfits, but whether that translates into more coverage for readers, viewers and listeners is unclear.

The union for Australian journalists is calling on media companies to make sure online revenue goes into news gathering.

"Any monies from these deals need to end up in the newsroom, not the boardroom," said Marcus Strom, president of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. "We will be pressing the case for transparency on how these funds are spent."

In the meantime, access occasionally could suffer: Facebook's move Thursday initially blocked some Australian commercial and government communications pages.

DIY education: Greek teacher creates TV classes for inmates

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

AVLONA, Greece (AP) — Setting up a television channel from scratch isn't the most obvious or easiest thing for a math teacher to do — especially without prior technical knowledge and for use inside a prison.

But that is exactly the task Petros Damianos, director of the school at Greece's Avlona Special Youth Detention Center, took on so his students could access the lessons that coronavirus lockdowns cut them off from.

Greek schools have shut, reopened, and closed again over the past year as authorities sought to curtail the spread of the virus. Like their peers across much of the globe, the country's students adapted to virtual classes.

But the online world isn't accessible to all.

The Avlona detention center, a former military prison, holds nearly 300 young men aged 18-21, and sometimes up to 25. The school Damianos founded there in 2000 now teaches primary grades through to college, following the national curriculum and awarding graduation certificates equivalent to any Greek school.

While attendance is voluntary, the prison school has grown in popularity and saw record enrollment in September, when up to 96% of inmates signed up. But with internet devices banned in their cells, the prison's students had no way to continue learning when the lockdowns canceled classroom lessons.

"Our teachers couldn't reach the kids like they reach all other kids in Greece," said Damianos, a mild-mannered man in his 60s. "This was a big problem, a very big problem that seemed almost insurmountable."

The fact that inmates are stacked four or five to a cell with less space per person than the prison classrooms didn't matter. Their school had to shut along with the rest during lockdowns in March and again in November.

When he heard in early December that Greece's schools wouldn't reopen before Christmas, "I felt ... despair," Damianos said. Making matters worse, the lockdown ended visits and furlough leave, so inmates "experienced a double prison," he said.

While access to education is important for all students, it is perhaps even more critical for Avlona's, some of whom have been convicted and others who are awaiting trial. Many never graduated or even completed primary grades, and education is the most concrete tool they can use to turn their lives around.

"Essentially, our students are those who ... before they got to prison, the education system expelled them," Damianos said. "These kids are kids we didn't catch in time. To whom we as a society, when we should have, didn't give what we should have given."

Desperate for a solution, Damianos had an idea: he could reach his students through the televisions in their cells if he could figure out how to create a dedicated TV channel to broadcast their classes.

Technician friends told Damianos it was possible with the necessary equipment. The next hurdle was obtaining the equipment with shops also closed during the nationwide lockdown. Then the school's staff had to learn how to use it.

The school's music teacher, Nikos Karadosidis, took on the role of technician, using experience from occasional concert tech work and guidance gleaned from YouTube tutorials.

"I very quickly realized — and this is the magic of it, too — that this whole thing is essentially DIY," Karadosidis said. "Do it yourself, with whatever materials you have, with whatever tools you have, to try to do the best you can."

Through donations, volunteers and online orders, the staff cobbled together what they needed. A critical

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piece of equipment — a modulator to transmit the TV signal — ran into delivery delays, so a store lent them an older one. Two hundred meters (feet) of cable arrived, and inmates helped run it from the school to the prison's central aerial.

One prison classroom was converted into a rudimentary studio, with a cheap hand-held video camera taped to a tripod. Multicolored Christmas lights served as a makeshift recording light, warning those outside to keep quiet during recording sessions.

On Jan. 8, about a month after Damianos had the idea, the channel was ready. They named it Prospathodas TV, Greek for "Trying TV." Through word of mouth, they got inmates to re-tune their televisions to capture the new channel.

The pilot program was a half-hour math class. Now the channel operates 24 hours a day, running six hours' worth of pre-recorded lessons on a loop on weekdays, and eight hours of content on a loop on weekends.

The teachers record new lessons daily: from math and handicrafts to economics and music. Karadosidis edits into the night and broadcasts the classes the next day, since live broadcasts are still beyond their technical capabilities.

For the students, going to class provided more than just education. Beyond the series of barred metal doors, past the courtyard with soccer balls caught in coils of razor wire, school was a brief respite from the harshness of prison life.

"School is something different. It's a bit more human than the rest of the prison," said M.S., a 21-year-old who earned his high school diploma in Avlona. "We come here and we joke around with our teachers. They take care of us.... It's a bit like a family."

Under prison regulations, inmates can only be identified by their initials.

M.S. has about another two years to go after serving 31 months for robbery, theft and beatings. He knows his criminal record has dashed his dream of teaching literature, but he made it into university and is now studying photography and visual arts.

Having graduated from high school, he doesn't need to watch Trying TV, but he has followed a class on making purses out of magazine paper and tape "because I'm interested in handicrafts and stuff. It gives me ideas." He says the TV channel has become quite popular.

"You run out of (cigarette) filters and you go into the next cell to ask for a filter, and you see five big guys battling with their little paper strips trying to make purses," he said. "Then you go to the next cell later, and someone's trying to solve an equation."

Once the pandemic is over, Damianos would like to expand the channel to include documentaries and other worthwhile programs. But while it's plugging a hole in education and maintaining contacts between students and teachers, he stresses that televised lessons can't deliver what in-person classes do.

"Let's be honest, the channel can't replace the education that takes place in school," Damianos said. "It is very important, but it's not enough."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

NASA rover streaks toward a landing on Mars

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A NASA rover streaked toward a landing on Mars on Thursday in the riskiest step yet in an epic quest to bring back rocks that could answer whether life ever existed on the red planet.

Ground controllers at the space agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, settled in nervously for the descent of Perseverance to the surface of Mars, long a deathtrap for incoming spacecraft. It takes a nail-biting 11 1/2 minutes for a signal that would confirm success to reach Earth.

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The landing of the six-wheeled vehicle would mark the third visit to Mars in just over a week. Two spacecraft from the United Arab Emirates and China swung into orbit around the planet on successive days last week.

All three missions lifted off in July to take advantage of the close alignment of Earth and Mars, traveling some 300 million miles in nearly seven months.

Perseverance, the biggest, most advanced rover ever sent by NASA, stood to become the ninth spacecraft to successfully land on Mars, every one of them from the U.S.

The car-size, plutonium-powered rover was aiming for NASA's smallest and trickiest target yet: a 5-by-4-mile strip on an ancient river delta full of pits, cliffs and fields of rock.

Scientists believe that if life ever flourished on Mars, it would have happened 3 billion to 4 billion years ago, when water still flowed on the planet.

Percy, as it is nicknamed, was designed to drill down with its 7-foot (2-meter) arm and collect rock samples that might hold signs of bygone microscopic life. The plan called for three to four dozen chalk-size samples to be sealed in tubes and set aside on Mars to be retrieved by a fetch rover and brought homeward by another rocket ship, with the goal of getting them back to Earth as early as 2031.

Scientists hope to answer one of the central questions of theology, philosophy and space exploration.

"Are we alone in this sort of vast cosmic desert, just flying through space, or is life much more common? Does it just emerge whenever and wherever the conditions are ripe?" said deputy project scientist Ken Williford. "Big, basic questions, and we don't know the answers yet. So we're really on the verge of being able to potentially answer these enormous questions."

China's spacecraft includes a smaller rover that also will be seeking evidence of life — if it makes it safely down from orbit in May or June.

Perseverance's descent has been described by NASA as "seven minutes of terror," in which flight controllers can only watch helplessly. The preprogrammed spacecraft was designed to hit the Martian atmosphere at 12,100 mph (19,500 kph), then use a parachute to slow it down and a rocket-steered platform known as a sky crane to lower the rover the rest of the way to the surface.

Mars has proved a treacherous place: In the span of less than three months in 1999, a U.S. spacecraft was destroyed upon entering orbit because engineers mixed up metric and English units, and an American lander crashed on Mars after its engines cut out prematurely.

NASA is teaming up with the European Space Agency to bring the rocks home. Perseverance's mission alone costs nearly \$3 billion.

The only way to confirm — or rule out — signs of past life is to analyze the samples in the world's best labs. Instruments small enough to be sent to Mars wouldn't have the necessary precision.

"The Mars sample return project is probably the most challenging thing we've ever attempted within NASA," said planetary science director Lori Glaze, "and we don't do any of these things alone."

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

US life expectancy drops a year in pandemic, most since WWII

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

Life expectancy in the United States dropped a staggering one year during the first half of 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic caused its first wave of deaths, health officials are reporting.

Minorities suffered the biggest impact, with Black Americans losing nearly three years and Hispanics, nearly two years, according to preliminary estimates Thursday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is a huge decline," said Robert Anderson, who oversees the numbers for the CDC. "You have to go back to World War II, the 1940s, to find a decline like this."

Other health experts say it shows the profound impact of COVID-19, not just on deaths directly due to

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infection but also from heart disease, cancer and other conditions.

"What is really quite striking in these numbers is that they only reflect the first half of the year ... I would expect that these numbers would only get worse," said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, a health equity researcher and dean at the University of California, San Francisco.

This is the first time the CDC has reported on life expectancy from early, partial records; more death certificates from that period may yet come in. It's already known that 2020 was the deadliest year in U.S. history, with deaths topping 3 million for the first time.

Life expectancy is how long a baby born today can expect to live, on average. In the first half of last year, that was 77.8 years for Americans overall, down one year from 78.8 in 2019. For males it was 75.1 years and for females, 80.5 years.

As a group, Hispanics in the U.S. have had the most longevity and still do. Black people now lag white people by six years in life expectancy, reversing a trend that had been bringing their numbers closer since 1993.

Between 2019 and the first half of 2020, life expectancy decreased 2.7 years for Black people, to 72. It dropped 1.9 years for Hispanics, to 79.9, and 0.8 years for white people, to 78. The preliminary report did not analyze trends for Asian or Native Americans.

"Black and Hispanic communities throughout the United States have borne the brunt of this pandemic," Bibbins-Domingo said.

They're more likely to be in frontline, low-wage jobs and living in crowded environments where it's easier for the virus to spread, and "there are stark, pre-existing health disparities in other conditions" that raise their risk of dying of COVID-19, she said.

More needs to be done to distribute vaccines equitably, to improve working conditions and better protect minorities from infection, and to include them in economic relief measures, she said.

Dr. Otis Brawley, a cancer specialist and public health professor at Johns Hopkins University, agreed.

"The focus really needs to be broad spread of getting every American adequate care. And health care needs to be defined as prevention as well as treatment," he said.

Overall, the drop in life expectancy is more evidence of "our mishandling of the pandemic," Brawley said.

"We have been devastated by the coronavirus more so than any other country. We are 4% of the world's population, more than 20% of the world's coronavirus deaths," he said.

Not enough use of masks, early reliance on drugs such as hydroxychloroquine, "which turned out to be worthless," and other missteps meant many Americans died needlessly, Brawley said.

"Going forward, we need to practice the very basics" such as hand-washing, physical distancing and vaccinating as soon as possible to get prevention back on track, he said.

Marilynn Marchione can be followed on Twitter: @MMarchioneAP

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UAE dismantles Eritrea base as it pulls back after Yemen war

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The United Arab Emirates is dismantling parts of a military base it runs in the East African nation of Eritrea after it pulled back from the grinding war in nearby Yemen, satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press show.

The UAE built a port and expanded an airstrip in Assab beginning in September 2015, using the facility as a base to ferry heavy weaponry and Sudanese troops into Yemen as it fought alongside a Saudi-led coalition against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels there.

But the country once praised as "Little Sparta" by former U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis appears to have found the limits of its military expansion in Yemen's stalemate conflict, experts say. After it withdrew

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troops from the conflict, the satellite photos show it began shipping off equipment and tearing down even newly built structures.

"The Emiratis are paring back their strategic ambitions and are pulling out of places where they had presences," said Ryan Bohl, an analyst at the Texas-based private intelligence firm Stratfor. "Having that hard-power deployment exposed them to more risk than the Emiratis are now willing to tolerate."

Emirati officials did not respond to questions from the AP. Eritrea, which gave a 30-year lease to the Emiratis for the base, similarly did not respond to questions sent to its embassy in Washington.

The UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, poured millions of dollars into improving the facility at Assab, only some 70 kilometers (40 miles) from Yemen. It dredged a port and improved the dusty airstrip's roughly 3,500-meter (11,500-foot) runway to allow for heavy support aircraft.

The Emiratis also built barracks, aircraft canopies and fencing across the 9-square-kilometer (3.5-square-mile) facility initially built in the 1930s by colonial power Italy.

Over time, the UAE stationed Leclerc battle tanks, G6 self-propelled howitzers and BMP-3 amphibious fighting vehicles at the airport, according to United Nations experts. Those types of heavy weapons have been seen on Yemeni battlefields. Attack helicopters, drones and other aircraft have been seen on its runways.

Barracks on the base housed Emirati and Yemeni troops, as well as Sudanese forces filmed disembarking in Yemen's port city of Aden. Records show the ship carrying them, the SWIFT-1, traveled back and forth to Assab. The vessel later came under attack by Houthi forces in 2016 and the Emirati government asserted it carried humanitarian aid, a claim for which U.N. experts later described themselves as being "unconvinced of its veracity."

The base also aided wounded soldiers by housing "one of the best field surgical hospitals anywhere in the Middle East," said Michael Knights, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near-East Policy who has studied the Assab base.

As Yemen's war dragged on, the Emiratis also used the base for holding prisoners as the Saudi-led coalition faced increasing international pressure over detainee abuse and airstrikes killing civilians. The UAE announced in the summer of 2019 it had begun withdrawing its troops from the war, which still rages today.

"There's only so far that they can punch above their weight, which they do militarily and economically," said Alex Almeida, a security analyst at Horizon Client Access who has studied Assab. "Once they figured out Yemen wasn't worth it for them, they decided, 'We're going to end it,' and they ended it pretty suddenly."

Satellite pictures from Planet Labs Inc., analyzed by the AP, show that decision appears to extend to Assab as well.

In June 2019, around the time the Emiratis made their withdrawal announcement, workers apparently razed structures believed to be barracks alongside the port, the satellite images show. Workers gathered neat rows of materiel just north of the port, apparently waiting to be shipped off.

In early January of this year, another photo showed what appeared to be vehicles and other equipment being loaded onto a waiting cargo ship. By Feb. 5, the ship and that equipment were gone.

The deconstruction included newly built canopies along a new tarmac near the facilities' runway as well. In the Feb. 5 images, another set of canopies that analysts earlier linked to the drones being flown out of the base had been dismantled as well. The UAE has used Chinese-made armed drones in the Yemen war to kill leaders among the Houthi rebels.

Destruction of the drone hangars come after rebels in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November alleged that Emirati drones from Assab had been used against their positions. The UAE hasn't commented on the allegation for which the rebels offered no evidence.

The U.N.-backed government in Libya also has alleged the UAE has flown weapons through Assab on its way there. U.N. experts have accused the UAE among other nations of funneling weapons into Libya amid its yearslong civil war.

Meanwhile, a Ukrainian-registered Antonov An-124 cargo plane flew several flights in late January back and forth to the Emirati city of Al Ain from Assab, according to flight data from FlightRadar24.com.

That aircraft, once linked to the Emirati military, now flies for an Ukrainian-Emirati company called Maxi-

mus Air. The firm did not return a request for comment left at its Abu Dhabi office.

Despite the dismantling work, Emirati attack helicopters still have been seen at the base. It remains a strategically important point as well, sitting just off the crucial Bab el-Mandeb strait connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

But the UAE may face more-pressing concerns. Since 2019, tensions between the U.S. and Iran have seen a series of escalating incidents, including attacks on ships off the Emirates. Those threats closer to home may take precedence over an expanded military footprint abroad.

"I think what 'Little Sparta' is doing is to keep its powder dry for whatever it needs to do next," Knights said.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Migrants on the move again in Mexico and Central America

By ISABEL MATEOS and MARÍA VERZA Associated Press

TENOSIQUE, Mexico (AP) — In the first Mexican shelter reached by migrants after trekking through the Guatemalan jungle, some 150 migrants are sleeping in its dormitories and another 150 lie on thin mattresses spread across the floor of its chapel.

Only six weeks into the year, the shelter known as "The 72" has hosted nearly 1,500 migrants, compared to 3,000 all of last year. It has halved its dormitory space due to the pandemic. That wasn't a problem last year because few migrants arrived, but this year it's been overwhelmed.

"We have a tremendous flow and there isn't capacity," said Gabriel Romero, the priest who runs the shelter in Tenosique, a town in southern Tabasco state. "The situation could get out of control. We need a dialogue with all of the authorities before this becomes chaos." In particular, he would like the government to assist with migrants who camp outside while they are full.

Latin America's migrants — from the Caribbean, South America and Central America — are on the move again. After a year of pandemic-induced paralysis, those in daily contact with migrants believe the flow north could return to the high levels seen in late 2018 and early 2019. The difference is that it would happen during a pandemic.

The protective health measures imposed to slow the spread of COVID-19, including drastically reduced bedspace at shelters along the route, mean fewer safe spaces for migrants in transit.

"The flow is increasing and the problem is there's less capacity than before to meet their needs" because of the pandemic, said Sergio Martin, head of the nongovernment aid group Doctors Without Borders in Mexico.

Some shelters remain closed by local health authorities and almost all have had to reduce the number of migrants they can assist. Applications for visas, asylum or any other official paperwork are delayed by the government's reduced capacity due to the pandemic to process them.

"This is not a post-COVID migration; it is a migration in the middle of the pandemic, making it all the more vulnerable," said Ruben Figueroa, an activist with the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement.

Some migrants have expressed hope of a friendlier reception from the new U.S. administration or started moving when some borders were reopened. Others are being driven by two major hurricanes that ravaged Central America in November and desperation deepened by the economic impact of the pandemic.

Olga Rodríguez, 27, had been walking for a month since leaving Honduras with her husband and four children, aged 3 to 8, after Hurricane Eta flooded the street vendors' house. They arrived in Mexico and applied for asylum, but told it would take six months. Forced to sleep in the street, they changed plans.

"The children suffered cold, we got wet and I told my husband if we're going to be in the cold and rain, better we walk," she said from Coatzacoalcos. Now their goal is the United States.

President Joe Biden's administration has taken steps toward rolling back some of the harshest policies of ex-President Donald Trump, but a policy remains allowing U.S. border officials to immediately send back almost anyone due to the pandemic. The U.S. government is concerned that the more hopeful message could set off a rush for the border and says it will take time to implement new policies.

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The number of people apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border in January was more than double that of the same month last year and 20,000 above January 2019. This week families have been seen crossing from Ciudad Juarez and turning themselves over to Border Patrol in hopes of applying for asylum.

"Wait in your country, or if you're in Mexico, wait" until you can be sure you can cross legally, Roberta Jacobson, the White House's lead advisor on the border, said recently.

Last week, the Biden administration announced that it would slowly start processing the approximately 25,000 asylum seekers who were forced to wait out their process in Mexico under Trump. That was scheduled to begin Friday at three border crossings.

Mexico has so far said it will continue enforcing an "orderly" migration, which in practice has meant trying to contain migrants in the south since Trump threatened tariffs on all Mexican imports in 2019.

On Tuesday, Mexico's National Immigration Institute said in a statement that authorities had made 50 raids on freight train lines since Jan. 25 in southern and central Mexico, detaining nearly 1,200 migrants.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador warned migrants recently to not be fooled by traffickers who promise that the U.S. will open its doors.

Isabel Chávez, one of the nuns who work at the migrant shelter in Palenque, some 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Tenosique, said they had to reduce the number of days migrants could stay there to a maximum of two because of the "avalanche" of migrants who arrived in January. There would be as many as 220 migrants there compared to the 100 they would see before the pandemic began in March 2020, she said.

In Tapachula, the largest Mexican city near its border with Guatemala and home to Mexico's biggest detention center, there are signs of the increase as well. "There are more people applying for refuge and the increase in migrants is evident in the city's public spaces," said Enrique Vidal Olascoaga, lawyer for the nongovernmental organization Fray Matías de Córdova, which helps migrants with legal procedures.

César Augusto Cañaveral, the director of the Good Shepherd shelter in Tapachula, lamented having to close the doors of the shelter after it filled in late January.

"Now we take food out to the street and some sleep outside," but that has concerned the shelter's neighbors, who worry about the risk of COVID-19 infections. "This is going to be more complicated than (the wave of migrants in) 2018, because the cherry on top is COVID-19," he said.

Now, more than 1,300 miles to the southeast, some 1,500 migrants spread across various camps in Panama have their sights set on getting to Tapachula, either as a temporary stopover en route to the U.S. border or to begin the asylum process in Mexico.

Panama reopened its border in late January and ever since, groups have been walking out of the dense Darien jungle that divides Panama and Colombia. The government has been shuttling them to other camps closer to the Costa Rica border to make space for new arrivals.

Last week, Guatemalan immigration officials warned that a new migrant caravan could be forming in coming days in Honduras. In January, Guatemalan authorities blocked the year's first caravan, sending nearly 5,000 Hondurans back to their country over a 10-day span.

But while Guatemala was focused on the caravan, other migrants were moving north as always in small, discreet groups. It was during the caravan last month that shelters in southern Mexico began seeing their numbers increase with mostly Honduran migrants.

Small groups of migrants are more vulnerable to criminals who kidnap and extort them, said the activist Figueroa.

Most invisible are those paying smugglers who stuff them into trailers like the one that Mexican authorities stopped in Veracruz this week. Inside were 233 migrants, mostly from Guatemala.

In late January, 19 bodies, shot and burned, were found inside a pickup truck near the Mexico-Texas border. Most were believed to be Guatemalan migrants. A dozen state police officers were arrested in connection with the case.

"We foresee an increase in violence," said Sergio Martin of Doctors Without Borders, noting that despite the pandemic migrants continue to be pushed into moving clandestinely.

Just down the border from where the bodies were found, the Rev. Francisco Gallardo, director of the

migrant shelter in Matamoros, said he had recently made arrangements for two pregnant women to deliver their babies in the Mexican city.

"Two families with two women eight months pregnant just crossed the river" into the U.S., he said, referring to the Rio Grande that divides the two countries. "They already had their smuggler and decided to risk it."

Back in southern Mexico, migrant Edilberto Aguilar continued walking. "This is a chain," said the 33-year-old Honduran. "One day we arrive and tomorrow others arrive. This never ends."

AP writers Juan Zamorano in Panama City and Sonia Pérez D. in Guatemala City contributed to this report.

Power outages linger for millions as another icy storm looms

By PAUL J. WEBER and JILL BLEED Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Millions of Americans endured another frigid day without electricity or heat in the aftermath of a deadly winter storm as utility crews raced to restore power before another blast of snow and ice sowed more chaos in places least equipped to deal with it.

Nearly 3.4 million customers around the U.S. were still without electricity, and some also lost water service. Texas officials ordered 7 million people — a quarter of the population of the nation's second-largest state — to boil tap water before drinking it following days of record low temperatures that damaged infrastructure and froze pipes.

The latest storm front was certain to complicate recovery efforts, especially in states that are unaccustomed to such weather — parts of Texas, Arkansas and the Lower Mississippi Valley.

"There's really no letup to some of the misery people are feeling across that area," said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster with the National Weather Service, referring to Texas.

The system was forecast to move into the Northeast on Thursday. More than 100 million people live in areas covered by some type of winter weather warning, watch or advisory, the weather service said.

This week's extreme weather has been blamed for the deaths of more than 30 people, some of whom perished while struggling to keep warm inside their homes. In the Houston area, one family succumbed to carbon monoxide from car exhaust in their garage. Another family died while using a fireplace to keep warm.

Weather-related outages have been particularly stubborn in Oregon, where some customers have been without power for almost a week.

The worst U.S. outages by far have been in Texas, where 3 million homes and businesses remained without power as of midday Wednesday. More than 200,000 additional customers were in the dark in four Appalachian states, and nearly that many in the Pacific Northwest, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility outage reports.

The president of the Texas power grid manager, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said he hoped many customers would see at least partial service restored by later Wednesday or Thursday.

Dashawn Walker, 33, was thrilled to find the power back on in his Dallas apartment. He stayed at a suburban hotel Tuesday night after being without power since Sunday, but said he was charged \$474 for one night.

"It's crazy," Walker said. "I mean why would y'all go up on the hotels in the middle of a crisis?"

Water pressure has fallen across the state because lines have frozen, and many residents are leaving faucets dripping in hopes of preventing pipes from freezing, said Toby Baker, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott urged residents to shut off water to their homes, if possible, to prevent more busted pipes and preserve pressure in municipal systems.

The outages in and around Portland, Oregon, affected nearly 150,000 customers nearly a week after a massive snow and ice storm toppled many trees and took out hundreds of miles of power lines.

The damage to the power system was the worst in 40 years, said Maria Pope, CEO of Portland General

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Electric. At the peak of the storm, more than 350,000 customers in the Portland area were in the dark.

"These are the most dangerous conditions we've ever seen in the history of PGE," said Dale Goodman, director of utility operations, who declined to predict when all customers would have power restored.

Utilities from Minnesota to Texas implemented rolling blackouts to ease the burden on strained power grids. The Southwest Power Pool, a group of utilities covering 14 states, said the blackouts were "a last resort to preserve the reliability of the electric system as a whole."

The weather also disrupted water systems in several Southern cities, including in New Orleans and Shreveport, Louisiana, where city fire trucks delivered water to several hospitals, and bottled water was being brought in for patients and staff, Shreveport television station KSLA reported.

Power was cut to a New Orleans facility that pumps drinking water from the Mississippi River. A spokeswoman for the Sewerage and Water Board said on-site generators were used until electricity was restored.

In the southwest Louisiana city of Lake Charles, Mayor Nic Hunter said Wednesday that water reserves remained low and local hospitals were faced with the possibility they might have to transfer patients to other areas.

Travel remains ill-advised in much of the United States, with roadways treacherous and thousands of flights canceled. Many school systems delayed or canceled face-to-face classes. But staying home carried risks too in places without power.

Authorities said a fire that killed three young children and their grandmother in the Houston area likely was caused by the fireplace they were using to keep warm. In Oregon, authorities confirmed Tuesday that four people died in the Portland area of carbon monoxide poisoning.

The crisis also produced stories of kindness.

In Clinton, Mississippi, Army veteran Evelyn Fletcher has been cooking and delivering meals to sidelined truck drivers, travelers and people staying at hotels after losing power at home.

"They're stranded, they're isolated — people are in need of support right now," Fletcher said.

On Monday, Fletcher made 85 meals. On Tuesday, she made 30 plates, while a local restaurant, T'Beaux's Crawfish and Catering, cooked 75 plates of shrimp and gumbo that she and other volunteers delivered. And on Wednesday, Fletcher was cooking a pot of turkey noodle soup, hoping to deliver another 70 meals.

"People are worried about more snow," she said. "We are going to keep people fed and keep them feeling hopeful."

Bleed reported from Little Rock, Arkansas. Associated Press journalists Gillian Flaccus in Portland, Oregon; Julie Walker in New York; Jake Bleiberg in Dallas; Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska; Kevin McGill in New Orleans; Leah Willingham in Jackson, Mississippi; Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; and Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, contributed to this report.

US needs to brace itself for more deadly storms, experts say

By MATTHEW DALY and ELLEN KNICKMEYER ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON (AP) — Deadly weather will be hitting the U.S. more often, and America had better get better at dealing with it, experts said Wednesday as Texas and other states battled winter storms that blew past the worst-case planning of utilities, governments and millions of shivering citizens.

This week's storms — with more still heading east — fit a pattern of worsening extremes under climate change and demonstrate anew that local, state and federal officials have failed to do nearly enough to prepare for greater and more dangerous weather.

At least two dozen people have died this week, including from fire or carbon monoxide poisoning while struggling to find warmth inside their homes. In Oklahoma City, an Arctic blast plunged temperatures in the state capital as low as 14 degrees below 0 (-25 Celsius).

"This is a different kind of storm," said Kendra Clements, one of several businesspeople in Oklahoma City who opened their buildings to shelter homeless people, some with frostbite, hypothermia and icicles in their hair. It was also a harbinger of what social service providers and governments say will be a surge

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of increased needs for society's most vulnerable as climate and natural disasters worsen.

Other Americans are at risk as well. Power supplies of all sorts failed in the extreme cold, including natural gas-fired power plants that were knocked offline amid icy conditions and, to a smaller extent, wind turbines that froze and stopped working. More than 100 million people live in areas under winter weather warnings, watches or advisories, and blackouts are expected to continue in some parts of the country for days.

The crisis sounded an alarm for power systems throughout the country: As climate change worsens, severe conditions that go beyond historical norms are becoming ever more common. Texas, for example, expects power demand to peak in the heat of summer, not the depths of winter, as it did this week.

The dire storms come as President Joe Biden aims to spend up to \$2 trillion on infrastructure and clean energy investment over four years. Biden has pledged to update the U.S. power grid to be carbon-pollution free by 2035 as well as weatherize buildings, repair roads and build electric vehicle charging stations.

"Building resilient and sustainable infrastructure that can withstand extreme weather and a changing climate will play an integral role" in creating jobs and meeting Biden's goal of "a net-zero emissions future," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

The storms are big news this week, especially in light of their effect on COVID-19 vaccinations as well as freezing Americans, but that doesn't mean they won't become more common, experts say.

"This definitely was an anomaly," but one that is likely to occur more frequently as a result of climate change, said Sara Eftekharnjad, assistant professor of electrical engineering and computer science at Syracuse University.

"There probably needs to be better planning, because we're starting to see more extreme weather events across the country," she said, whether it's severe cold in Texas or the intense heat wave in California last year that fueled deadly wildfires.

Better forecasting — both short-term and long-term — would help avoid catastrophic failures such as the current outages in Texas and other states, as would large-scale storage systems that can supply electricity when demand spikes and a greater diversity of power sources, Eftekharnjad and other experts said.

Climate change also is hurting military readiness. Damage from a 2018 hurricane at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida and 2019 flooding at Nebraska's Offutt Air Force Base, for example, led the Pentagon to send service members as far away as Britain to train.

Another 2018 hurricane that hit North Carolina's Camp Lejeune, home to one-third of the U.S. Marine Corps' capability, caused enough damage to degrade training overall, senior U.S. military authorities concluded.

Hardening military installations against worsening natural disasters will cost trillions. But it has to be done, said Joan VanDervort, a former longtime Defense Department climate expert now with the Center for Climate and Security think tank. "We have eyes overseas that are looking at our vulnerability and seeing how we respond. ... There are enemies out there that will certainly take advantage of it."

Michael Craig, an assistant professor of energy systems at the University of Michigan, said the events in California and Texas show that "what we have now is not going to do it in the face of climate change. It's only going to get worse from here."

The disaster in Texas and other states "is a reminder that our nation's critical infrastructure is vulnerable to extreme weather events and we can no longer turn a blind eye to the resiliency investments needed to protect it," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, who met with Biden at the White House last week.

"The cost associated with addressing climate change and improving our infrastructure's resilience is always going to be less than the cost of rebuilding or failing to act," Carper said.

Meanwhile, federal regulators are looking into the operations of the bulk-power system during the severe winter storm that affected states from Louisiana to Minnesota.

In Texas, where wind power is a growing source of electricity, the wind turbines generally are not equipped to withstand extended low temperatures, as they are in Iowa and other cold-weather states. Modifying the turbines slightly to withstand freezing temperatures is one step needed to confront climate change,

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said Roy McCann, professor of electrical engineering at the University of Arkansas.

While some Republican politicians, including Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, have tried to pin blame on wind and solar power for the outages, traditional thermal power plants, which rely mostly on natural gas, provide the bulk of power in the state and were the larger problem.

"The entire system was overwhelmed," said Joshua Rhodes, a research associate on energy issues at the University of Texas.

Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City.

Thousands of cold-stunned sea turtles being rescued in Texas

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas (AP) — Residents, some of whom lack heat or basic amenities in their own homes due to the unusually chilly weather, have been rescuing cold-stunned sea turtles and taking them to a convention center in a South Texas resort town.

"Every 15 minutes or less there's another truck or SUV that pulls up," Ed Caum, executive director of the South Padre Island Convention and Visitors Bureau, told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

He said sometimes people bring one or two sea turtles, sometimes more. "We had trailers full yesterday coming in that had 80, 100, 50," he said.

The South Padre Island Convention Center started pitching in Monday when its neighbor, Sea Turtle Inc., could no longer handle the number of sea turtles being dropped off, and their mostly outdoor operation had lost power. He said the convention center itself didn't have power or water till early Wednesday morning.

He says they've "collected" more than 3,500 sea turtles so far. He said he hesitates to use the word rescued because "we know we're going to lose some."

Caum said that with another cold front approaching, they don't know when they'll be able to return the sea turtles to the water.

Temperatures in the area on Wednesday afternoon were in the 40s. He said it may be Saturday — when temperatures are expected to reach the low 60s (above 15 Celsius) — before the turtles can be released back into the Gulf.

He said with power returned they have been able to bring the convention center's temperature to 60 degrees.

"We're trying to do the best we can to save as many turtles as possible," he said.

Trump-McConnell feud threatens Republicans' path to power

By STEVE PEOPLES, JILL COLVIN and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump is escalating a political war within his own party that could undermine the Republican push to fight President Joe Biden's agenda and ultimately return to power.

A day after blistering Mitch McConnell, the Senate's top Republican, as a "dour, sullen and unsmiling political hack," Trump repeated his baseless claim on Wednesday that he was the rightful winner of the November election in a series of interviews with conservative outlets after nearly a month of self-imposed silence.

Trump also continued to attack McConnell, accusing the Senate GOP leader of failing to stand up for Republicans after McConnell blasted Trump for inciting the Jan. 6 Capitol riot despite voting to acquit the former president at his second impeachment trial.

"The Republicans are soft. They only hit their own, like Mitch," Trump complained on Newsmax. "If they spent the same time hitting (Senate Democratic leader Chuck) Schumer and (President Joe) Biden, the Republicans would be much better off, that I can tell you."

Republican officials in several battlegrounds carried by Biden, including Georgia and Arizona, have said the vote was fair. Trump's legal claims surrounding the vote were rejected by judges across the political spectrum, including many appointed by the former president. McConnell himself described Trump's con-

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tention as an “unhinged falsehood.”

Leading GOP strategists described the exploding feud between the former Republican president and the Senate’s most powerful Republican as, at best, a distraction and, at worst, a direct threat to the party’s path to the House and Senate majorities in next year’s midterms.

“I don’t think he cares about winning,” Steven Law, a McConnell ally who leads the most powerful Republican-aligned super PAC in Washington, said of Trump. “He just wants it to be about himself.”

Law noted that Trump lost several states where Republicans face must-win Senate elections in next year’s quest to break up Democrats’ control of Congress, including in Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Republicans are also competing in Nevada and New Hampshire, where Trump was defeated, and in North Carolina, where Trump barely won.

If Trump tries to make himself “the center of attention,” Law said, “that actually could cost Republicans seats in the general election.”

Such infighting is not altogether unusual after a political party loses the White House, but in this case, the feuding factions have been willing to attack each other publicly. And there was a broad consensus on Wednesday that the ugly intraparty clash would likely extend well into next year’s congressional primary season.

The stakes may be higher this time, however, as key players — Trump, among them — have openly threatened the prospect of creating a new political party, which would endanger the Republican Party’s very existence.

Roughly 120 anti-Trump Republicans, including current and former officeholders, secretly convened earlier in the month to contemplate the future of the GOP. A plurality, or 40%, supported the idea of creating a new party, according to an internal survey provided by one of the meeting’s organizers, former independent presidential candidate Evan McMullin.

“There’s a lot of energy out there for something new,” McMullin said, while encouraging Trump to follow through with his threats of creating a Patriot Party. “Frankly, I would welcome him to start a new party and take his most loyal supporters with him. I think that would be a wonderful thing for the party and the country.”

Trump’s plans for the future are still coming together in West Palm Beach, Florida.

He has been banned from Facebook and Twitter for inciting violence, but on Wednesday, he broke his monthlong silence, giving his first interviews since leaving the White House after the death of conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh.

On Newsmax, Trump said his team was still exploring its options for returning to social media and “negotiating with a number of people,” while still keeping the option of building his own platform on the table.

“We’re looking at a lot of different things, but I really wanted to be somewhat quiet,” Trump said, sidestepping repeated questions about whether he intends to run again in 2024.

“Too early to say,” he said, while acknowledging that he missed being president.

Still, Trump said that he has had no problem communicating when he wants to by issuing statements — and has made clear this week that he will not retire quietly.

The former president hurled a series of personal insults at McConnell in a fiery written statement Tuesday. Mainstream Republicans were perhaps most concerned about his threat to support primary challengers against Republican candidates who don’t fully embrace his “Make America Great Again” philosophy.

Some feared that Trump might encourage Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., to run for the Senate, though there was no evidence of that. The fears hark back to the GOP’s struggle a decade ago when a handful of tea party candidates with baggage emerged from their Senate primaries and stymied the GOP from retaking a majority.

In Indiana, Richard Mourdock defeated six-term Sen. Richard Lugar in the 2012 primary, but he imploded after a debate in which he said pregnancy resulting from rape “is something that God intended.” In Missouri, Republican nominee Todd Akin lost after he insisted on a local talk show that women’s bodies have ways to avoid pregnancy in cases of “legitimate rape.”

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And in Delaware, tea party favorite Christine O'Donnell beat a longtime GOP congressman before losing by a landslide in the 2010 general election following reports of personal financial difficulties, questionable use of campaign funds and allegations that she had "dabbled into witchcraft."

Now that Trump has invigorated a similarly populist movement, Republicans need to recruit candidates who can navigate a pro-Trump primary and maintain statewide appeal while not alienating establishment-minded donors. That's no easy task.

The Senate Republican campaign arm, led by Florida Sen. Rick Scott, will not get involved in open primaries. But McConnell's advisers have not ruled out the possibility — even if it draws Trump's ire.

"You can't let insanity go unchecked, or it will eat you alive," said Josh Holmes, a top McConnell political adviser.

"He just wants to win," he said of McConnell. "If he has to act as a heat shield, so be it."

Meanwhile, Trump broke his monthlong media blackout Wednesday, calling into Fox News, Newsmax and OANN and repeating what Democrats have labeled his "big lie": his insistence that he won the 2020 election, even though he lost to Biden by millions of votes.

Dozens of judges, local election officials and even his own administration have said there was no evidence of mass voter fraud, but that hasn't stopped Trump from saying there was, even after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol building that left five dead.

"Well, Rush thought we won. And so do I, by the way. I think we won substantially," Trump told Fox.

He did not call out McConnell by name, but he acknowledged critics within his own party: "We don't have the same support at certain levels of the Republican system."

Meanwhile, Law sought to downplay Trump's grip on the Republican Party. He noted that Trump's approval rating among Republican voters, at close to 80%, stands at a similar mark to that of former President George W. Bush following the Iraq War and the 2007 financial meltdown.

The focus on the next election cannot be Trump, he said.

"We will do everything we can to make the focus Joe Biden and the Pelosi-Schumer Congress. We can win with that," Law said. "The challenge is if there's a way in which Trump finds a way to make himself the focus next fall."

Peoples reported from New York.

Muddled promises on schools pose political problem for Biden

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is in a political firestorm over how and when to get more schools open amid the coronavirus pandemic, with Republicans seizing on confusion surrounding Biden's goal to reopen a majority of schools within his first 100 days to paint the president as beholden to teachers' unions at the expense of American families.

His administration in recent weeks has sent muddled and at times contradictory messages about Biden's goal. On Tuesday night, the president said his 100-day goal was to have most elementary schools open five days a week, seeming to conflict with his own press secretary, who had said last week that schools would be considered "open" if they held in-person classes even one day a week.

Biden's aides dismiss the controversy as a flareup that will disappear once the coronavirus is better under control and more school districts reopen, pointing to recent polls suggesting the public so far believes Biden is doing a good job in handling the issue.

But there could be lingering damage if Biden is seen to break an early promise on an issue so important to so many Americans.

Teachers' unions have said they support reopening schools once officials are able to make the buildings safer, but they need the \$130 billion included in Biden's proposed American Rescue Plan to make it happen. And even if the bill passes Congress by the Democrats' mid-March deadline, it's unclear whether districts would be able to make changes in time to hasten school openings before the end of Biden's first 100 days.

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Dan Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association, said teachers are willing to go back to in-person learning "only if this bill is passed, only if the dollars get to the school districts in time for them to be able to do the work that they need to do in terms of spacing, in terms of sanitizing, and only if we get the majority of our teachers vaccinated."

"It's possible. But at this stage, at this point, it's not probable," he said.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said in an interview she hopes Biden will meet his goal, and has said teachers should return to school when COVID-19 mitigation strategies are in place. But she noted that with social distancing, school still won't feel normal.

"You're not going to be able to have every single child in every single school in the normal way that we think about normal school," she said.

Until the nation reaches herd immunity with the widespread distribution of the vaccine, Weingarten said, "we're not going to be normal."

This leaves Biden caught between teachers' unions expressing caution towards his expanded goal on reopening, and critics who say just one day of classroom time a week for a majority of schools is far too little. Data from Burbio, a service that tracks school opening plans, recently reported that 66% of K-12 students already are learning in-person to some degree.

Republicans have been using the issue to hit at Democrats for weeks, pointing to data suggesting that many schools are safe to open now and charging that the Biden administration is siding with teachers' unions over science and the needs of American families.

"In places across America where public education depends on the whims of a powerful public sector union, the best interests of children have often come dead last," Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in the Senate, said during a floor speech earlier this month. "As the months have rolled by and the data have poured in, it's become clear that schools can open safely."

"An administration that puts facts and science first would be conducting a full-court press to open schools," McConnell said.

Republicans see the issue as one that has an urgent and immediate impact on nearly every American family, and one that's particularly salient for the kinds of suburban swing voters who can be decisive in tough House districts and statewide races.

Republican strategist Rory Cooper said the issue is particularly relevant in "collar counties around major urban areas." He and other parents are "enraged with the state of schooling right now," he said.

Children face "mental health issues, academic issues, physical and social issues. And the priority seems to be on the adults who worked in the school system, rather than the children who are supposed to benefit from it," Cooper said.

Democrats believe they can turn the issue back on any Republicans who vote against the COVID-19 aid bill, and plan to hammer those lawmakers for blocking funding to get kids back to school.

But Republicans are already using the issue against Democrats in races this year. One of California Gov. Gavin Newsom's Republican opponents, Kevin Faulconer, launched his campaign hammering Newsom on the issue after stepping off a yellow school bus, a symbol of the frustration of parents whose kids remain locked out of classrooms because of the pandemic.

While teachers' unions have embraced what they say was much-needed leadership from the president after the Trump administration left educators worried about their health and without adequate protection, they also acknowledge that Biden's goal has put pressure on the unions to deliver.

"Has it made it harder, you know, on everyone to have an ambitious, bold goal for the American people? Of course," Weingarten said, adding that she gives Biden "credit for wanting to help families get to a sense of hope."

Part of what's contributing to the confusion, according to National Education Association President Becky Pringle, is that there's no one-size-fits-all program that schools can implement to meet Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on how to safely reopen. She said she felt that's what was guiding the Biden administration's now-discarded one-day-a-week standard for reopening.

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"It was an acknowledgment that every school has different challenges in meeting those guidelines," Pringle said, noting that implementing social distancing guidelines, for example, would be a different challenge in crowded urban schools than it would be in more sparsely attended rural schools."

Another challenge for Biden in getting teachers and students fully back to in-person learning is the question of vaccinations for teachers, where the administration's message has been muddled.

While Biden said Tuesday that teachers should move up in priority for getting vaccinated, White House press secretary Jen Psaki clarified his stance on Wednesday, saying that while teachers should be a priority, vaccinating teachers was just a recommendation and not required for schools to reopen. And Dr. Anthony Fauci, the administration's top infectious disease expert, said it would be "non-workable" for every teacher to get vaccinated before schools reopen.

Domenech said the comments from the administration are certain to be met with frustration from teachers.

"To say that vaccination should not be a prerequisite, I think that sets up an unnecessary issue," he said.

And with his 100-day goal for schools, Biden is taking responsibility for something that he cannot ultimately control.

Even if school districts receive the money they need to quickly implement changes, the decision on whether to reopen is left up to teachers' unions and local officials, and is made on an individual basis across the nation's more than 13,500 school districts.

Psaki acknowledged that during a briefing Wednesday, declaring that while the federal government can help with money and guidelines on how to safely reopen, "this is going to be up to local schools and school districts."

Facebook blocks Australians from accessing news on platform

By ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Facebook announced Thursday it has blocked Australians from viewing and sharing news on the platform because of proposed laws in the country to make digital giants pay for journalism.

Australian publishers can continue to publish news content on Facebook, but links and posts can't be viewed or shared by Australian audiences, the U.S.-based company said in a statement.

Australian users cannot share Australian or international news.

International users outside Australia also cannot share Australian news.

"The proposed law fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between our platform and publishers who use it to share news content," Facebook regional managing director William Easton said.

"It has left us facing a stark choice: attempt to comply with a law that ignores the realities of this relationship, or stop allowing news content on our services in Australia. With a heavy heart, we are choosing the latter," Easton added.

The announcement comes a day after Treasurer Josh Frydenberg described as "very promising" negotiations between Facebook and Google with Australian media companies.

Frydenberg said after weekend talks with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Alphabet Inc. and its subsidiary Google, he was convinced that the platforms "do want to enter into these commercial arrangements."

Frydenberg said he had had a "a constructive discussion" with Zuckerberg after Facebook blocked Australian news.

"He raised a few remaining issues with the Government's news media bargaining code and we agreed to continue our conversation to try to find a pathway forward," Frydenberg tweeted.

But communications Minister Paul Fletcher said the government would not back down on its legislative agenda.

"This announcement from Facebook, if they were to maintain this position, of course would call into question the credibility of the platform in terms of the news on it," Fletcher told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

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"Effectively Facebook is saying to Australians information that you see on our platforms does not come from organizations that have editorial policies or fact-checking processes or journalists who are paid to do the work they do," Fletcher added.

The Australian Parliament is debating proposed laws that would make the two platforms strike deals to pay for Australian news.

The Senate will consider the draft laws after they were passed by the House of Representatives late Wednesday.

Both platforms have condemned the proposed laws as unworkable. Google has also threatened to remove its search engine from the country.

But Google is striking pay deals with Australian news media companies under its own News Showcase model.

Seven West Media on Monday became the largest Australian news media business to strike a deal with Google to pay for journalism.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. has since announced a wide-ranging deal.

Rival Nine Entertainment is reportedly close to its own pact and ABC is also in negotiations.

News plays a larger part in Google's business model than it does in Facebook's.

Easton said the public would ask why the platforms were responding differently to the proposed law that would create an arbitration panel to set a price for news in cases where the platforms and news businesses failed to agree.

"The answer is because our platforms have fundamentally different relationships with news," Easton said.

Peter Lewis, director of the Australia Institute's Center for Responsible Technology think tank, said Facebook's decision "will make it a weaker social network."

"Facebook actions mean the company's failures in privacy, disinformation, and data protection will require a bigger push for stronger government regulation," Lewis said. "Without fact-based news to anchor it, Facebook will become little more than cute cats and conspiracy theories."

Houston furniture store offers shelter after winter storm

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — For Tina Rios, her family and hundreds of other people, shelter from the winter storm that has left much of Houston without power or heat came from an unusual place: a furniture store.

Sitting at one of the many tables on display Wednesday inside Gallery Furniture's cavernous showroom, Rios, 32, explained how she "started stressing really, really hard" after her suburban Houston mobile home lost power at around 4:30 a.m. on Monday and she, her husband, Eric Bennis, and their three children were soon able to see their breath inside. After spending one frigid night there, they realized they needed to find somewhere warm to wait out the blackout, not so much for the parents, who grew up in New Jersey and are used to cold, but for the children, ages 3, 9 and 10.

"They're Texas babies," said Bennis, a 31-year-old tow truck driver. "This is the first time they've seen white on the ground."

They heard Gallery Furniture's owner, Jim McIngvale, had opened his main store in north Houston as a shelter, so they made the hourlong drive from Channelview.

"We came in and they welcomed us with open arms," said an emotional Rios.

As utility crews raced Wednesday to restore power to nearly 3.4 million customers in Texas and other parts of the U.S. while another blast of ice and snow threatened to cause more chaos in places that aren't used to such weather, McIngvale, known as "Mattress Mack," said Houston has been good to his business and his employees and that he was just doing his part to help.

"We all have a responsibility for the well-being of the community and we think this is our responsibility," said McIngvale, who later walked around the store greeting people and offering them doughnuts and kolaches — Czech pastries that are popular in parts of Texas.

McIngvale previously opened the store, which has a generator that can power the location for several

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days, as a shelter after flooding from Hurricane Harvey in 2017 inundated much of Houston. He has also provided meals for people during the coronavirus pandemic.

Unlike in 2017, McIngvale has had to take precautions to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Anyone entering the makeshift shelter must wear a mask and bottles of hand sanitizer were stationed throughout the store.

People sat around dining room tables in the showroom on Wednesday and ate food located near a back kitchen or bags of chips and other snacks taken from small metal buckets set up near the entrance.

At a playground inside, kids could be heard yelling and laughing as they came down a slide. Other kids played with their tablets while their parents made phone calls to see if power had been restored at their homes. Those still without power planned to stay another night on one of the store's \$3,000 couches or \$5,000 beds.

On Tuesday, more than 300 people spent the night, including Stephanie Anderson, 29, and her 8-year-old son, Jaden. Their home lost power Monday afternoon and after a cold night of sleeping under three blankets and with no water and only candlelight to see by, Anderson said they came to the furniture store on Tuesday after finding out about it on Facebook.

"I'm just thankful that we're here and we're warm. If we didn't come here, I'm afraid we would still be at home," she said.

Anderson and her son shared a couch Tuesday night and she tried to keep him distracted Wednesday so that he wouldn't worry too much.

Kids "really want to know what's going on. Why do we have to live here? Why is it so cold and why don't we have electricity?" said Anderson, who works in car sales.

In a moment of levity, Anderson and another woman staying at the store, Yvonne Woolard, compared notes over which furniture they had slept on.

"I slept on a \$5,000 recliner over there. ... It reclined to a bed," said Woolard, 59, adding that although it was comfortable, she'd rather be home and planned to head there later Wednesday to check on her cat and whether power had been restored.

McIngvale said he'd keep his store open as a shelter for as long as he could, if necessary.

"We've been through tougher fights than this. We'll get through this," McIngvale said.

Follow Juan A. Lozano on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/juanlozano70>

EXPLAINER: Why the power grid failed in Texas and beyond

By DAVID KOENIG and MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The power outages tormenting Texas in uncharacteristically Arctic temperatures are exposing weaknesses in an electricity system designed when the weather's seasonal shifts were more consistent and predictable — conditions that most experts believe no longer exist.

This isn't just happening in Texas, of course. Utilities from Minnesota to Mississippi have imposed rolling blackouts to ease the strain on electrical grids buckling under high demand during the past few days. And power outages have become a rite of summer and autumn in California, partly to reduce the chances of deadly wildfires.

But the fact more than 3 million bone-chilled Texans have lost their electricity in a state that takes pride in its energy independence underscores the gravity of a problem that is occurring in the U.S. with increasing frequency.

WHAT HAPPENED IN TEXAS?

Plunging temperatures caused Texans to turn up their heaters, including many inefficient electric ones. Demand spiked to levels normally seen only on the hottest summer days, when millions of air conditioners run at full tilt.

The state has a generating capacity of about 67,000 megawatts in the winter compared with a peak capacity of about 86,000 megawatts in the summer. The gap between the winter and summer supply

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reflects power plants going offline for maintenance during months when demand typically is less intense and there's not as much energy coming from wind and solar sources.

But planning for this winter didn't imagine temperatures cold enough to freeze natural gas supply lines and stop wind turbines from spinning. By Wednesday, 46,000 megawatts of power were offline statewide — 28,000 from natural gas, coal and nuclear plants and 18,000 from wind and solar, according to the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which operates the state's power grid.

"Every one of our sources of power supply underperformed," Daniel Cohan, an associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at Rice University in Houston, tweeted. "Every one of them is vulnerable to extreme weather and climate events in different ways. None of them were adequately weatherized or prepared for a full realm of weather and conditions."

The staggering imbalance between Texas' energy supply and demand also caused prices to skyrocket from roughly \$20 per megawatt hour to \$9,000 per megawatt hour in the state's freewheeling wholesale power market.

That raised questions whether some power generators who buy in the wholesale market may have had a profit motive to avoid buying more natural gas and simply shut down instead.

"We can't speculate on people's motivations in that way," said Bill Magness, CEO of ERCOT. He added he had been told by generators that they were doing everything possible to provide power.

WHY WASN'T THE STATE PREPARED?

Gas-fired plants and wind turbines can be protected against winter weather — it's done routinely in colder, northern states. The issue arose in Texas after a 2011 freeze that also led to power-plant shut-downs and blackouts. A national electric-industry group developed winterization guidelines for operators to follow, but they are strictly voluntary and also require expensive investments in equipment and other necessary measures.

An ERCOT official, Dan Woodfin, said plant upgrades after 2011 limited shutdowns during a similar cold snap in 2018, but this week's weather was "more extreme."

Ed Hirs, an energy fellow at the University of Houston, rejected ERCOT's claim that this week's freeze was unforeseeable.

"That's nonsense," he said. "Every eight to 10 years we have really bad winters. This is not a surprise."

In California, regulators last week ordered the state's three major utilities to increase their power supply and potentially make plant improvements to avoid another supply shortage like the one that cropped up in California six months ago and resulted in rolling blackouts affecting about 500,000 people for a few hours at a time.

"One big difference is that leadership in California recognizes that climate change is happening, but that doesn't seem to be the case in Texas," said Severin Borenstein, a professor of business administration and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley who has been studying power supply issues for more than 20 years.

WHY THE NEED FOR ROLLING BLACKOUTS?

Grid operators say rolling blackouts are a last resort when power demand overwhelms supply and threatens to create a wider collapse of the whole power system.

Usually, utilities black out certain blocks or zones before cutting off power to another area, then another. Often areas with hospitals, fire stations, water-treatment plants and other key facilities are spared.

By rolling the blackouts, no neighborhoods are supposed to go an unfairly long period of time without power, but that was not always the case this week in Texas. Some areas never lost power, while others were blacked out for 12 hours or longer as temperatures dipped into the single digits.

WHEN DO THEY OCCUR?

Rolling blackouts are usually triggered when reserves fall below a certain level. In Texas, as in California last August, grid operators tell utilities to reduce load on the entire system, and it is up to the utilities to decide how to do that.

In Texas this week, grid operators and utilities knew about the dire weather forecast for at least a week. Last weekend they issued appeals for power conservation, and ERCOT tweeted that residents should "unplug the fancy new appliances you bought during the pandemic and only used once."

The lighthearted attempts at humor were lost on residents, few if any of whom were told in advance when their homes would lose power. Once the outages started, some utilities were unable to provide information about how long they might last.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE ROLLING BLACKOUTS?

Start with the obvious steps: When power companies or grid operators warn about trouble coming, turn down your thermostat and avoid using major appliances. Of course, those steps are sometimes easier said than done, especially during record-breaking temperatures.

Like in other places, Texans might be more willing to adjust their thermostats a few more notches if regulators imposed a system that required households to pay higher prices during periods of peak demand and lower rates at other times.

"People turn up their furnaces now because there isn't a financial incentive for them not to do it," Borinstein said.

Experts also say more fundamental — and costly — changes must be made. Generators must insulate pipelines and other equipment. Investments in electricity storage and distribution would help. Tougher building codes would make homes in places like Texas better insulated against the cold.

Texas, which has a grid largely disconnected from others to avoid federal regulation, may have to rethink the go-it-alone strategy. There could be pressure for the state to require power generators to keep more plants in reserve for times of peak demand, a step it has so far resisted.

"The system as we built it is not performing to the standards we would like to see," said Joshua Rhodes, an energy researcher at the University of Texas in Austin. "We need to do a better job. If that involves paying more for energy to have more reliability, that's a conversation we're going to have to have."

Koenig reported from Dallas, Liedtke reported from San Ramon, California. The AP's Paul Weber contributed to this story from Austin, Texas.

Power outages linger for millions as another icy storm looms

By PAUL J. WEBER and JILL BLEED Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Millions of Americans endured another frigid day without electricity or heat in the aftermath of a deadly winter storm as utility crews raced to restore power before another blast of snow and ice sowed more chaos in places least equipped to deal with it.

Nearly 3.4 million customers around the U.S. were still without electricity, and some also lost water service. Texas officials ordered 7 million people — a quarter of the population of the nation's second-largest state — to boil tap water before drinking it following days of record low temperatures that damaged infrastructure and froze pipes.

The latest storm front was certain to complicate recovery efforts, especially in states that are unaccustomed to such weather — parts of Texas, Arkansas and the Lower Mississippi Valley.

"There's really no letup to some of the misery people are feeling across that area," said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster with the National Weather Service, referring to Texas.

The system was forecast to move into the Northeast on Thursday. More than 100 million people live in areas covered by some type of winter weather warning, watch or advisory, the weather service said.

This week's extreme weather has been blamed for the deaths of more than 30 people, some of whom perished while struggling to keep warm inside their homes. In the Houston area, one family succumbed to carbon monoxide from car exhaust in their garage. Another family died while using a fireplace to keep warm.

Weather-related outages have been particularly stubborn in Oregon, where some customers have been without power for almost a week.

The worst U.S. outages by far have been in Texas, where 3 million homes and businesses remained without power as of midday Wednesday. More than 200,000 additional customers were in the dark in four Appalachian states, and nearly that many in the Pacific Northwest, according to poweroutage.us, which

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tracks utility outage reports.

The president of the Texas power grid manager, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said he hoped many customers would see at least partial service restored by later Wednesday or Thursday.

Dashawn Walker, 33, was thrilled to find the power back on in his Dallas apartment. He stayed at a suburban hotel Tuesday night after being without power since Sunday, but said he was charged \$474 for one night.

"It's crazy," Walker said. "I mean why would y'all go up on the hotels in the middle of a crisis?"

Water pressure has fallen across the state because lines have frozen, and many residents are leaving faucets dripping in hopes of preventing pipes from freezing, said Toby Baker, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott urged residents to shut off water to their homes, if possible, to prevent more busted pipes and preserve pressure in municipal systems.

The outages in and around Portland, Oregon, affected nearly 150,000 customers nearly a week after a massive snow and ice storm toppled many trees and took out hundreds of miles of power lines.

The damage to the power system was the worst in 40 years, said Maria Pope, CEO of Portland General Electric. At the peak of the storm, more than 350,000 customers in the Portland area were in the dark.

"These are the most dangerous conditions we've ever seen in the history of PGE," said Dale Goodman, director of utility operations, who declined to predict when all customers would have power restored.

Utilities from Minnesota to Texas implemented rolling blackouts to ease the burden on strained power grids. The Southwest Power Pool, a group of utilities covering 14 states, said the blackouts were "a last resort to preserve the reliability of the electric system as a whole."

The weather also disrupted water systems in several Southern cities, including in New Orleans and Shreveport, Louisiana, where city fire trucks delivered water to several hospitals, and bottled water was being brought in for patients and staff, Shreveport television station KSLA reported.

Power was cut to a New Orleans facility that pumps drinking water from the Mississippi River. A spokeswoman for the Sewerage and Water Board said on-site generators were used until electricity was restored.

In the southwest Louisiana city of Lake Charles, Mayor Nic Hunter said Wednesday that water reserves remained low and local hospitals were faced with the possibility they might have to transfer patients to other areas.

Travel remains ill-advised in much of the United States, with roadways treacherous and thousands of flights canceled. Many school systems delayed or canceled face-to-face classes. But staying home carried risks too in places without power.

Authorities said a fire that killed three young children and their grandmother in the Houston area likely was caused by the fireplace they were using to keep warm. In Oregon, authorities confirmed Tuesday that four people died in the Portland area of carbon monoxide poisoning.

The crisis also produced stories of kindness.

In Clinton, Mississippi, Army veteran Evelyn Fletcher has been cooking and delivering meals to sidelined truck drivers, travelers and people staying at hotels after losing power at home.

"They're stranded, they're isolated — people are in need of support right now," Fletcher said.

On Monday, Fletcher made 85 meals. On Tuesday, she made 30 plates, while a local restaurant, T'Beaux's Crawfish and Catering, cooked 75 plates of shrimp and gumbo that she and other volunteers delivered. And on Wednesday, Fletcher was cooking a pot of turkey noodle soup, hoping to deliver another 70 meals.

"People are worried about more snow," she said. "We are going to keep people fed and keep them feeling hopeful."

Bleed reported from Little Rock, Arkansas. Associated Press journalists Gillian Flaccus in Portland, Oregon; Julie Walker in New York; Jake Bleiberg in Dallas; Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska; Kevin McGill in New Orleans; Leah Willingham in Jackson, Mississippi; Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; and Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, contributed to this report.

Players return to COVID protocols as spring training opens

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

One year later, players and managers say they have a better understanding of what it takes to play baseball through a pandemic.

Pitchers and catchers around the game reported to spring training Wednesday saying they appreciate what's at stake as they try to make sure the season starts on time. The protocols have been tightened even further from what they experienced during the abbreviated 2020 season.

"We've all gone through a year of this, of living through this," New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "And so I think we're a little, much better equipped of how to handle ourselves, how to conduct ourselves, how to make good use of our time."

New standards agreed to by Major League Baseball and the players' association require players, staffers and other team personnel to wear electronic tracing wristbands for ballpark access. Players underwent a five-day at-home quarantine before reporting, with exceptions for essential activities and approved outdoor workouts and exercise.

They'll need to stay in their living quarters throughout spring training except for baseball activities, medical care, grocery shopping, takeout food pickups and outdoor physical activity. Outdoor dining will only be allowed if they get permission beforehand.

"Between the players' union and MLB, the agreement I think is pretty rock-solid when it comes to player safety, staff safety," Chicago White Sox pitcher Lucas Giolito said Tuesday. "There's going to be a few things that are a little more, what's the word for it, given more importance. I think some of the workouts are going to be in smaller groups, a lot more on point with mask wearing and things like that. I don't think it will affect our work too much. We'll certainly be able to get done what we need to get done."

But the restrictions will make it more challenging to get ready for the season.

Catcher James McCann faces hurdles this spring trying to bond with an entirely new pitching staff after signing a \$40 million, four-year deal with New York Mets. Normally, the veteran backstop would invite pitchers to dinner, set up play dates for their kids, go out and grab a drink — anything to help develop those relationships.

Forget the off-field meetups. Under MLB's protocols, even getting together at the team's Florida complex is more difficult. Gathering in places like the video room — usually a convenient spot for 3-4 players to meet — is a no-no.

"Nobody likes to wear a mask and sit and talk 6 feet away from each other," McCann said. "A lot of different things I guess we took for granted."

MLB is hoping to have a full season after playing a 60-game schedule last year that included no fans in the stands until the postseason. The Miami Marlins and St. Louis Cardinals both dealt with COVID-19 outbreaks that resulted in multiple postponements.

"We're the lucky sport to have 162 games, but with that obviously comes a lot of thoughtfulness and dedication and commitment," new Marlins general manager Kim Ng said. "To play this game, you have to be absolutely committed, especially this team with them going through what they went through last year. People understand how it can decimate."

Cardinals pitcher Carlos Martinez battled COVID-19 last summer and says he wasn't the same the rest of the season.

"After that, I was not comfortable with my body," said Martinez, who added that he feels great now.

Oakland right-hander Frankie Montas was quarantining at home in Scottsdale, Arizona, on Wednesday with COVID-19. Manager Bob Melvin said Montas is "several days into it" after testing positive prior to reporting day.

Two other players were added to the COVID-19-related injured list Wednesday, which doesn't necessarily mean they've tested positive: Boston Red Sox catcher Kevin Plawecki and Chicago Cubs left-hander Kyle Ryan.

One of the first things Cardinals president John Mozeliak did upon arriving in Jupiter, Florida, was to request a list from the medical staff of players and coaches who tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies.

Mozeliak believes knowing which players already have at least some measure of protection from the coronavirus can help in preventing an outbreak during spring training.

"I believe we had about 15 or 18 people with antibodies in this camp," Mozeliak said, "so that was encouraging."

Mozeliak also expressed hope that some staff and players could begin receiving the COVID-19 vaccine by opening day.

"But I certainly understand, collectively, you're dealing with a pretty healthy group of young people," he said, "and when you're looking across our country, there are people more deserving of that opportunity than this group. But clearly if you were vaccinated, it would ease up a lot of the protocols we have in a sense of where you can go and where you can't."

For now, players say they are ready to follow the protocols while looking forward to the day they're playing in full stadiums again.

"Thankful it's going to be, not quite normal, but closer to it," Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Madison Bumgarner said. "I think we're on the path back to that, so hopefully it all happens sooner rather than later."

AP Baseball Writers Ronald Blum, Stephen Hawkins and Jake Seiner and AP Sports Writers David Brandt, Dave Skretta and Steven Wine contributed to this report.

More AP MLB coverage: <https://apnews.com/MLB>

Crippling weather hampers vaccine deliveries, distribution

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM and JOCELYN NOVECK Associated Press

The icy blast across much of the U.S. injected more confusion and frustration into the nation's COVID-19 vaccination drive Wednesday just when it was gathering speed, snarling vaccine deliveries and forcing the cancellation of countless shots around the country.

Across a large swath of the nation, including Deep South states like Georgia and Alabama, the snowy, slippery weather either led to the closing of vaccination sites outright or held up the necessary shipments, with delays expected to continue for days.

In New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio said doses expected this week were delayed by weather elsewhere in the country, forcing the city to hold off making 30,000 to 35,000 vaccination appointments.

One public health expert said the delays were unacceptable.

"Having vaccine centers take snow days is just going to back things up more than they already are," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "The virus doesn't take snow days."

Adalja said people in charge of vaccination efforts must find ways to be more resilient to weather, "just like mailmen can deliver the mail through sleet or snow." He suggested clinics use better contingency plans. The goal, he said, must be "a continuous assembly line of vaccines going into people's arms."

Jo Dohogne of Bartlett, Tennessee, said she scheduled two appointments this week to receive her second dose of the Moderna vaccine, but both were canceled because of poor weather.

Dohogne, 75, who has multiple sclerosis, said she felt left in the lurch as the six-week mark for her second dose approached following her first vaccination on Jan. 14.

"I'm just stressed ... it's just like this is taking up my entire life," Dohogne said.

After her appointment for a vaccine on Saturday was canceled, Dohogne said a neighbor's friend has been helping her navigate the vaccine enrollment process. But with no word on when she can get her second shot, Dohogne said she is "just frustrated and stressed."

In Washington, White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said that in places where vaccination venues have been closed, like Texas, the government is encouraging sites to increase their hours once

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they are open.

"We want to make sure that as we've lost some time in some states for people to get needles in arms, that our partners do all they can to make up that lost ground," he said.

Some shipments of the vaccine made by Pfizer were delayed in the South because of the bad weather, but the company was unaware of any vaccine spoilage, said spokesman Eamonn Nolan. Pfizer's vaccines, which must be kept frozen at minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 34.4 degrees Centigrade), are shipped with dry ice in temperature-controlled containers that last up to 10 days unopened.

In southern Nevada, officials reported that the winter storms had delayed a shipment of Moderna vaccines scheduled to be administered as second doses this week.

The U.S. is vaccinating an average of 1.7 million Americans per day against COVID-19, up from under 1 million a month ago. New figures from the White House show a steady increase in the pace of vaccinations over President Joe Biden's first month in office.

Much of the increase, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, comes from people receiving their second dose. The pace of first-dose vaccinations has been largely steady over the past several weeks, hovering around an average of 900,000 shots per day.

Biden is on track to blow past his goal of 100 million shots in his first 100 days in office — though the pace must pick up even further to meet his plans to vaccinate nearly all adults by the end of the summer.

The White House also said the government will ramp up genetic analysis of coronavirus samples from around the country to gain information on where more infectious and potentially deadlier mutations may be spreading.

In the face of frustrating delays, some people showed remarkable persistence. Fran Goldman, 90, of Seattle, told The Seattle Times she walked 6 miles (9.7 kilometers) round trip in the snow to get her vaccine.

Goldman said that after much effort, she had finally secured a slot for Sunday morning, but on Friday and Saturday a strong storm moved through, filling streets with snowdrifts.

Goldman dressed in fleece pants and threw a few warm layers over a short-sleeve shirt so that the nurse could get to her arm easily.

"It was not easy going. It was challenging," she said. She made it to her appointment, just five minutes late.

In other developments, Pennsylvania is facing a temporary shortage of second shots of the Moderna vaccine after providers inadvertently used them as first doses. More than 100,000 people may have to reschedule their appointments.

Noveck reported and from New York and Naishadham reported from Phoenix. Medical Writer Linda A. Johnson contributed from Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, Jeff Martin from Atlanta and Michelle R. Smith from Providence, R.I.

UN chief urges global plan to reverse unfair vaccine access

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sharply criticized the "wildly uneven and unfair" distribution of COVID-19 vaccines on Wednesday, saying 10 countries have administered 75 percent of all vaccinations and demanding a global effort to get all people in every nation vaccinated as soon as possible.

The U.N. chief told a high-level meeting of the U.N. Security Council that 130 countries have not received a single dose of vaccine and declared that "at this critical moment, vaccine equity is the biggest moral test before the global community."

Guterres called for an urgent Global Vaccination Plan to bring together those with the power to ensure equitable vaccine distribution -- scientists, vaccine producers and those who can fund the effort.

And he called on the world's major economic powers in the Group of 20 to establish an emergency task force to establish a plan and coordinate its implementation and financing. He said the task force should

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have the capacity "to mobilize the pharmaceutical companies and key industry and logistics actors."

Guterres said Friday's meeting of the Group of Seven major industrialized nations -- the United States, Germany, Japan, Britain, France, Canada and Italy -- "can create the momentum to mobilize the necessary financial resources."

Thirteen ministers addressed the virtual council meeting organized by Britain on improving access to COVID-19 vaccinations, including in conflict areas.

The coronavirus has infected more than 109 million people and killed at least 2.4 million of them. As manufacturers struggle to ramp up production of vaccines, many countries complain of being left out and even rich nations are facing shortages and domestic complaints.

The World Health Organization's COVAX program, an ambitious project to buy and deliver coronavirus vaccines for the world's poorest people, has already missed its own goal of beginning coronavirus vaccinations in poor countries at the same time that shots were rolled out in rich countries. WHO says COVAX needs \$5 billion in 2021.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the council the Biden administration "will work with our partners across the globe to expand manufacturing and distribution capacity and to increase access, including to marginalized populations."

President Joe Biden has rejoined the WHO and Blinken announced that by the end of February the United States will pay over \$200 million in previously assessed and current obligations to the U.N. agency, which Washington will seek to reform.

America's top diplomat said the U.S. also plans to provide "significant financial support" to COVAX through the GAVI vaccine alliance, and will work to strengthen other multilateral initiatives involved in the global COVID-19 response. He gave no details.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized the growing "immunity divide" and called on the world to "come together to reject 'vaccine nationalism,' promote fair and equitable distribution of vaccines, and, in particular, make them accessible and affordable for developing countries, including those in conflict."

At WHO's request, he said, China will contribute 10 million doses of vaccines to COVAX "preliminarily."

China has donated vaccines to 53 developing countries including Somalia, Iraq, South Sudan and Palestine, which is a U.N. observer state. It has also exported vaccines to 22 countries, he said, adding that Beijing has launched research and development cooperation on COVID-19 with more than 10 countries.

India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar also called for a halt to "vaccine nationalism" and encouragement for internationalism. "Hoarding superfluous doses will defeat our efforts towards attaining collective health security," he warned.

Jaishankar said India has been at the forefront of the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, initially providing medicine, ventilators and personal protective equipment and now directly sending made-in-India vaccines to 25 nations across the world, with 49 additional countries from Europe and Latin America to Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands slated to receive vaccines "in the coming days."

Two vaccines, including one developed in India, have been granted emergency authorization, the minister said, and as many as 30 vaccine candidates are in various stages of development.

Jaishankar announced "a gift of 200,000 doses" of vaccine for about 90,000 U.N. peacekeepers serving in a dozen hotspots around the world.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, whose country is currently president of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, called for speeding up COVAX and stopping the "undue hoarding" and "monopolization of vaccines."

He urged that priority be given to countries with limited resources, saying "it's been pointed out that these countries won't have generalized access until the middle of 2023 if current trends persist."

"What we are seeing is a huge gap," Ebrard said. "In fact, I don't think we've ever seen such a huge division affecting so many in such a short space of time. That is why it's important to reverse this."

He urged the international community not to establish mechanisms that could prevent the speedy delivery of vaccines but instead to strengthen supply chains "that will promote and guarantee universal access."

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British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, whose country holds the Security Council presidency this month and presided at the virtual meeting, urged the U.N.'s most powerful body to adopt a resolution calling for local cease-fires in conflict zones to allow the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines.

"Cease-fires have been used to vaccinate the most vulnerable communities in the past," he said. "There's no reason why we can't... We have seen it in the past to deliver polio vaccines to children in Afghanistan, just to take one example."

Britain says more than 160 million people are at risk of being excluded from coronavirus vaccinations because they live in countries engulfed in conflict and instability, including Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

Britain's U.N. ambassador, Barbara Woodward said: "Humanitarian organizations and U.N. agencies need the full backing of the council to be able to carry out the job we are asking them to do."

Britain has drafted a Security Council resolution that the U.K. hopes will be adopted in the coming weeks, she said.

Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, objected to the council focusing on equitable access to vaccines, saying this went beyond its mandate to preserve international peace and security.

Indicating Moscow was not interested in a new resolution, he said Russia is ready to discuss progress on implementing the only resolution the Security Council has adopted on the pandemic. After three months of difficult negotiations, the council last July 1 endorsed the secretary-general's call for cease-fires in major global conflicts to tackle COVID-19.

Britain's Raab argued that the council needs to follow up and call for cease-fires "specifically to enable COVID vaccines to be carried out in those areas so badly affected by conflict."

Rush Limbaugh, radio king and architect of right wing, dies

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

Rush Limbaugh called himself a truth detector, doctor of democracy, lover of mankind, all-around good guy and harmless fuzz ball, titles his legions of followers embraced as he boomed from their radios in a daily ritual.

To those who hated him, the names he conjured were often unfit for print.

Such was the nature of Limbaugh, who died of lung cancer Wednesday at the age of 70: Prized by adherents as the voice of conservatism, pilloried by critics as the worst of American politics' extreme right wing.

He was divisive to the very end, but it did little to diminish his importance as the dominant force of talk radio, one of the most influential voices in Republican politics and an architect of the modern right-wing.

Unflinchingly conservative, wildly partisan, bombastically self-promoting and larger than life, Limbaugh had for the past quarter-century galvanized listeners with his politically incorrect, sarcasm-laced commentary. He called himself an entertainer, but with his three-hour weekday radio show broadcast on nearly 600 stations across the U.S., and a massive audience of millions hanging on his every word, Limbaugh's rants shaped the national political conversation, swaying the opinions of average Republicans and the direction of the party.

He drew people in with his wit, his sense of the theatrical and a made-for-broadcast voice offering listeners a blueprint for what he saw as the grand scheme of the opposition. And he did it with such unyielding confidence, his followers heard his words as sacred truth.

"I want to persuade people with ideas. I don't walk around thinking about my power," he told author Zev Chafets in his 2010 book, "Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One." "But in my heart and soul, I know I have become the intellectual engine of the conservative movement."

Limbaugh took as a badge of honor the title of "most dangerous man in America," and called himself "America's anchorman." But his assessments of those with whom he disagreed were not nearly so kind.

He called them communists, wackos, feminazis, faggots and radicals. And he would spare none of them.

When the actor Michael J. Fox, suffering from Parkinson's disease, appeared in a commercial for a Democrat, Limbaugh mocked him and his tremors. When a Washington advocate for the homeless com-

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mitted suicide, he cracked a string of jokes. As the AIDS epidemic raged in the 1980s, he made the dying a punchline.

To him, 12-year-old Chelsea Clinton was "a dog."

When the topic was reproductive rights, he didn't simply voice a pro-life stance, he suggested Democratic ideology in biblical times would have led to the abortion of Jesus Christ. When a woman accused Duke University lacrosse players of rape, she was derided as a "ho," and when a Georgetown University law student spoke in support of expanded contraceptive coverage, she was dismissed as a "slut."

When Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008 despite all Limbaugh's warnings, he didn't simply voice regret, he said: "I hope he fails." And with the ugly scenes of a mob insurrection last month at the Capitol still fresh, he was dismissive to calls for an end to violence, comparing the rioters instead to American revolutionaries.

"There's a lot of people out there calling for the end of violence ... who say that any violence or aggression at all is unacceptable regardless of the circumstances," he said the day after the insurrection. "I am glad Sam Adams ... Thomas Paine ... the actual tea party guys ... the men at Lexington and Concord, didn't feel that way."

For all the controversy he embodied, he remained a GOP kingmaker.

His idol, Ronald Reagan, wrote a letter of praise that Limbaugh proudly read on the air in 1992: "You've become the number one voice for conservatism." In 1994, Limbaugh was so widely credited with the first Republican takeover of Congress in 40 years that the GOP made him an honorary member of the new class.

During the 2016 presidential primaries, Limbaugh said he realized early on that Trump would be the nominee, and he likened the candidate's deep connection with his supporters to his own. Trump, in turn, heaped praise on Limbaugh, and during last year's State of the Union speech, awarded the broadcaster the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

As news of Limbaugh's death spread, Trump took to Fox News Channel to laud a man he deemed "a legend," as tributes poured in from across the American right.

"The Super Nova of American conservatism," heralded Ann Coulter.

Limbaugh inspired the likes of Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly, and countless lesser-known people who established conservative radio shows in their markets. They followed, too, in pushing the bounds of civil dialogue.

The brand of blunt, no-gray-area debate that Limbaugh popularized spread, from cable television to congressional town hall meetings, from voracious debates over health care to the rallies of the tea party movement.

"What he did was to bring a paranoia and really mean, nasty rhetoric and hyperpartisanship into the mainstream," said Martin Kaplan, a University of Southern California professor and expert on the intersection of politics and entertainment, who is a frequent Limbaugh critic. "The kind of antagonism and vituperativeness that characterized him instantly became acceptable everywhere."

Such criticism echoed again and again in his lifetime, but Limbaugh seemed only to push further, assembling an ever-growing list of those branded enemies, of the issues the public was purportedly being fooled on, and the lies the mainstream media was supposedly feeding.

He offered a litany of it all to his listeners, as he did in a 1991 broadcast he heavily quotes in his first book, "The Way Things Ought to Be." In that single show, in one breathless segment, he railed against the homeless, AIDS patients, criticism of Christopher Columbus, aid to the Soviet Union, condoms in schools, animal rights advocates, multiculturalism, the social safety net and on and on.

Though he often enunciated the Republican platform better and more entertainingly than any party leader, he was an imperfect spokesman. Limbaugh was a portly, cigar-smoking multimillionaire who drew his massive following with his message, not affability.

He came with a checkered personal life that repeatedly put him in headlines. In 2003, Limbaugh admitted an addiction to painkillers and entered rehabilitation. Authorities opened an investigation into alleged "doctor shopping," saying he received up to 2,000 pills from four doctors over a period of six months, but he ultimately reached a deal with prosecutors that dismissed the single charge.

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He was divorced three times, from marriages to Roxy Maxine McNeely in 1977, Michelle Sixta in 1983 and Marta Fitzgerald in 1994. He married his fourth wife, Kathryn Rogers, in a lavish 2010 ceremony. He had no children.

Limbaugh was frequently accused of bigotry and blatant racism through his comments and sketches such as "Barack the Magic Negro," a song featured on his show that said Obama "makes guilty whites feel good" and that the politician is "Black, but not authentically." Similar race-fueled comments derailed Limbaugh's 2009 bid to become one of the owners of the St. Louis Rams.

Through it all, though, his message remained crystal clear.

Key to his monologue was a constant belittling of mainstream media outlets, even as his power grew greater than many of them. He offered a version of the news that was easy to digest, in which his side was truthful and right and all others were liars hell-bent on destroying the country. He strung stories together to portray what amounted to elaborate left-wing conspiracies.

To Limbaugh, his opponents relied on half-truths, bias and outright lies, the very same combination others would say was his magic formula. In his second best-selling book, "See, I Told You So," he assessed the political debate generated by the mainstream press in a way his critics said was actually Limbaugh's own modus operandi.

"Lies have become facts," he wrote. "Lies are facts."

Rush Hudson Limbaugh III was born Jan. 12, 1951, in Cape Girardeau, Mo., to the former Mildred Armstrong and Rush Limbaugh Jr., who flew fighter planes in World War II and practiced law at home. Rusty, as the younger Limbaugh was known, was chubby and shy, with little interest in school but, from a young age, a passion for broadcasting.

He'd turn down the volume during St. Louis Cardinals games, offering play by play, and gave running commentary during the evening news. By high school, he was already working in radio.

Limbaugh dropped out of Southeast Missouri State University for a string of radio jobs, from his hometown, to McKeesport, Pa., to Pittsburgh and then Kansas City, Mo. He was known as Rusty Sharpe and then Jeff Christie on the air, mostly spinning Top 40 hits and sprinkling in glimpses of his wit and conservatism. But he never gained the following he craved.

He admitted he was often driven by a desire to be liked, even though his pulpit drew hatred as much as love. "One of the early reasons radio interested me was that I thought it would make me popular. I wanted to be noticed and liked," he wrote.

He gave up on radio for several years beginning in 1979, to take a front-office job with the Kansas City Royals, but ultimately returned to broadcasting, again in Kansas City and then, in Sacramento, Calif.

It was in California, in the early 1980s, where Limbaugh really hit a stride and garnered an audience, broadcasting shows dripping with sarcasm, full of his signature bravado, and railing against liberals. The stage name was gone. Rush Limbaugh was on the air, and the public figure who would become known to millions essentially was born.

Limbaugh began a national broadcast of his show in 1988 from WABC in New York, heard in a smattering of markets around the country. His grandstanding know-it-all commentary quickly gained traction, but Limbaugh was dismayed by his reception in New York. He believed the move meant he'd be welcomed by the likes of Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather. He was wrong.

"I came to New York," he wrote, "and I immediately became a nothing, a zero."

He had a late-night television show in the 1990s which drew notable ratings but lackluster advertising due to fear of his divisive message. The feelings he could stir were demonstrated when he filled in as host of the "Pat Sajak Show" in 1990, when audience members called him a Nazi and repeatedly shouted, disrupting the broadcast.

Ultimately, Limbaugh moved his radio show to Palm Beach, Florida, where he bought a massive estate. He told The New York Times in 2008 that his eight-year contract with Premiere Radio Networks would bring him an estimated \$38 million annually, in addition to a nine-figure signing bonus. As of 2012, Premiere estimated up to 20 million people heard his broadcasts each week. Arbitron, a radio ratings authority, said it couldn't verify that figure, but there is no question that no one came close to his reach or his influence.

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"When Rush wants to talk to America, all he has to do is grab his microphone. He attracts more listeners with just his voice than the rest of us could ever imagine," Beck wrote in a 2009 article for Time magazine. "He is simply on another level."

Polls consistently found Limbaugh regarded as the voice of the Republican Party. His followers, whom he dubbed "Ditto-heads," were unwavering in their enthusiasm, even when he was attacked by opponents or faced personal hurdles of his own.

For all the criticism he received for his message, he was successful in large part for the certainty with which he delivered it, never questioning opinions he regarded as undeniable truth.

"Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night and just think to yourself, 'I am just full of hot gas?'" he was asked by David Letterman in a 1993 appearance on "The Late Show."

"I am a servant of humanity," he replied. "I am in the relentless pursuit of the truth. I actually sit back and think that I'm just so fortunate to have this opportunity to tell people what's really going on."

Biden backs studying reparations as Congress considers bill

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's White House is giving its support to studying reparations for Black Americans, boosting Democratic lawmakers who are renewing efforts to create a commission on the issue amid the stark racial disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A House panel heard testimony Wednesday on legislation that would create a commission to examine the history of slavery in the U.S. as well as the discriminatory government policies that affected former slaves and their descendants. The commission would recommend ways to educate the American public of its findings and suggest appropriate remedies, including financial payments from the government to compensate descendants of slaves for years of unpaid labor by their ancestors.

Biden backs the idea of studying the issue, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday, though she stopped short of saying he would sign the bill if it clears Congress.

"He certainly would support a study of reparations," Psaki said at the White House briefing. "He understands we don't need a study to take action right now on systemic racism, so he wants to take actions within his own government in the meantime."

Biden captured the Democratic presidential nomination and ultimately the White House with the strong support of Black voters. As he campaigned against the backdrop of the biggest reckoning on racism in a generation in the wake of George Floyd's killing, Biden backed the idea of studying reparations for the descendants of slaves. But now, as he tries to win congressional support for other agenda items including a massive coronavirus relief package, he faces a choice of how aggressively to push the idea.

Even with Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House, passing a reparations bill could prove difficult. The proposal has languished in Congress for more than three decades, winning fresh attention in 2019 only after Democrats won control of the House.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, who has 173 co-sponsors for her bill, said the descendants of slaves continue to suffer from the legacy of that brutal system and the enduring racial inequality it spawned, pointing to COVID-19 as an example. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that Black people are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized because of COVID-19 as white people and nearly twice as likely to die from the illness. She offered up her bill as a way to bring the country together.

"The government sanctioned slavery," Jackson Lee said. "And that is what we need, a reckoning, a healing reparative justice."

But polling has found long-standing resistance in the U.S. to reparations to descendants of slaves, divided along racial lines. Only 29% of Americans voiced support for paying cash reparations, according to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll taken in the fall of 2019. Most Black Americans favored reparations, 74%, compared with 15% of white Americans.

Rep. Burgess Owens, a first-term Republican from Utah, argued against a reparations commission. He noted that his great-great-grandfather arrived in America in the belly of a slave ship but went on to escape slavery through the Underground Railroad and become a successful entrepreneur. He criticized the

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"redistribution of wealth" as a failed government policy.

"Though it is impractical and a nonstarter for the United States government to pay reparations, it is also unfair and heartless to give Black Americans the hope that this is a reality," Owens said.

Jackson Lee's bill calls for the commission to examine the practice of slavery as well as forms of discrimination that federal and state governments inflicted on former slaves and their descendants. The commission would then recommend ways to educate the American public of its findings and appropriate remedies.

Kamm Howard, the co-chair of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, called the commission long overdue and said that "many years have been wasted, many lives lost," since the legislation was first introduced by Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., in 1989.

"The goal here is restoration. Where would we as a people be if it were not for 246 years of stolen labor and accompanying horrors, if not for the multiple periods of multibillion-dollar plunder post-enslavement?" Howard said. "We must be made whole."

Larry Elder, a Black conservative talk radio host, said that African Americans have made tremendous progress economically and socially, noting that Barack Obama was elected twice to the presidency. He claimed that racism has never been less of a significant problem in America than it is now and that reparations would represent one of the greatest transfers of wealth in history. "Figuring out who owes what is going to be a hell of an achievement," Elder said.

Former NFL star Herschel Walker also spoke in opposition to the commission, saying reparations would create separation and division.

"I feel it continues to let us know we're still African American rather than just American," Walker said.

Associated Press writers Josh Boak and Padmananda Rama contributed to this report.

Vaccination of whole Brazilian city spares it from shortages

By DIANE JEANTET and TATIANA POLLASTRI Associated Press

SERRANA, Brazil (AP) — As Brazil's mayors and governors start sounding the alarm over dwindling supplies of coronavirus vaccines, there are no such complaints in Serrana, a city that Sao Paulo's state government selected to test city-wide vaccination.

The city is small, but the task is sizeable: administering shots over eight weeks to the entire population aged 18 and up — 30,000 people. The study, known as Project S, entails follow-ups with each participant to shed light on the extent to which vaccination with the CoronaVac shot reduces spread of the virus.

Inês Aparecida Giolo, 61, was among among the first participants in the study, receiving her shot Wednesday morning at a school near her home.

"It's a lot of joy, because it's not just me, it's for the whole city. So we are very happy," said Giolo.

The idea of vaccinating an entire city came about last year, during the pandemic's peak, as a means to obtain answers to countless questions in an organized manner, according to Dimas Covas, director of Sao Paulo's Butantan Institute, which is distributing the CoronaVac vaccines and is a partner in the experiment.

"This will allow us to know in depth what is happening with vaccinated people, but also with the pandemic: the number of people affected, hospital needs," Covas said at the opening ceremony Wednesday.

Serrana — with about 45,000 inhabitants, one quarter the population of Providence, Rhode Island — was one of the worst-hit cities in Sao Paulo state, with about 5% of its population contracting the virus, said Marcos Borges, director of the State Hospital of Serrana, also part of Project S.

Borges said the town had to be prepped before the study could start, as cases needed to be monitored closely. All residents with COVID-19 symptoms for at least two days were given a quick PCR test, with results in less than 24 hours. A broad communications campaign, with support from messaging application WhatsApp, aimed to ensure high levels of participation.

Following reports that Brazilians had rented or bought property in Serrana to wangle their way into the study, Butantan's Covas said last week that a history of residence would be required for registration.

Sao Paulo state has recorded the highest number of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil, but it has also been a

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leader in efforts to secure vaccines, while federal authorities have been accused of dragging their feet.

Butantan contracted with Chinese firm Sinovac for 46 million doses of its CoronaVac vaccines in September, as well as a transfer of technology for future domestic production.

Butantan last month shared slightly disappointing results for CoronaVac tests in Brazil, showing an overall efficacy of 50.38%. While lower than other vaccines, global health authorities have said any vaccine at least 50% effective is useful. CoronaVac was 78% successful in preventing mild illness, and completely eliminated death.

Project S begins just a month after the country started vaccinating and as several cities are running out of shots for their elderly citizens.

Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday halted new vaccinations for a week. City officials said they will continue to deliver second doses to those who have already been injected once, but have paused new shots for the elderly.

Rio officials say vaccines for new recipients ran out partly because they had pushed forward their schedule by one week after receiving a fresh lot of doses. Mayor Eduardo Paes on Monday said additional shots won't be delivered before next week.

Other state capitals have had to adopt similar strategies, such as Salvador, in Bahia state, and Cuiaba in Mato Grosso. Looming shortages have also been reported in at least four other capitals, according to Brazilian newspaper O Globo.

Some mayors and governors have blamed the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro for not seeking more vaccine contracts earlier. Only 2 million AstraZeneca doses of the 100 million contracted by his government have arrived so far.

Brazil's Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello said Wednesday during an online meeting with representatives of 26 states and the federal district that Brazil will have nearly 231 million vaccines by July 31. Pazuello included batches provided by AstraZeneca and Sinovac, the two shots that have already reaching the arms of many Brazilians, but also said there will be jabs of Sputnik V and Covaxin, which are yet to be approved by Brazil's health regulator.

In Serrana, there's no risk vaccination will be interrupted, as a special batch of CoronaVac was made exclusively for the study, Butantan's Covas said. Participation isn't mandatory, but is expected to be high, with more than 23,000 registrations as of last week. Serrana won't be isolated and people will be free to come and go.

Those who participate will be monitored for up to one year after their immunization, with researchers also evaluating the impact of the pandemic on the economy and vaccination acceptance rates. Initial results are expected in 12 weeks.

Diane Jeantet reported from Rio.

South Carolina House passes bill banning most abortions

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The South Carolina House on Wednesday overwhelmingly passed a bill banning nearly all abortions, following the lead of other states with similar measures that would go into effect if the U.S. Supreme Court were to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

The bill faces a final procedural vote in the House on Thursday that is unlikely to change the outcome and will then be sent to the governor for his signature. Republican Gov. Henry McMaster has promised to sign the measure as soon as possible.

The Senate approved the measure on Jan. 28, after years of failed attempts. Republicans gained three seats in the 2020 elections and the newly energized 30-16 Republican majority made the proposal Senate Bill No. 1.

"This is the greatest pro-life bill this state has ever passed," said Republican Rep. David Hiott of Pickens. The "South Carolina Fetal Heartbeat and Protection from Abortion Act" requires doctors to perform

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ultrasounds to check for a heartbeat in the fetus. If one is detected, the abortion can only be performed if the pregnancy was caused by rape or incest or the mother's life is in danger.

The bill would not punish a pregnant woman for getting an illegal abortion, but the person who performed the abortion could be charged with a felony, sentenced up to two years and fined \$10,000 if found guilty.

About a dozen other states have passed similar or more restrictive abortion bans, which could take effect if the U.S. Supreme Court — with three justices appointed by Republican former President Donald Trump — were to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision supporting abortion rights.

Groups that oppose the bill will likely sue, keeping the law from going into effect. All of the bans passed by other states are tied up in court challenges.

While Wednesday's House approval was nearly a foregone conclusion, the road there was rocky. One Republican lawmaker who wanted a stricter law saying fetuses have the rights of all citizens at conception threw up his papers and stormed out in a ruckus that angered the speaker. Most Democrats walked out of the chamber to protest the bill. They had to come back when a member of the party who left and returned made the rare request to have the clerk read the whole bill out loud before the vote, prompting Republicans to require that all lawmakers be present.

During the walkout, Republicans wiped out more than 100 proposed amendments. After holding a news conference to speak against the bill, several Democrats returned to express their opposition to the measure, which has come up for debate in the legislature numerous times over the past decade. Lawmakers approved the bill by a vote of 79-35. Two Democrats voted for the ban, and two Republicans voted against it.

"You love the fetus in the womb. But when it is born, it's a different reaction," said Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter of Orangeburg, the House's longest serving member at 29 years. Cobb-Hunter noted how the General Assembly made the abortion bill a priority over education, several COVID-19 bills and almost everything else, and how some supporters of the ban balked at any requirement earlier this year that they wear masks while on the House floor and in committee meetings.

"The government not having any business mandating face masks' sounds to me real close to 'the government not having any business telling a woman what to do with her body,'" Cobb-Hunter said.

Numerous Republican lawmakers spoke in favor of the bill and many cheered after the vote. Supporters of the ban stood outside the House chambers applauding and hugging the lawmakers that pushed the hardest for the measure.

Rep. Melissa Lackey Oremus said she was 16 and in the top of her class when she had "a little fun one night — too much" and got pregnant.

The Republican from Aiken and now 42-year-old mother of three said she was unsure what to do until she had an ultrasound wand rubbed over her belly and heard her child's heartbeat.

"That sound to me was, I had a human being inside of me," Oremus said. "That sound, it was the most beautiful sound to me. How could I have a choice to kill that sound, to make it go away?"

The debate was briefly stopped by a Republican when Rep. Jonathon Hill, apparently angry his amendments to completely ban all abortions weren't being considered, stormed to the House's center aisle, threw his amendments up in the air and walked out.

Another representative picked up the papers.

"If it had been me, it would have stayed on the floor and I would have not allowed him back in the chamber until he picked it up," House Speaker Jay Lucas said. "We are a legislative body. We have debate. We are not children. We don't throw tantrums when we lose."

Hill wasn't immediately punished for his behavior.

Follow Jeffrey Collins on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/JSCollinsAP>.

US govt seizes over 10M phony N95 masks in COVID-19 probe

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal agents have seized more than 10 million fake 3M brand N95 masks in

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recent weeks, the result of an ongoing investigation into counterfeits sold in at least five states to hospitals, medical facilities and government agencies.

The most recent seizures occurred Wednesday when Homeland Security agents intercepted hundreds of thousands of counterfeit 3M masks in an East Coast warehouse that were set to be distributed, officials said.

Investigators also notified about 6,000 potential victims in at least 12 states including hospitals, medical facilities and others who may have unknowingly purchased knockoffs, urging them to stop using the medical-grade masks. Officials encouraged medical workers and companies to go to 3M's website for tips on how to spot fakes.

"Not only do they give a false sense of security, how dangerous is the exposed individual without any protective gear? They have no utility whatsoever," Homeland Security Secretary Ali Mayorkas said of the fake masks.

The masks do not come through 3M's regular distributors, they come from outside the normal supply chain, officials said. But hospitals and medical groups have increasingly gone around normal purchasing routines during mask shortages in the global pandemic, officials said. They said the scams are taking advantage of the panic over masks.

Homeland Security officials would not say which states the phony masks were sent to, but said criminal charges would be forthcoming.

The phony masks are not tested to see whether they meet strict N95 standards and could put frontline medical workers at risk if they are used while treating patients with COVID-19.

Nearly a year into the pandemic, fraud remains a major problem as scammers seek to exploit hospitals and desperate 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 earlier in the pandemic when fraudsters 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. It is considered the gold standard in protection against the coronavirus. The company delivered some 2 billion N95 masks in 2020 as the pandemic intensified, but in the earlier months, when masks were in short supply, fraudsters took advantage.

So far during the pandemic Homeland Security Investigations has used its 7,000 agents, along with border officials, the Food and Drug Administration and the FBI, to investigate the scams, seizing \$33 million in phony products and arresting more than 200 people. 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.

Over the past two weeks, federal agents have executed search warrants and seized masks in five different states, and more action is expected. But phony masks have already made it to front-line workers in other cases.

3M has been dealing with increasing instances of fraud. Over the past year there has been more than 1,250 raids by law enforcement resulting in the seizure of millions of fake masks. The company has filed more than a dozen lawsuits over reports of fraud, counterfeiting and price gouging.

EXPLAINER: How will we know we've reached herd immunity?

By CANDICE CHOI and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

Health officials around the world are racing to vaccinate enough people to stop the spread of COVID-19, but what qualifies as "enough" is still an open question.

The goal is to get to "herd immunity," which is when enough people have immunity, either from vaccination or a past infection, to stop uncontrolled spread.

Herd immunity doesn't make any one person immune, and outbreaks can still flare up. It means that a virus is no longer easily jumping from person to person, helping to protect those who are still vulnerable

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to catching it.

Nobody knows for sure what the herd immunity threshold is for the coronavirus, though many experts say it's 70% or higher. And the emergence of variants is further complicating the picture.

Here's what's known about the virus and herd immunity.

HOW IS THE HERD IMMUNITY THRESHOLD CALCULATED?

It's a formula based on how contagious a virus is — or how many people catch the virus from one infected person, on average.

But the calculation offers only a broad target for when there might be a big drop off in spread. The figure could also vary by region.

"It's not 64.9 is terrible and 70.1 is fantastic," said Dr. Walter Orenstein, an infectious disease expert at Emory University.

Orenstein notes vaccination levels and other factors that affect spread could differ even within a city.

HOW DO WE KNOW WE'VE REACHED HERD IMMUNITY?

Proof that we're nearing herd immunity would be a "disruption in the chain of transmission," said Ashley St. John, who studies immune systems at Duke-NUS Medical School at Singapore.

But don't wait for any big declaration that we've reached that milestone.

To determine whether to relax restrictions, health officials will be watching infection and hospitalization trends as vaccinations roll out. And those decisions are likely to begin long before the ideal herd immunity threshold is reached, though they will be gradual and vary by region.

In India, for instance, scientists believe that more people will need to be protected in densely populated cities, where the virus spreads faster, than in its vast countryside.

India plans to look for antibodies in people nationally to figure out what percentage of its nearly 1.4 billion people have already been infected, said Dr. Jayaprakash Muliyil, who is advising the government on virus surveillance.

Vaccine effectiveness also plays a role. Fewer people need to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity if the shots have higher efficacy.

HOW DO CORONAVIRUS VARIANTS AFFECT HERD IMMUNITY?

It depends on the protection that past infection or vaccination gives you from the variant.

If vaccines were to prove notably less effective against a variant, it would require vaccinating an even greater portion of the population or updating existing vaccines to make them more effective, Orenstein said.

So far, it appears the shots provide at least some protection from the most worrisome variants. But scientists are still studying the situation, and worry about further mutations.

The variants have underscored the importance of vaccinating people as quickly as possible. Slowing transmission is critical since viruses can mutate when they infect people.

DOES HERD IMMUNITY HAVE TO BE GLOBAL?

Global herd immunity is ideal but unlikely.

Rich nations have reserved most vaccines that will be manufactured this year. In the U.S., for example, officials have said enough people could be vaccinated by fall to start to return to normal.

But many poorer countries will likely have to wait longer. This is why the World Health Organization has warned that global herd immunity is unlikely to be achieved this year.

Differences in vaccination levels among countries are also why many experts believe the virus will never be completely stamped out.

CAN HERD IMMUNITY WEAR OFF?

It's not known how long immunity lasts, either after vaccination or from an infection, though experts believe it should be at least several months.

Still, booster shots could be necessary down the road. And though the current COVID-19 vaccines are expected to work on the variants identified in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, it's possible the virus could mutate enough over time that the shots would need to be updated.

Mutations in influenza viruses, for example, are why we get flu shots every year. But experts note coro-

naviruses generally do not mutate as easily.

WHAT IF THE COVID-19 VACCINES DON'T PREVENT INFECTION?

The COVID-19 vaccines rolling out now appear very effective at preventing people from getting sick. We don't know yet how good they are at stopping transmission, but experts say they should help greatly reduce the spread of the virus.

Even if you get infected after vaccination, your body should shed less virus and for a shorter time, said Deborah Fuller, a vaccine expert at the University of Washington.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, on Wednesday noted the public health benefit of getting vaccinated, given the potential for reduced spread.

"It's not only good for you and your family and your community, it will have a very important impact on the dynamics of the outbreak in our country," he said.

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NASA rover attempting most difficult Martian touchdown yet

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Spacecraft aiming to land on Mars have skipped past the planet, burned up on entry, smashed into the surface, and made it down amid a fierce dust storm only to spit out a single fuzzy gray picture before dying.

Almost 50 years after the first casualty at Mars, NASA is attempting its hardest Martian touchdown yet.

The rover named Perseverance is headed Thursday for a compact 5-mile-by-4-mile (8-kilometer-by-6.4-kilometer) patch on the edge of an ancient river delta. It's filled with cliffs, pits, sand dunes and fields of rocks, any of which could doom the \$3 billion mission. The once submerged terrain also could hold evidence of past life, all the more reason to gather samples at this spot for return to Earth 10 years from now.

While NASA has done everything possible to ensure success, "there's always this fear that it won't work well, it won't go well," Erisa Stilley, a landing team engineer, said Tuesday. "We've had a pretty good run of successful missions recently and you never want to be the next one that isn't. It's heartbreaking when it happens."

A look at NASA's latest mission:

MARS MASTER

NASA has nailed eight of nine landing attempts, making the U.S. the only country to achieve a successful touchdown. China hopes to become the second nation in late spring with its own life-seeking rover; its vessel entered orbit around Mars last week along with a United Arab Emirates spacecraft. The red planet's extremely thin atmosphere makes it hard to get down safely. Russia has piled up the most lander losses at Mars and moon Phobos, beginning in the early 1970s. The European Space Agency also has tried and failed. Two NASA landers are still humming along: 2012's Curiosity rover and 2018's InSight. Launched last July, Perseverance will set down some 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) away at Jezero Crater, descending by parachute, rocket engines and sky crane. The millions of lines of software code and hundreds of thousands of electric parts have to work with precision. "There's no go-backs. There's no retries," deputy project manager Matt Wallace said Wednesday.

TOUGHEST LANDING YET

NASA has equipped the 1-ton Perseverance — a beefier version of Curiosity — with the latest landing tech to ace this touchdown. A new autopilot tool will calculate the descending rover's distance to the targeted location and release the massive parachute at the precise moment. Then another system will scan the surface, comparing observations with on-board maps. The rover could detour up to 2,000 feet (600 meters) while seeking somewhere safe, Neil Armstrong style. Without these gizmos, Jezero Crater

would be too risky to attempt. Once down, the six-wheeled Perseverance should be the best driver Mars has ever seen, with more autonomy and range than Curiosity. "Percy's got a new set of kicks," explained chief engineer Adam Steltzner, "and she is ready for trouble on this Martian surface with her new wheels."

LOOKING FOR SIGNS OF LIFE

Where there was water, there may have been life. That's why NASA wants Perseverance snooping around Jezero Crater, once home to a lake fed by a river. It's now bone dry, but 3.5 billion years ago, this Martian lake was as big and wet as Nevada and California's Lake Tahoe. Perseverance will shoot lasers at rocks judged most likely to contain evidence of past microscopic life, analyzing the emitted vapor, and drill into the best candidates. A few dozen core samples — about a pound's worth (one-half kilogram) of rock and dust — will be set aside in sealed titanium tubes for future pickup.

ROUND-TRIP TICKET

Scientists have wanted to get hold of Mars rocks ever since NASA's Mariners provided the first close pictures a half-century ago. NASA is teaming up with the European Space Agency to do just that. The bold plan calls for a rover and return rocket to launch to Mars in 2026, to retrieve Perseverance's stash of samples. NASA expects to bring back the rocks as early as 2031, several years before the first astronauts might arrive on the scene. The rover's super sterilized sample tubes are the cleanest components ever sent into space, according to NASA, to avoid any contaminating traces of Earth.

COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

Speaking of clean, NASA's Mars Mission Control has never been so spotless. Instead of passing around jars of peanuts right before Perseverance's landing — a good luck tradition going back decades — masked flight controllers will get their own individual bags. It's one of many COVID-19 precautions at California's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. The landing team will be spread over multiple rooms, with NASA bigwigs and journalists watching remotely. Launched last July, the aptly named Perseverance bears a plaque honoring health care workers battling the virus over the past year.

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Thousands of service members saying no to COVID-19 vaccine

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — By the thousands, U.S. service members are refusing or putting off the COVID-19 vaccine as frustrated commanders scramble to knock down internet rumors and find the right pitch that will persuade troops to get the shot.

Some Army units are seeing as few as one-third agree to the vaccine. Military leaders searching for answers believe they have identified one potential convincer: an imminent deployment. Navy sailors on ships heading out to sea last week, for example, were choosing to take the shot at rates exceeding 80% to 90%.

Air Force Maj. Gen. Jeff Taliaferro, vice director of operations for the Joint Staff, told Congress on Wednesday that "very early data" suggests that just up to two-thirds of the service members offered the vaccine have accepted.

That's higher than the rate for the general population, which a recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation put at roughly 50%. But the significant number of forces declining the vaccine is especially worrisome because troops often live, work and fight closely together in environments where social distancing and wearing masks, at times, are difficult.

The military's resistance also comes as troops are deploying to administer shots at vaccination centers around the country and as leaders look to American forces to set an example for the nation.

"We're still struggling with what is the messaging and how do we influence people to opt in for the vaccine," said Brig. Gen. Edward Bailey, the surgeon for Army Forces Command. He said that in some units just 30% have agreed to take the vaccine, while others are between 50% and 70%. Forces Command

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oversees major Army units, encompassing about 750,000 Army, Reserve and National Guard soldiers at 15 bases.

At Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where several thousand troops are preparing for future deployments, the vaccine acceptance rate is about 60%, Bailey said. That's "not as high as we would hope for front-line personnel," he said.

Bailey has heard all the excuses.

"I think the most amusing one I heard was, 'The Army always tells me what to do, they gave me a choice, so I said no,'" he said.

Service leaders have vigorously campaigned for the vaccine. They have held town halls, written messages to the force, distributed scientific data, posted videos, and even put out photos of leaders getting vaccinated.

For weeks, the Pentagon insisted it did not know how many troops were declining the vaccine. On Wednesday they provided few details on their early data.

Officials from individual military services, however, said in interviews with The Associated Press that refusal rates vary widely, depending on a service member's age, unit, location, deployment status and other intangibles.

The variations make it harder for leaders to identify which arguments for the vaccine are most persuasive. The Food and Drug Administration has allowed emergency use of the vaccine, so it's voluntary. But Defense Department officials say they hope that soon may change.

"We cannot make it mandatory yet," Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis, commander of the Navy's 2nd Fleet, said last week. "I can tell you we're probably going to make it mandatory as soon as we can, just like we do with the flu vaccine."

About 40 Marines gathered recently in a California conference room for an information session from medical staff. One officer, who was not authorized to publicly discuss private conversations and spoke on condition of anonymity, said Marines are more comfortable posing questions about the vaccine in smaller groups.

The officer said one Marine, citing a widely circulated and false conspiracy theory, said: "I heard that this thing is actually a tracking device." The medical staff, said the officer, quickly debunked that theory, and pointed to the Marine's cellphone, noting that it's an effective tracker.

Other frequent questions revolved around possible side effects or health concerns, including for pregnant women. Army, Navy and Air Force officials say they hear much the same.

The Marine Corps is a relatively small service and troops are generally younger. Similar to the general population, younger service members are more likely to decline or ask to wait. In many cases, military commanders said, younger troops say they have had the coronavirus or known others who had it, and concluded it was not bad.

"What they're not seeing is that 20-year-olds who've actually gotten very sick, have been hospitalized or die, or the folks who appear to be fine but then it turns out they've developed pulmonary and cardiac abnormalities," Bailey said.

One ray of hope has been deployments.

Lewis, based in Norfolk, Virginia, said last week that sailors on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, which is operating in the Atlantic, agreed to get the shot at a rate of about 80%. Sailors on the USS Iwo Jima and Marines in the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, who also are deploying, had rates of more than 90%.

Bailey said the Army is seeing opportunities to reduce the two-week quarantine period for units deploying to Europe if service members are largely vaccinated and the host nation agrees. U.S. Army Europe may cut the quarantine time to five days if 70% of the unit is vaccinated, and that incentive could work, he said.

The acceptance numbers drop off among those who are not deploying, military officials said.

Gen. James McConville, the Army's chief of staff, used his own experience to encourage troops to be vaccinated. "When they asked me how it felt, I said it was a lot less painful than some of the meetings I go to in the Pentagon."

Col. Jody Dugai, commander of the Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital at Fort Polk, Louisiana, said that so far conversations at the squad level, with eight to 10 peers, have been successful, and that getting more information helps.

At the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Brig. Gen. David Doyle, has a dual challenge. As base commander, he must persuade the nearly 7,500 soldiers on base to get the shot and he needs to ensure that the thousands of troops that cycle in and out for training exercises are safe.

Doyle said the acceptance rate on his base is between 30% and 40%, and that most often it's the younger troops who decline.

"They tell me they don't have high confidence in the vaccine because they believe it was done too quickly," he said. Top health officials have attested to the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

Doyle said it appears peers are often more influential than leaders in persuading troops — a sentiment echoed by Bailey, the Army Forces Command surgeon.

"We're trying to figure out who the influencers are," Bailey said. "Is it a squad leader or platoon sergeant in the Army? I think it probably is. Someone who is more of their age and interacts with them more on a regular basis versus the general officer who takes his picture and says, 'I got the shot.'"

AP National Security writer Robert Burns contributed to this report.

Woman charged in Capitol melee says Proud Boys recruited her

By ROXANA HEGEMAN Associated Press

BELLE PLAINE, Kan. (AP) — An Arizona woman charged in the Jan. 6 onslaught of the U.S. Capitol bragged in a Snapchat video that she was recently recruited by a Kansas City chapter of the Proud Boys, a neofascist organization that describes itself as "Western chauvinists" and has long forbidden female members.

Felicia Konold's claim that the chapter recruited her and she was "with them now," even though she's not from the Kansas City area, has intrigued experts who study extremist right-wing movements.

"It is ironic that such a deeply misogynistic organization has attracted someone who is a woman to join their organization," said Eric Ward, a senior fellow with the Southern Poverty Law Center. "It tells us there is dissent in the ranks of Proud Boys right now."

Details of the video surfaced last week in a probable cause affidavit against Konold, 26, of Tucson, who is charged with conspiracy, civil disorder and other federal charges stemming from the melee.

Konold sounded almost euphoric in the Snapchat video she posted after the Capitol attack, saying she never could have imagined having such an influence on the events that unfolded that day. She laughingly references "all my boys, behind me, holding me up in the air, pushing back. We (expletive) did it!"

In order to seemingly prove her point that she had just been "recruited into a (expletive) chapter from Kansas City," she displayed on the video a two-sided "challenge coin" that appears to have markings that designate it as belonging to the Kansas City Proud Boys.

The challenge coin denotes membership, something that seems to go against the rhetoric about women from the organization's national leadership, Ward said.

"The fact she has that coin, the challenge coin, tells me there is something happening around gender in the Proud Boys — and it is something worth paying attention to," said Ward, who is also the executive director of the Western States Center, a civil rights advocacy group that works to advance gender equity.

Experts who monitor right-wing extremist groups point to the controversy that erupted when former mixed martial arts fighter Tara LaRosa tried in December to establish a Proud Girls offshoot on the social media app Telegram.

The Proud Boys' social media channels quickly responded, calling auxiliary groups such as Proud Boy's Girls or Proud Girls "ridiculous ideas." "Don't ride our coattails," one post read. "Want to support us? Get married, have babies, and take care of your family."

Alex DiBranco, executive director of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacy, said there are differences among Proud Boys chapters over whether to embrace women as Proud Girls, even as the group

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as a whole has become more hostile to women's auxiliaries in recent years. Mothers of Proud Boys have posted about Proud Boys gatherings they hosted for their sons.

But DiBranco said the people in her group who have worked on this topic are still unaware of a situation where a woman was actually recruited to be a member of a Proud Boys' chapter itself, which is strictly against the Proud Boys rules.

Cassie Miller, a senior research analyst for the Southern Poverty Law Center, said that for a period of time there were auxiliary groups of Proud Boys' Girls made up of the wives and girlfriends of members, but they were not allowed full membership within the group. As far as she knows, none of those auxiliary groups are active right now.

"The group has been very clear from the beginning it is an organization for men only and they hold misogynistic beliefs and believe that women are best suited for domestic labor and should act as mothers and homemakers," Miller said.

Prosecutors allege in a court filing that William Chrestman, whom they described as the leader of Kansas City Proud Boys cell, "readily recruited" Felicia Konold and her brother, Cory Konold, from Arizona to join the Kansas City Proud Boys.

Neither her attorney, Victoria Brambl, nor her father responded to messages seeking comment. The siblings are scheduled to be released to electronically monitored home detention on Thursday. Brambl asked a magistrate judge Wednesday that her client be allowed to possess a gun while she remains in custody because she lives in a rural area with a lot of crime. The judge refused.

The Proud Boys have been known to incite street violence with counterprotesters. The group gained widespread attention during a presidential debate in September when then-President Donald Trump famously told them to "stand back and stand by."

Prosecutors allege that, beginning in December, the Proud Boys encouraged its members to attend the Jan. 6 demonstration in Washington, D.C. A large group of them, including Felicia Konold and other members of the Kansas City cell, was captured on video marching together and later entering the U.S. Capitol.

While there were plenty of white women at the Jan. 6 protests, white supremacists groups are generally dominated by white men, DiBranco said. Conspiracy theorists, such as followers of QAnon, tend to be popular with women, but Proud Boys supporters and QAnon supporters come together at these types of protests. The movement against vaccinations is dominated by women.

"Those lockdown protests exposed their members to these elements of a far-right coalition that these women might not otherwise be a part of," DiBranco said. "Women may have moved from anti-vaxxer into QAnon and other kinds of conspiracies."

VIRUS TODAY: White House says U.S. vaccinations picking up

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Wednesday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— The White House said the U.S. is vaccinating some 1.7 million people per day, up from under 1 million a month ago. New figures from the White House show the steady increase in the pace of vaccinations over President Joe Biden's first month in office. The data comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Much of the uptick comes from people receiving their second dose of the approved vaccines from Moderna and Pfizer. The pace of first dose vaccinations has been largely steady over the past several weeks, hovering around an average of 900,000 shots per day. Biden is on track to blow past his goal of 100 million injections in his first 100 days in office — though the pace must pick up even further to meet his plans to vaccinate nearly all adults by the end of the summer.

— President Joe Biden has promised that most elementary schools will open five days a week by the end of his first 100 days in office. That's Biden's clearest statement yet on school reopenings, an issue where his administration came under fire when aides said schools would be considered open if they held in-person learning just one day a week. Biden had pledged in December to reopen "the majority of our

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schools” in his first 100 days but has since faced increasing questions about how he would define and achieve that goal, with school districts operating under a patchwork of different virtual and in-person learning arrangements nationwide.

— Arizona has passed two grim milestones, with more than 800,000 confirmed coronavirus cases and more than 15,000 deaths from the disease. The state’s Department of Health Services on Wednesday reported 1,315 additional cases and 82 new deaths, bringing its totals to 801,055 cases and 15,063 deaths in the almost 13 months since COVID-19 was first reported in Arizona. The state was among the national hot spots in last summer’s virus surge and the larger wave that began last fall accelerated during the winter holidays and started to decline last month. State health officials say the number of hospital beds occupied by people with the virus peaked at 5,082 on Jan. 11 and has since fallen to 1,941 as of Tuesday.

THE NUMBERS: According to data from Johns Hopkins University, there were 62,398 new COVID-19 cases and 1,756 deaths in the United States on Tuesday. The record high for new cases was 300,282 on Jan. 2 and the record high for deaths was 5,443 on Feb. 12.

DEATH TOLL: The total number of deaths from COVID-19 in the U.S. reached 488,103.

QUOTABLE: “Variants represent a growing threat,” said U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, a Democrat from Wisconsin. “At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing our testing capacity was essential to our ability to track and slow the spread of the virus — the same is true for finding and tracking these variants.”

ICYMI: Gillette Stadium is a sellout. Workers at the mass vaccination site at the home of the New England Patriots have given out 65,878 coronavirus shots. That’s the capacity of the NFL stadium. Brigitte Peters, 79, of Uxbridge, received two tickets to the team’s 2021 home opener after getting the landmark shot on Tuesday evening. It will be her first Patriots game. She said she was excited to tell her grandchildren about the tickets, and the vaccination process was easy and painless. “It couldn’t have been better, I didn’t even feel it,” she said. “It was so easy.” The site operated by CIC Health opened Jan. 18 and started by administering about 300 vaccines per day. It is now giving about 4,000 shots per day, and plans to continue expanding.

ON THE HORIZON: Snow, ice and bitter cold gripping large parts of the nation is delaying people from receiving the coronavirus vaccination. In Georgia, health officials say expected deliveries of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccinations did not arrive due to the weather. The Georgia Department of Public Health said vaccine providers had to reschedule appointments. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said similar delays of vaccine delivery have caused the city to hold back 30,000 to 35,000 vaccination appointments. The winter weather has also delayed planned vaccination events and appointments in Alabama, Missouri and Tennessee this week, according to officials in those states.

Find AP’s full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Executioners sanitized accounts of deaths in federal cases

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — Executioners who put 13 inmates to death in the last months of the Trump administration likened the process of dying by lethal injection to falling asleep and called gurneys “beds” and final breaths “snores.”

But those tranquil accounts are at odds with reports by The Associated Press and other media witnesses of how prisoners’ stomachs rolled, shook and shuddered as the pentobarbital took effect inside the U.S. penitentiary death chamber in Terre Haute, Indiana. The AP witnessed every execution.

The sworn accounts by executioners, which government filings cited as evidence the lethal injections were going smoothly, raise questions about whether officials misled courts to ensure the executions scheduled from July to mid-January were done before death penalty opponent Joe Biden became president.

Secrecy surrounded all aspects of the executions. Courts relied on those carrying them out to volunteer information about glitches. None of the executioners mentioned any.

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Questions about whether inmates' midsections trembled as media witnesses described were a focus of litigation throughout the run of executions. Inmates' lawyers argued it proved pentobarbital caused flash pulmonary edema, in which fluid rushes through quickly disintegrating membranes into lungs and airways, causing pain akin to being suffocated or drowned. The U.S. Constitution prohibits execution methods that are "cruel and unusual."

The discrepancies could increase pressure on Biden to declare his administration won't execute any of the roughly 50 federal inmates still on death row. Activists want him to go further by backing a bill abolishing the federal death penalty. Biden hasn't spoken about any specific action.

During the Sept. 22 execution of William LeCroy, convicted of killing Georgia nurse Joann Lee Tiesler in 2001, the 50-year-old's stomach area heaved uncontrollably immediately after the pentobarbital injection. It lasted about a minute, according to the AP and other reports.

Executioner Eric Williams stood next to LeCroy as he died. But Williams made only cursory reference to "the rise and fall" of LeCroy's abdomen in his account. Shortly after serving in five of the recent executions, Williams was named the interim warden of the high-profile New York City lockup where Jeffrey Epstein died in 2019.

"During the entirety of the execution, LeCroy did not appear to be in any sort of distress, discomfort, or pain," Williams wrote. "A short time after he took a deep breath and snored, it appeared to me that LeCroy was in a deep, comfortable sleep."

The distinctive jerking and jolting was visible in at least half the executions, according to the AP and other media accounts. Among multiple executioner accounts, none described any such movements. All employed the same sleep metaphors.

When Donald Trump's Justice Department announced in 2019 it'd resume executions after a 17-year hiatus, it said it would use pentobarbital alone. Manufacturers were no longer willing to supply the combination of drugs used in three federal executions from 2001 to 2003, explaining they didn't want drugs meant to save lives to be used for killing.

One point of contention during the litigation was whether, even if pulmonary edema did occur, inmates could feel it after they appeared to be knocked out. Experts for the prisoners said the drug paralyzes the body, masking the pain prisoners could feel as they died.

None of those executed appeared to writhe in pain. But audio from the death chamber to the media viewing room was switched off just prior to the injections, so journalists couldn't hear if inmates groaned or complained of pain.

William Breeden, a spiritual adviser in the chamber when 52-year-old Corey Johnson was executed on Jan. 14 after his 1992 conviction of killing seven people, said in a filing the next day that "Corey said his hands and mouth were burning" after the injection. Federal Bureau of Prisons attorney Rick Winter said in response that neither he nor anyone in a government witness room heard that.

Some pain doesn't necessarily mean an execution method violates prohibitions against "cruel and unusual" punishment, the Supreme Court ruled in 2019. The Constitution, the 5-4 majority opinion said, "does not guarantee a prisoner a painless death — something that, of course, isn't guaranteed to many people."

Government lawyers, eager to carry on and avoid any potential delays, sought to discredit the journalists' accounts.

In an Oct. 8 filing, government expert Kendall Von Crowns, who didn't witness the executions, relied on executioners' descriptions to suggest journalists misperceived what they saw. He noted that LeCroy's executioner "does not state that there was any irregular or uncontrolled heaving." It was more likely, he said, that journalists saw "hyperventilation due to the anxiety associated with his impending death."

The Federal Bureau of Prisons declined to comment on why lawyers representing the agency relied on experts who had not observed executions in person and whether executioners' statements may have misled courts.

In an evidentiary hearing in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 18 — when eight executions had yet to be carried out — government attorneys objected when inmates' lawyers asked Crowns about media reports of midsection movements in three of the first five executions.

After Judge Tanya Chutkan overruled them, Crowns suggested what reporters saw was called agonal breathing — involuntary intakes of air in the final moments before death.

"It has nothing to do with they're drowning in their own fluids or they can't breathe," Crowns testified. He added: "It has no relevance to pulmonary edema whatsoever."

All the journalist reports said the movements happened within minutes of injections, never in the minutes before an inmate was pronounced dead.

What media witnesses described was consistent with pulmonary edema, an expert for inmates' legal teams, Gail Van Norman, argued in a filing after LeCroy's execution. She said that as fluid blocks airways, it throws the chest, diaphragm and abdomen off their usual rhythm, "giving the appearance of the chest and abdomen rocking opposite of one another, or a heaving abdomen."

Authorities also provided no public access to medical records on when inmates' brainwaves or hearts stopped, which could have helped determine whether they were conscious when the distinctive motions occurred.

Chutkan was asked to revisit and rule on the issue repeatedly. At one hearing, she expressed exasperation with the pace of the executions, saying the unrelenting push by government attorneys accorded her little time to digest a deluge of filings on often complex scientific issues.

"I am drinking from a firehose here," she said.

But in a key Sept. 20 decision, Chutkan cited the conflicting witness accounts, dueling experts and the Supreme Court's 2019 ruling in ruling against the inmates — several of whom were scheduled to die, and would die, within days.

"While the court continues to be concerned at the possibility that inmates will suffer excruciating pain during their executions," she said, inmates' attorneys "have not established that flash pulmonary edema is 'certain' or even 'likely' to occur before an inmate is rendered insensate."

Associated Press writer Michael Tarm witnessed 10 of the federal executions since July.

Follow Michael Tarm on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/mtarm>.

After delay, Israel allows vaccines into Hamas-run Gaza

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel allowed the Palestinian Authority to deliver the first coronavirus vaccines to the Gaza Strip on Wednesday despite objections from Israeli lawmakers who suggested they be used as a bargaining chip for the release of captives held by the territory's militant Hamas rulers.

Israel has faced international criticism for largely excluding Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza from its highly successful vaccination campaign. It held up the shipment for two days as the government faced questioning from a parliamentary committee before ultimately approving it.

The dispute highlights the Palestinians' reliance on Israel even as they struggle to combat the pandemic on their own. It's also a potent example of global inequality in the rollout of vaccines, most of which have been scooped up by wealthy countries.

The shipment finally arrived midday Wednesday at the Kerem Shalom crossing. Palestinian Health Minister Mai Alkaila said the PA sent 2,000 doses of the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine — enough to inoculate only 1,000 people in an impoverished territory that is home to 2 million Palestinians.

Gaza has been under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas, an Islamic militant group, seized power from PA forces in 2007. Gaza's Health Ministry has reported more than 53,000 cases and at least 538 deaths since the start of the pandemic, and authorities have been reluctant to impose widespread lockdowns because the territory is already mired in poverty.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars and numerous skirmishes since the militant group took control of Gaza.

In an interview Wednesday with Israel's army radio station, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he

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was working on bringing captive Israelis back from Gaza, but did not link the issue to vaccines. He noted the vaccines were from Palestinian supplies, and said it was important that Palestinians be vaccinated because the virus can easily cross into Israel.

"This is not from Israeli supplies," he said. "I am committed to bringing back the prisoners and the missing in action at any price. We are working on this these days, but the epidemiological issue is not connected."

During Monday's parliamentary debate, Zvi Hauser, chair of the foreign affairs and defense committee, argued that the vaccine delivery should be linked to progress on the release of two Israeli captives held by Hamas and the remains of two Israeli soldiers killed in a 2014 war. He also expressed concern that vaccines would go to Hamas members rather than medics.

Ahmad Tibi, an Arab member of parliament, called the discussion "shameful," saying: "In 20 years, your children will also be ashamed of this position of vaccination prevention."

The Palestinian Authority said the first doses would go to front-line medical workers. But Ashraf al-Qedra, spokesman for the Gaza Health Ministry, said they would be administered in two phases, first to vulnerable patients and then to health care workers.

"The amount is very small and not enough to cover all 12,000 medical workers," he said. "We think it's better to first inoculate vulnerable patients, such as organ transplant and dialysis patients."

The ministry said vaccinations would begin Sunday due to inclement winter weather that could make it dangerous for patients to travel to hospitals.

Israel has launched one of the world's most successful vaccination programs, inoculating more than a third of its population of 9.3 million since December after securing millions of doses from pharmaceutical giants Pfizer and Moderna.

Rights groups say it has an obligation as an occupying power to share its vaccines with the Palestinians. Israel captured east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 war, territories the Palestinians want for their future state.

Israel denies having such an obligation and says its priority is its own citizens. It is vaccinating Palestinian residents of annexed east Jerusalem, which it considers part of its capital. Israel withdrew troops from Gaza in 2005, and it says the Palestinian Authority is responsible for health care in the territories it administers according to interim peace agreements.

The Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the occupied West Bank, has not publicly requested vaccines from Israel and says it has secured its own supply through the World Health Organization and agreements with drug makers.

Still, Israel provided 2,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine to the PA earlier this month, allowing it to begin vaccinating medical workers, and the PA says it independently acquired 10,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine.

Hamas is believed to be holding two captives, an Israeli of Ethiopian descent who entered Gaza shortly after the 2014 war, and an Arab Bedouin citizen of Israel. In exchange, Hamas is likely to demand the release of a large number of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, including individuals implicated in deadly attacks.

—
Krauss reported from Jerusalem. Associated Press writers Josef Federman and Ilan Ben Zion in Jerusalem contributed.

Jailed suspect in anti-Maduro plot blames Colombia, Guaido

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writer

MIAMI (AP) — From a windowless cell in a maximum-security prison in Colombia, Yacsy Álvarez awaits trial on charges she helped organize an attempted armed invasion to overthrow the government in neighboring Venezuela.

Álvarez was a translator and business partner of Jordan Goudreau, the former American Green Beret whose ill-fated plan to depose Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro with a ragtag army he allegedly helped train in the jungles of Colombia ended in disaster last year.

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Prosecutors in Colombia said Álvarez helped smuggle weapons to the volunteer army. But she claims she's being made the scapegoat for the sins of others, including U.S.-backed Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who distanced himself from the self-declared freedom fighters. Last month, her attorney asked prosecutors to add Guaidó as a co-conspirator in the case.

She's also lashing out at her accusers in Colombia, who she claims were in contact with the plot's Venezuelan ringleader. Despite being aware of the soldiers' movements, she said, Colombian authorities did nothing to stop them — even after Maduro's vice president, a full seven months before the raid, announced the coordinates of the rebels' safe houses from the floor of the United Nations General Assembly.

"I've got no military training, no political experience, no economic resources," said Álvarez in the brief jail-cell interview from prison in Medellín. "They grabbed me, the most ignorant, to clean up the dishes broken by others."

Álvarez's claims raise new questions about the role of staunch U.S. ally Colombia in the so-called Operation Gideon — or the Bay of Piglets, as the bloody fiasco came to be known. The failed attempt last May to ignite an uprising ended with six insurgents dead and two of Goudreau's former Special Forces buddies behind bars in Caracas.

Colombia, whose security forces are among the top U.S. partners in the world, has steadfastly denied knowingly serving as a staging ground for the incursion, just as the U.S. has insisted it was unaware of any illicit activities.

But Álvarez said the man coordinating the clandestine effort, retired Venezuelan army Gen. Cliver Alcalá, had been in contact with Colombia's intelligence services ever since he arrived in the country in 2017 following a failed barracks conspiracy inside Venezuela.

The information matches findings of an AP investigation last year that the always loquacious Alcalá openly touted his plans for an incursion and appealed for support in a June 2019 meeting with two agents from Colombia's National Intelligence Directorate, or DNI.

Alcalá at the meeting in a hotel in Medellín also boasted about his relationship with Goudreau, describing him as a former CIA agent, according to a former Colombian official familiar with the conversation. But when the CIA in Bogota denied any link to Goudreau, Alcalá was told by his handlers to cease all talk of an invasion or face expulsion, the former official said.

PLOTTER OR DOUBLE AGENT?

Nine months after Operation Gideon became a laughingstock on social media, a full account of how it was organized and what led to its unraveling remains cloaked behind questionable confessions and propaganda ploys from Caracas as well as silence and subterfuge from Maduro's opponents.

Álvarez, 39, has been portrayed in Colombia media as something of a Venezuelan Mata Hari, alternately accused of conspiring to overthrow Maduro or working as a double agent to sabotage the operation from behind enemy lines. But in her telling, her only crime is having come to the aid of the forlorn troops when Guaidó and Colombia, after encouraging the deserters and offering them free housing and assistance, abandoned the men.

She was arrested along with three other Venezuelans last September following a five-month investigation into the arming and training of an exile militia on Colombian soil.

Colombian President Iván Duque said at the time the four were "presumably promoted and financed by Maduro's dictatorial regime" although so far authorities haven't presented any hard evidence establishing such links.

Álvarez served as Goudreau's translator during his visits to Colombia and the two opened an affiliate of his small Florida security firm Silvercorp, in mid-2019. It listed its address at an upscale hotel in Barranquilla, according to Colombian public records.

She also flew with Goudreau and the two other former Green Berets — Luke Denman and Airan Berry — to Barranquilla aboard a Cessna jet belonging to her boss, businessman Franklin Durán, who has a long history of deal-making with the Venezuelan government. At the time, Álvarez was living in the Caribbean coastal city and working as a director in a unit of Durán's auto lubricants company.

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Durán was arrested in May by Venezuelan authorities, accused of financing the plot. Through his lawyers, he has denied any involvement. But Maduro's opponents have pointed to Durán's murky past — he spent four years in a U.S. jail for working as a foreign agent of Hugo Chávez to cover up bulk cash contributions to Argentina's former president — as evidence that the mission had been co-opted.

Wherever his loyalties lie, Alvarez said it was Durán who put her in touch with Alcalá, who he knew for years.

Alvarez said the Colombian authorities were intimately aware of what was going on and appeared to be supportive if not directly involved. At one point, Alcalá introduced her to his longtime handler at the DNI, someone identifying himself as "Franklin Sánchez," which she now believes was a pseudonym.

At no time did she suspect she was under investigation. Instead, she claims it was Sánchez who tried to protect her, urging her to change residences due to possible threats originating from the Maduro-controlled elite police unit known as the Special Action Forces. She gave the same explanation to her lawyer, Alejandro Carranza, in a recorded conversation from jail on Nov. 26, a copy of which the attorney provided to the AP.

The threat is also referenced in a letter, also provided by Carranza, sent by the DNI a month before her arrest to prosecutors urging them to take "urgent" action to prevent her from being harmed or fleeing illegally to Panama. The letter, which is labeled "secret," was written at the request of the DNI's director, retired Vice Admiral Rodolfo Amaya.

She also claims to have spoken via videoconference for three hours to agents from the FBI, who have a parallel investigation into whether Goudreau broke U.S. laws requiring State Department approval for American companies supplying military training or equipment to foreign persons. During the meeting, she says she pleaded with the FBI to protect her mother, who remains in Venezuela, from retaliation by Maduro.

U.N. SPEECH

Colombia's DNI in a statement said it had no prior knowledge of plans for a military incursion nor any information about Alcalá's relationship with Goudreau. It also denied ever having any contact with Alvarez, to warn her of threats or otherwise, but didn't dispute the authenticity of the letter sent to prosecutors about her movements.

But numerous public statements from Maduro's government, as well as police reports in Colombia of suspicious activity by Venezuelan military deserters, indicate the plot was hidden in plain sight.

On Sept. 27, 2019, Venezuela Vice President Delcy Rodríguez delivered a blistering speech against Colombia at the U.N. General Assembly in which she revealed the location of what she said were three safe houses where soldiers were being trained to oust Maduro. Hours later, the Venezuelan government broadcast on social media the address and a photo taken from Google Earth of one of the houses — what it called "Camp Two" — in the coastal city of Riohacha. Days earlier, her brother, then Communications Minister Jorge Rodríguez, had provided the same information.

The simple concrete home on an unpaved dusty street was rented for around \$700 a month on July 1, 2019, by two Venezuelans, according to a copy of the rental contract provided to the AP by the owner. One of the men, Luis Gómez Penaranda, was arrested two months later in Venezuela for allegedly transporting C-4 explosives for a planned bombing of government buildings. In a videotaped confession that was heavily promoted by Maduro's government, Penaranda fingered Alcalá and one of Alvarez's co-defendants, Rayder Russo, as the architects of the thwarted attack. Penaranda was freed last year as part of a mass release of government opponents.

Dilarina Mendoza, the home's owner, said the renters presented paperwork identifying themselves as members of an accredited religious organization, the Mahanaim Foundation, a reference to a Biblical village meaning "two camps" in Hebrew. She said Alvarez, whom she identified in photos, was with them and the one who paid the first month's rent. On one occasion she saw Alcalá at the house as well as an American in a baseball cap whom she was unable to identify.

From the outset, the tenants fell behind in rent even as ever-larger numbers of Venezuelans crowded into the house, sleeping on metallic bunk beds they purchased. Repeatedly she was told they were waiting for cash to be sent from their brethren in the U.S. Finally, in late October, she filed a police report — a copy

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of which she also provided — claiming about \$2,000 in unpaid rent and expenses.

"I had to kick them out. I was so angry because they wouldn't leave," said Mendoza, who said she never suspected they were up to anything nefarious. "On top of that, they left the house a mess and destroyed my marble floor."

Once evicted, the group of around 20 men moved to similarly downscale quarters 2 kilometers (about 1 mile) away. Police searched the new house on March 26, 2020 — more than a month before the botched Venezuela invasion. The house was uninhabited, but inside they found Venezuelan military uniforms, maps of key states, and nine security cameras among mattresses strewn across the floor, according to a police report obtained by the AP. There were also receipts of small Western Union transfers — one for \$48.75 — from other known conspirators among ex-Venezuelan soldiers living in Miami. The police report is referenced in the arrest warrant against Álvarez, a copy of which was provided by her lawyer.

It's unclear what prompted the raid. But it's possible authorities were already suspicious even if they were unwilling — or unable — to neutralize the plot and prevent the bloodbath that would soon take place. Three days earlier, on March 23, police seized a cache of 26 assault rifles and tactical equipment it was later revealed were dispatched by Álvarez and destined for the rebels in the desert-like La Guajira peninsula that Colombia shares with Venezuela.

By now, the mission had been thoroughly infiltrated and Maduro's government couldn't help but gloat. On March 28, socialist party boss Diosdado Cabello, the eminence grise of Venezuela's vast Cuban-trained intelligence network, for the first time named Álvarez, Alcalá, and Goudreau and others on state TV for allegedly spearheading a "mercenary" plot to oust Maduro.

"What has the Colombian government done? Nothing, because they are accomplices," said Cabello.

Ramiro Bejarano, a former Colombian intelligence chief, said Álvarez's statements are a further embarrassment for Colombian authorities who in their enthusiasm to see Maduro removed overlooked how easily Alcalá's improvised plan could backfire into what it ultimately became: a hard-to-explain political mess for the Venezuelan opposition and its foreign backers.

"They were either complicit or completely negligent in not shutting it down," said Bejarano, now a columnist critical of the current government in Bogota. "But it's impossible they didn't know what was going on right under their noses."

U.S. INVOLVEMENT?

Alcalá, a former acolyte of the late Hugo Chávez who broke with Maduro when he became president in 2013, did not partake in the incursion. On March 26 — three days after the cache of weapons was intercepted — federal prosecutors in New York unsealed charges against him, Maduro, Cabello and others for allegedly conspiring with Colombian rebels to ship large quantities of cocaine to the U.S. A \$10 million reward was announced for information leading to Alcalá's arrest — a surprise reversal for an outspoken Maduro critic who had been in contact with Colombian intelligence for years.

But before turning himself in, Alcalá took responsibility for the weapons that Álvarez allegedly helped transport, saying they belonged to the "Venezuelan people." He also lashed out against Guaidó, accusing him of betraying a contract signed with "American advisers" to remove Maduro from power.

The U.S. has denied any direct role in the attempted Venezuelan raid. Elliott Abrams, who was the Trump administration's envoy for Venezuela, said last year, in a written response to questions posed by Sen. Chris Murphy, that the only knowledge he and others in the State Department had of Silvercorp's activities in Colombia came from inquiries by the AP.

Abrams said he had no knowledge of Goudreau's alleged efforts to obtain weapons nor was he made aware of any meetings between Guaidó representatives and security contractors on U.S. soil related to such an undertaking.

Meanwhile, Guaidó has disputed the authenticity of his signature on an agreement presented by Goudreau detailing a snatch and grab operation against Maduro. The two Miami-based aides who did acknowledge signing the document said they broke off all contact with Goudreau almost six months before the suicide mission was launched.

Goudreau has acknowledged plowing ahead alone, but in October nonetheless sued one of Guaidó's

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aides, political strategist JJ Rendon, for \$1.4 million, alleging breach of contract. His 133-page complaint reads like an intrigue-filled Netflix series involving everything from clandestine airstrips to aides to Vice President Mike Pence. In it, Goudreau asserts, without evidence except a few inconclusive meetings he had with two Trump officials, that the "Alcalá plan" had been approved by the U.S. government.

The FBI, however, has been investigating Goudreau for weapons trafficking, U.S. law enforcement source told the AP last year. In May, it seized \$50,000 from him when it raided a Miami-area apartment where he was residing, his attorney told the AP. No reason was given for the seizure although the FBI has since decided to return the funds, the attorney said.

"We believe the raid was conducted in order to provoke a violent response," Gustavo Garcia-Montes told the AP, adding that his client had already been in contact and was cooperating with investigators. Neither Goudreau nor anybody else has been charged in the matter.

HEROES TO SOME

Back in Colombia, Álvarez and her co-defendants have so far been the only ones held accountable for Operation Gideon.

While Álvarez has vowed to fight the charges, her three co-defendants are considering a plea deal. Álvarez's attorney said the men are shielding Guaidó, citing as evidence the fact that he was previously a leader in an anti-Maduro party and since migrating to Colombia has been referred cases by the Guaidó-appointed embassy in Bogota. The attorney, Eduardo Cespedes, says he's just looking to protect his clients from a long jail sentence, but is confident he can beat the charges if the case goes to trial.

To some, Álvarez and her co-defendants remain heroes.

"In Venezuela, everyone fights the dictatorship on Twitter, but these brave men and woman actually risked their lives," said retired Venezuelan Capt. Javier Nieto, a longtime conspirator who appeared in a video alongside Goudreau in Florida the day of failed beach raid to urge restraint. "Since it didn't work out, Colombia to save face in the international community had to make arrests. So they grabbed whoever they could find while the cowards who betrayed their promises remain untouched."

The evidence against Alvarez includes footage from security cameras in an apartment building showing her handing off heavy bags to a person who would be caught hours later transporting the weapons.

She claims she didn't know what was inside the bags, which she said had been dropped off at her apartment by several of the plotters on instructions from Alcalá while she was in Spain.

"All I tried to do was help some Venezuelan soldiers who trusted and believed in Juan Guaidó's word when he asked them to join him on the right side of history," said Álvarez on the verge of tears as she rushes to finish the call before being returned to her dark cell. "If I have to pay 15 years of jail for that, so be it."

AP investigative researcher Randy Herschaft in New York contributed to this report.

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Japan starts COVID-19 vaccinations with eye on Olympics

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan launched its coronavirus vaccination campaign Wednesday, months after other major economies started giving shots and amid questions about whether the drive would reach enough people quickly enough to save a Summer Olympics already delayed by the pandemic.

Despite a recent rise in infections, Japan has largely dodged the kind of cataclysm that has battered other wealthy countries' economies, social networks and health care systems. But the fate of the Olympics, and the billions of dollars at stake, makes Japan's vaccine campaign crucial. Japanese officials are also well aware that rival China, which has had success beating back the virus, will host the Winter Olympics next year, heightening the desire to make the Tokyo Games happen.

Japan's rollout lagged behind other places because it asked vaccine maker Pfizer to conduct clinical tri-

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als with Japanese people, in addition to tests already conducted in six other nations — part of an effort to address worries in a country with low vaccine confidence.

That longstanding reluctance to take vaccines — usually because of fears of rare side effects — as well as concerns about shortages of the imported vaccines now hang over the rollout, which will first give shots to medical workers, then the elderly and vulnerable, and then, possibly in late spring or early summer, the rest of the population.

Medical workers say vaccinations will help protect them and their families, and business leaders hope the drive will allow economic activity to return to normal. But the late rollout will make it impossible to reach so-called herd immunity in the country of 127 million people before the Olympics begin in July, experts say.

That will leave officials struggling to quell widespread wariness — and even outright opposition — among citizens to hosting the Games. About 80% of those polled in recent media surveys support cancellation or further postponement of the Olympics.

Despite that, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and others in his government are forging ahead with Olympic plans, billing the Games as “proof of human victory against the pandemic.”

Japan has not seen the massive outbreaks that have buffeted the United States and many European countries, but a spike in cases in December and January raised concerns and led to a partial state of emergency that includes requests for restaurants and bars to close early. Suga has seen his support plunge to below 40% from around 70% when he took office in September, with many people saying he was too slow to impose restrictions and they were too lax.

The country is now seeing an average of about 1 infection per 100,000 people — compared with 24.5 in the United States or 18 in the United Kingdom. Overall, Japan has recorded about 420,000 cases and 7,000 deaths, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

In a room full of journalists Wednesday, Dr. Kazuhiro Araki, president of Tokyo Medical Center, rolled up his sleeve and got a shot, one of the first Japanese to do so.

“It didn’t hurt at all, and I’m feeling very relieved,” he told reporters while he was being monitored for any allergic reaction. “We now have better protection, and I hope we feel more at ease as we provide medical treatment.”

About 40,000 doctors and nurses considered vulnerable to the virus because they treat COVID-19 patients are in the first group slated to be vaccinated using shots developed by Pfizer and its Germany-based partner BioNTech — after the vaccine was authorized Sunday by Japan’s regulator. It requires two doses, though some protection begins after the first shot.

Japan’s late authorization of the vaccine means it lags behind many other countries. Britain started inoculations on Dec. 8 and has given at least one shot to more than 15 million people, while the United States began its campaign on Dec. 14 and about 40 million people have received shots. Vaccines were rolled out in many European Union countries in late December, and the campaigns there have come under criticism for being slower.

But Japan’s vaccine minister, Taro Kono, defended the delay as necessary to build confidence in a country where mistrust of vaccines is decades old. Many people have a vague unease about vaccines, partly because their side effects have often been played up by media here.

“I think it is more important for the Japanese government to show the Japanese people that we have done everything possible to prove the efficacy and safety of the vaccine to encourage the Japanese people to take the vaccine,” Kono said. “So at the end of the day we might have started slower, but we think it will be more effective.”

Half of the recipients of the first shots will keep daily records of their condition for seven weeks; that data will be used in a health study meant to inform people worried about the side effects. Studies on tens of thousands of people of the Pfizer vaccine — and others being administered currently in other countries — have found no serious side effects.

“We would like to make efforts so that the people can be vaccinated with a peace of mind,” Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told reporters.

The development of a Japanese COVID-19 vaccine is still in the early stages, so the country, like many

others, must rely on imported shots — raising concerns about supply issues seen in other places as producers struggle to keep up with demand. Suga on Wednesday acknowledged the importance to strengthen vaccine development and production capability as “important crisis management” and pledged to provide more support.

Supplies will help determine the progress of the vaccination drive in Japan, Kono said.

The first batch of Pfizer vaccines that arrived Friday is enough to cover the first group of medical workers. A second batch is set for delivery next week.

To get the most from each vial, Japanese officials are also scrambling to get specialized syringes that can draw six doses per vial instead of five by standard Japanese-made syringes.

After the front-line medical workers will come inoculations of 3.7 million more health workers starting in March, followed by about 36 million people aged 65 and older beginning in April. People with underlying health issues, as well as caregivers at nursing homes and other facilities, will be next, before the general population receives its turn.

Some critics have noted the vaccination drive — which requires medical workers to be carried out — adds to their burden, since Japanese hospitals are already strained by daily treatment of COVID-19 patients. There’s an added worry that hospitals will have no additional capacity to cope with the large number of overseas visitors the Olympics would involve.

EU hails deals to get more vaccine shots, tackle variants

By FRANK JORDANS and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Amid signs that more infectious coronavirus variants are spreading unchecked across Europe, governments and EU leaders scrambled Wednesday to speed up vaccine efforts that have been hampered by limited supplies and to fund ways to hunt down variants and counter them.

The European Union announced Wednesday that it has agreed to buy a further 300 million doses of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine and was injecting almost a quarter of a billion euros (almost \$300 million) into efforts to combat virus variants.

The news came only hours after Pfizer and BioNTech said they had signed a deal to deliver an additional 200 million vaccine doses to the bloc.

The EU Commission said its second contract with Moderna provides for an additional purchase of 150 million doses in 2021 and an option to purchase 150 million more doses in 2022.

“With a portfolio of up to 2.6 billion doses, we will be able to provide vaccines not just to our citizens, but to our neighbors and partners as well,” EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Von der Leyen and her team have come under intense criticism for their handling of the EU’s vaccine procurement process. While the 27-nation bloc began vaccinating its 450 million citizens almost two months ago, it still lags far behind Britain, the United States, and others in the share of population reached.

Von der Leyen also unveiled EU plans to better detect virus variants and to speed up the approval of adapted vaccines capable of countering them.

As the U.K. virus variant looks set to become dominant in the EU, the executive arm said it will spend at least 75 million euros to support genomic sequencing and develop specialized tests for new variants. Another 150 million euros will be allocated to research and data exchange.

“Our priority is to ensure that all Europeans have access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines as soon as possible,” von der Leyen said. “At the same time, new variants of the virus are emerging fast and we must adapt our response even faster.”

Germany’s health minister said the virus variant first detected in Britain last year now accounts for more than a fifth of all positive tests in his country, rising from 6% to more than 22% in just two weeks.

In Slovakia, which now has the highest rate of virus deaths per population in the world, authorities found the U.K. variant in 74% of its positive samples.

Danish Health Minister Magnus Heunicke said the U.K. variant represented 45% of its analyzed cases in the second week of February and predicted it will represent 80% of Danish infections by early March.

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Scientists say the U.K. variant spreads more easily and is likely more deadly, but so far existing vaccines appear to be effective against it. Another variant first detected in South Africa, however, has shown signs of being able to evade the immune response generated by the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Authorities in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, expressed concerns that some people appeared less willing to take the AstraZeneca vaccine than those made by Moderna or Pfizer.

"The authorized AstraZeneca vaccine isn't a second-class vaccine," the state's health ministry said. "The vaccine shows a good effectiveness and is well tolerated."

Reticence toward the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is only given to those under 65 in Germany, has been reinforced by reports that some people had fevers and headaches after getting the shot. Officials say such reactions are normal after vaccinations, show that the body's immune system is responding and should disappear after a day or two.

Health Minister Jens Spahn said if people didn't want to get an AstraZeneca shot, he and others would gladly take it.

"If people who are offered it don't take it, then we will offer it to the next person," he said, noting that Germany and the EU are still facing vaccine shortages.

Pfizer and German partner BioNTech confirmed that they, too, have finalized an agreement to supply the EU with another 200 million vaccine doses.

The two companies said those doses — expected to be delivered this year, an estimated 75 million of them in the second quarter — come on top of the 300 million vaccine doses the bloc initially ordered. The EU has an option to request a further 100 million doses.

Vaccine shortages have been a charged issue in Europe.

Last month, Pfizer said it was temporarily reducing deliveries to Europe and Canada while it upgraded production capacity at its plant in Belgium. The EU also had a public spat with AstraZeneca over getting fewer of its vaccine shots than anticipated. AstraZeneca's chief blamed the lag on new factories needing to work out vaccine production issues.

Spain's top coronavirus expert says at current levels of vaccine supply, it doesn't make sense to set up massive facilities to administer the jabs, echoing comments by U.S. governors, who are also facing vaccine shortages in their states.

The European Medicines Agency, meanwhile, said it could issue an opinion by mid-March on a fourth vaccine, a one-shot version by Johnson & Johnson. The three other EU-approved vaccines require two shots spaced weeks apart.

Von der Leyen said the EU bought more doses than needed because it wanted to supply shots to its neighbors "from the eastern partnership to the western Balkans to Africa" — although some of those countries have already opted for vaccines from Russia and China after losing out to richer nations in the early bidding for vaccines.

Authorities in Berlin on Wednesday opened the capital's fifth coronavirus vaccination center, located inside an indoor cycling arena. The vast Velodrom started with just 120 vaccinations but officials hope to increase that to 2,200 per day.

"We can't complain," said Dieter Krueger, who was waiting in its recovery room with Ilse, his wife of 60 years, after receiving a Moderna vaccine shot. "Things are looking up."

Jordans contributed from Berlin. Geir Moulson in Berlin, Jan M. Olsen on Copenhagen and Aritz Parra in Madrid contributed to this report.

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

Delivery-only restaurant brands see pandemic-fueled growth

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By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Do you know which restaurant cooked the meal you just had delivered? Increasingly, it can be hard to tell. Delivery-only brands — cooked in another brand's kitchen and often delivered by third parties like Uber Eats — were proliferating even before the pandemic. They're an inexpensive way for restaurants to try a new concept or fill a need in the community; a burger place might try making tacos under a different name, for example.

But over the last year, delivery-only brands have seen explosive growth as the pandemic made delivery a more popular option. Big restaurant chains are now joining the fray, hoping to win new customers as traffic in their dining rooms dwindles.

On Wednesday, Applebee's is launching Cosmic Wings, a delivery-only brand that specializes in chicken wings and Cheetos-flavored dipping sauce. Uber Eats will deliver the brand from 1,300 Applebee's kitchens.

It's joining a crowded market. Denny's is rolling out two virtual brands — The Burger Den and The Melt-down — in the first half of this year. Chuck E. Cheese started delivery-only Pasqually's Pizza and Wings last March. In the last few months, Chili's launched It's Just Wings, TGI Fridays cooked up Conviction Chicken and Carrabba's Italian Grill began delivering Tender Shack chicken sandwiches.

Celebrities are even getting in on the trend. Tyga Bites, a chicken nugget brand from rapper Tyga, and Mariah's Cookies, backed by singer Mariah Carey, are among the brands offered by Virtual Dining Concepts, a new company that sets up delivery-only brands in restaurant kitchens. Coming soon: Mario's Tortas Lopez and Pauly D's Italian Subs.

Uber Eats says it has more than 10,000 delivery-only restaurants on its platform, up from 3,000 in 2019. More than half of that growth has come from national chains, the company said. Grubhub and DoorDash won't say how many delivery-only brands are on their platforms.

Scott Gladstone, Applebee's vice president of strategy and development, said making Cosmic Wings its own brand lets Applebee's target customers it might not reach with its regular menu, where wings are one of nearly a dozen appetizers.

"This gives it the best chance to stand out on its own," Gladstone said.

With dining rooms shuttered in the pandemic, Applebee's and other sit-down restaurants had to quickly shift their emphasis to carryout and delivery. NPD Group, which tracks U.S. restaurant sales, says delivery now makes up 11% of restaurant sales, up 86% since the pandemic began.

In some cases, delivery-only brands have become big businesses of their own. Brinker International, which owns Chili's, says It's Just Wings is on track to bring in \$150 million in annual sales.

Josh Phillips, the co-owner of Espita, a stylish Mexican restaurant in Washington D.C., opened a delivery-only brand called Ghostburger in August to keep Espita's kitchen running through the winter. He chose burgers because he wanted to reach new customers at a lower price point than Espita. They also travel well and don't take much kitchen space to make.

It's been so successful that Phillips is now scouting for locations for stand-alone Ghostburger restaurants. Ghostburger, which cost Phillips only \$2,000 to launch, is now bringing in nearly \$40,000 per week, or 60% of what Espita could make in a good week.

"I don't see a world where we can stop. We're more profitable today than we ever have been," Phillips said.

Rick Camac, the dean of restaurant and hospitality management at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York, thinks demand for delivery will only grow. More restaurants now offer it, packaging has gotten better and delivery companies are getting faster, he said.

"Our habits have changed, and I don't think they are going back very easily or quickly," he said.

Still, he said, restaurants should put some thought into their delivery-only brands. A pizza restaurant can't necessarily make good burgers, he said. And without a storefront, marketing can also be a challenge.

"The ones that don't do it well will ultimately fail," he said.

There has also been some blowback on social media when customers find out that the place they thought was a new local restaurant was actually a big chain. DoorDash says it encourages restaurant chains to

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disclose their virtual brands, but it's not always clear where meals are being cooked.

John Dillon, Denny's chief brand officer, said his company tries to be transparent, partly because its delivery-only brands showcase the variety of food Denny's offers. But he also points out that 96% of Denny's stores are run by franchisees, so patronizing them helps local communities.

Mikelya Fournier, a small business owner in Leesburg, Georgia, was excited to see a new restaurant — It's Just Wings — on DoorDash one night. She dug around and discovered it was made by Chili's. But she thinks the food is delicious and she's happy to have another delivery option.

"Food deserts are rampant in my area, so having a bigger chain come in and fill a need is amazing," Fournier said.

Fournier said delivery companies could simply require restaurants to disclose their virtual brands. But either way, she'll keep ordering from It's Just Wings.

"I don't care who owns it," she said.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 18, the 49th day of 2021. There are 316 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 18, 1970, the "Chicago Seven" defendants were found not guilty of conspiring to incite riots at the 1968 Democratic national convention; five were convicted of violating the Anti-Riot Act of 1968 (those convictions were later reversed).

On this date:

In 1546, Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, died in Eisleben.

In 1564, artist Michelangelo died in Rome.

In 1930, photographic evidence of Pluto (now designated a "dwarf planet") was discovered by Clyde W. Tombaugh at Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona.

In 1943, Madame Chiang Kai-shek (chang ky-shek), wife of the Chinese leader, addressed members of the Senate and then the House, becoming the first Chinese national to address both houses of the U.S. Congress.

In 1960, the 8th Winter Olympic Games were formally opened in Squaw Valley, California, by Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

In 1967, American theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer died in Princeton, New Jersey, at age 62.

In 1972, the California Supreme Court struck down the state's death penalty.

In 1983, 13 people were shot to death at a gambling club in Seattle's Chinatown in what became known as the Wah Mee Massacre. (Two men were convicted of the killings and are serving life sentences; a third was found guilty of robbery and assault.)

In 1988, Anthony M. Kennedy was sworn in as an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1997, astronauts on the space shuttle Discovery completed their tune-up of the Hubble Space Telescope after 33 hours of spacewalking; the Hubble was then released using the shuttle's crane.

In 2001, veteran FBI agent Robert Philip Hanssen was arrested, accused of spying for Russia. (Hanssen later pleaded guilty to espionage and attempted espionage and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.) Auto racing star Dale Earnhardt Sr. died in a crash at the Daytona 500; he was 49.

In 2003, an arson attack involving two South Korean subway trains in the city of Daegu claimed 198 lives. (The arsonist was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 2004.)

Ten years ago: The United States vetoed a U.N. resolution that would have condemned Israeli settlements as illegal and called for a halt in all settlement building; the 14 other Security Council members voted in favor of the measure.

Five years ago: In what was seen as a criticism of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump,

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Pope Francis said that a person who advocated building walls was "not Christian"; Trump quickly retorted it was "disgraceful" to question a person's faith. (A Vatican spokesman said the next day that the pope's comment was not intended as a "personal attack" on Trump.) Dallas-based Heritage Auctions said a rare copy of a comic book featuring the first appearance of Spider-Man had been sold to an anonymous collector for \$454,100.

One year ago: Japanese health authorities confirmed 88 more cases of the coronavirus aboard the quarantined cruise ship Diamond Princess, bringing the number of cases on board to 542; U.S. officials said Americans who chose to remain on board could not return home for at least two weeks after coming ashore. Health officials in the Chinese city of Wuhan announced that a hospital director who'd mobilized the hospital's resources to deal with the thousands of sick people arriving daily had died from the virus. President Donald Trump commuted the 14-year prison sentence of former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich for political corruption; Blagojevich left prison hours later and returned home to Chicago. (Trump also issued pardons or clemency to former New York City police commissioner Bernie Kerik, financier Michael Milken, and a long list of others.) The Boy Scouts of America filed for bankruptcy protection in the first step toward creating a huge compensation fund for men who were molested as youngsters decades ago by scoutmasters or other leaders; the organization urged victims to come forward.

Today's Birthdays: Former Sen. John Warner, R-Va., is 94. Singer Yoko Ono is 88. Singer-songwriter Bobby Hart is 82. Singer Irma Thomas is 80. Singer Herman Santiago (Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers) is 80. Actor Jess Walton is 75. Singer Dennis DeYoung is 74. Actor Sinead Cusack is 73. Actor Cybill Shepherd is 71. Singer Randy Crawford is 69. Rock musician Robbie Bachman is 68. Actor John Travolta is 67. Actor John Pankow is 66. Game show host Vanna White is 64. Actor Jayne Atkinson is 62. Actor Greta Scacchi (SKAH'-kee) is 61. Actor Matt Dillon is 57. Rock musician Tommy Scott (Space) is 57. Rapper Dr. Dre is 56. Actor Molly Ringwald is 53. Actor Sarah Brown is 46. Country musician Trevor Rosen (Old Dominion) is 46. Actor Ike Barinholtz is 44. Actor Kristoffer Polaha is 44. Singer-musician Sean Watkins (Nickel Creek) is 44. Rock-singer musician Regina Spektor is 41. Opera singer Isabel Leonard is 39. Roots rock musician Zac Cockrell (Alabama Shakes) is 33. Actor Shane Lyons is 33. Actor Sarah Sutherland is 33. Actor Maiara Walsh is 33.