

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 1 of 96

- [1- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [2- Kindergarten Roundup](#)
- [3- Ward 2 to have an election](#)
- [4- New water tower logo](#)
- [5- Work continues at new water tower site](#)
- [6- Erickson Poem](#)
- [7- SDDOT Snowplows Named](#)
- [8- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [12- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [19- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [20- Weather Pages](#)
- [23- Daily Devotional](#)
- [24- Physicans Life Insurance Ad](#)
- [25- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [26- News from the Associated Press](#)



An advertisement for a basketball game. It features a black background with three images: a yellow bulldog head on the left, a tiger's face in the center, and a red basketball hoop on the right. The word "BOYS" is written in gold letters above the hoop. Below the images, the text reads: "Region 1A at Groton Area Milbank Bulldogs Friday, March 5, 2021, 7 p.m." in white.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



2021 Groton Area Elementary Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning 5 on or before September 1, 2021

Friday, March 12, 2021

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

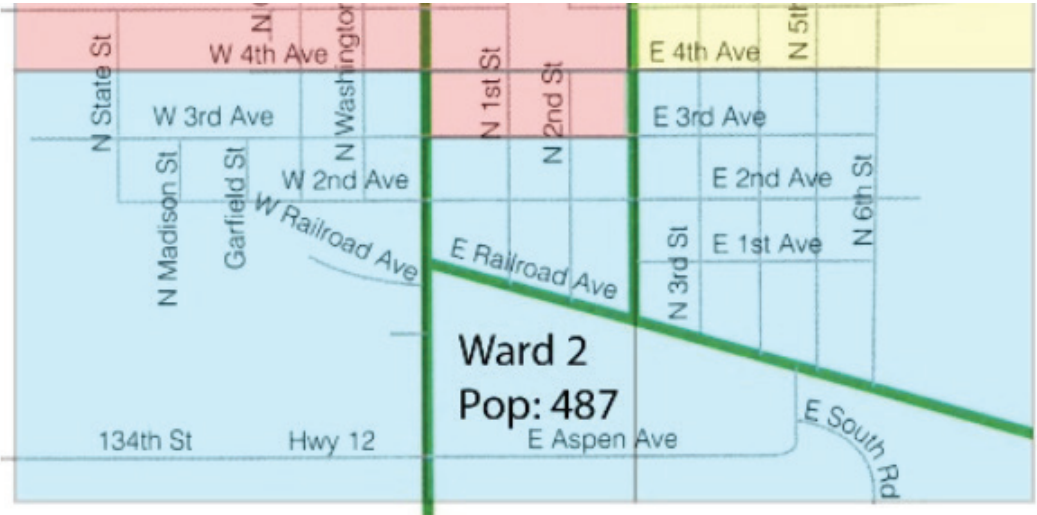
Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2021-2022 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet by the end of this week.



Ward 2 to have an election

Voters in Ward 2 will have a choice between two candidates for the city council. Incumbent Jon Cutler will be challenged by Mitchell Locke for the two-year term.

Meanwhile in the other wards, Brian Bahr will fill out the one-year term of incumbent Emily Kappes who chose not to run. Incumbent Shirley Wells took out a petition and will fill the two-year spot in Ward 2 and Incumbent Karyn Babcock took out a petition and will fill the spot in Ward 2 for a two-year term.



The area shown in blue is the ward that will have the election this year. (Photo from city website)

The Groton City Council met in regular session Tuesday night and voted to rescind a motion made at the last meeting to award the gravel bid to Krueger Brothers. Jensen Rock and Sand had submitted the low bid, but the council opted to go with the next lower bid with Krueger Brothers. City Attorney Drew Johnson was not at the last meeting and he informed the council Tuesday night that its bad circumstances to now award the bid to the lowest bidder. He recommended to the council to rescind the motion and to award to the gravel bid to the low bidder, which the council did do.

Spring garbage routes will go into effect next Tuesday. With the warm temperatures, the roads will soon become soft and garbage pickup will be done only along a designated route.

The logo for the new water tower was approved. The Groton American Legion Post #39 will inform the city at its March 9th meeting whether the Legion wants to pay to have a flag painted on the tower as well. A simple flag is \$5,000 but a flag the same as what is up there now is \$7,000.

The council authorized the addition of an assistant Junior Legion Coach at a wage of \$1,000. It was mentioned that money from the COVID Relief Grant will be used for this non-budgeted item. Speaking of the COVID Relief Grant, the council approved transferring \$250,000 from that grant to the Building and Structures line item in the budget to pay for the purchase of the Wells Fargo Bank building which will be the new city hall.

Four adult season baseball tickets were authorized to be given as a prize for the Baseball/Softball Foundation annual spring fundraiser.

The state law was changed last year and the city is catching up on the change made in the liquor revenue percentage. The city is getting 10 percent of above the cost for liquor and malt beverage and the state has set the maximum rate to 5 percent. The council adopted an ordinance to reflect the change.

The council approved for the city offices to be closed April 2 and April 5 for Easter. March 16th is the date set for equalization. The second reading of the summer salary ordinance was also approved.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 4 of 96

32'-4"

23'-0"

40" Letter

92" Tiger

32" Lettering

Colors TBD

- White
- Gold
- Black

Orientation (two sides)

Notice:
Colors shown are close approximations.
Printed and media variations may slightly
differ from actual paint colors slightly.
Measurements are approximate and are
provided for a visual aid.
Field verify tank shell height before
installing patterns.

LASI
LAKE AREA SIGN CO. LLC

Danny McKinney, Owner
1375 N. Beglis Pkwy
Sulphur, LA 70663
(337) 625-4179
(337) 794-1564
dannymc@lakeareesignco.com

Client: *Maguire Iron*
Design: *Groton, SD (Draft 9)*
Designer: *Danny McKinney*
Date: *2/23/2021*

Date: _____
Signature: _____

Approved Resubmit

The Groton City Council gave the approval for this design to be put on the new water tower.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 5 of 96



Work is starting to resume on the Groton Water Tower project. The above shows the footing for the new building that will be put up, just south of the existing pump room. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

PANDEMIC DILEMMA

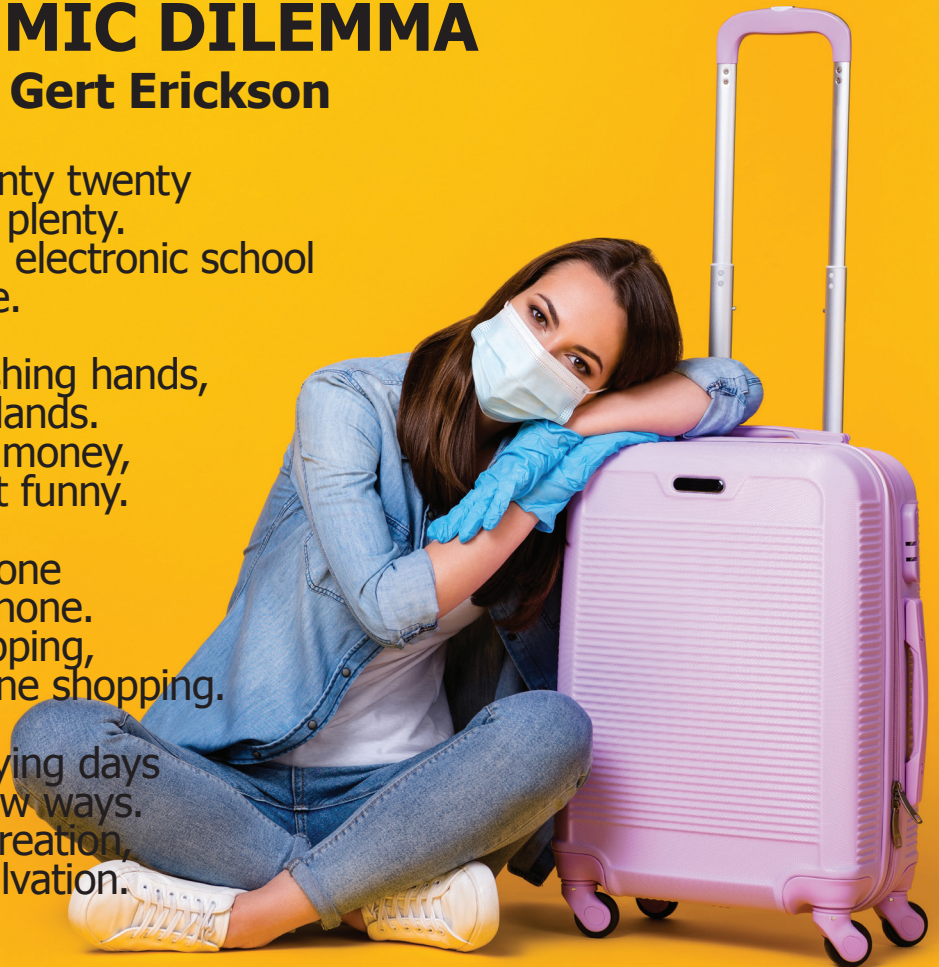
By Gert Erickson

COVID Pandemic of twenty twenty
Has changed our lives a plenty.
Working from home and electronic school
Wearing mask is the rule.

Social distancing --- washing hands,
Curtailed visits to other lands.
Loss of jobs and lack of money,
These conditions are not funny.

Elderly persons home alone
Family contact just by phone.
No dining out or bar hopping,
Items purchased by online shopping.

We can survive these trying days
Simply adjust to life's new ways.
God has a plan for His creation,
Trusting in Him is our salvation.



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 7 of 96

SDDOT Snowplows Named

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) rolled out South Dakota’s first ever Name the Snowplow Contest in mid-January.

“The contest was designed to engage people across the state with the SDDOT in a fun and unique way,” says Interim Transportation Secretary Joel Jundt. “Safety on our roadways is our number one priority, and winter driving and snowplow safety awareness is vital to keeping people safe each and every day.”

When the contest ended on Jan. 31, 2021, over 800 entries had been submitted by individuals, families, elementary classrooms, senior living centers, and businesses across the entire state.

SDDOT staff then voted on the submissions. The winners will soon officially meet and take photos with their locally named snowplow. Following is the list of named plows and the people who provided the winning submission.

SDDOT Area:	Snowplow Name:	Submitted by:
Aberdeen Area:	Darth Blader	Dave Bacon (Aberdeen)
Belle Fourche Area:	Art	Family and Friends of Art DeKnikker (Faith/Bison)
Custer Area:	Mt. Plowmore	Landon Harrod (Edgemont)
Huron Area:	Snow Mater	Jim Bruce (Highmore)
Mitchell Area:	Blizzard Wizard	Cordell Davis (Plankinton)
Mobridge Area:	Winter Warrior	Marion Goehring (Herreid)
Pierre Area:	Lewis & Clark	Jackie Heier (Pierre)
Rapid City Area:	Polar Patroller	Tiffany Hoff (Rapid)
Sioux Falls Area:	SnowBeGone Kenobi	Shawn Hanson (Sioux Falls)
Watertown Area:	Thaw Enforcement	Robert Innes (Aurora)
Winner Area:	Walter the Salter	Dairy Queen Staff (Winner)
Yankton Area:	Frosty the Snowplow	Lilly Kroger (Beresford)

“The name Art was submitted by several people in the Belle Fourche Area in memory of 43-year SD-DOT veteran snowplow operator, Art DeKnikker,” says Todd Seaman, Rapid City Region Engineer. “The opportunity to honor Art’s dedicated public service is a true testament to all our plow operators who work hard every day to keep citizens safe.”

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 8 of 96

#372 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Today looks pretty much like yesterday; we really have plateaued. We're now at 28,734,200 reported cases in the US, 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 47,300 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations declined to 46,738. And there were 1922 deaths reported today. That brings us to 516,283 total deaths, 0.4% more than yesterday.

On March 2, 2020, one year ago today, the US had diagnosed 102 cases of Covid-19, 48 of them in repatriated citizens and 54 acquired in 11 states. California had 20 cases and Washington 18; no other state had more than 4. Italy had gone from 400 to over 2000 cases in five days. There'd been six US deaths, all in Washington and four of those in that King County nursing home. In the past 24 hours, there were nine times more cases diagnosed outside China as inside the country, so this cat was well out of the bag at this point. Twitter advised employees to work from home, and Washington's governor suggested residents reconsider attending large events. Cancellations and closures: the Superman film premiere, 48 schools in Washington, US joint military exercises with Israel, the Louvre, and Japan's and Shanghai's Fashion Weeks.

I looked pretty smart (and do forgive me mentioning this because at other times, I didn't look so smart at all) when I said, "This won't be over any time soon, and it's probably going to get worse before it gets better." Also when I described how someone had asked me, "Don't you think this is just getting blown up by the media?" and I answered: "Let me be clear: I do not. This is real, and it is consequential. The news media are not exaggerating, stirring folks up, trying to sell papers; they are reporting on a dangerous public health situation. We shouldn't panic, but we absolutely should take it seriously."

Covid-19 testing in the US has sort of fallen off a cliff: We went from 14 million tests per week early in the year to fewer than 10 million per day last week. We haven't run that few tests since October. There is a number of potential reasons for this decline. With decreasing case rates, there are probably fewer people who are contacts needing testing. People are traveling less, so they're not testing before and after trips; with the passing of the holiday season and the bad weather we've been seeing, travel will decrease. The weather will also cause more people to stay home, which may mean fewer contacts, and has shut down testing sites as well. Many states have concentrated their resources on vaccination rather than testing, so that may have decreased the numbers of tests done. And some people are just sick of the whole thing, and so maybe they're just opting out, even when they need a test.

Now some of those things are OK things: Who isn't happy about decreased case rates? But others aren't so hot. Most epidemiologists think we should still be doing more testing than we are, particularly as these new variants move across the country. You can't identify a variant in a specimen you never collect. And overtesting is actually a good way to stay ahead of the virus; if we can identify more of the asymptomatic cases turning up in case contacts, we can depress transmission further, and I'd think we'd all be in favor of that, even the folks who don't care who dies and just want to go out to eat again. In times of declining case counts, ramping up your testing would be an excellent way to drive those counts down even more. As you know, I have concerns we're setting ourselves up for another surge. Do not want that.

The White House announced another boost in the vaccine supply this week. Delivered doses are projected to rise from 14.6 million per week to 15.2 million per week. The additional 2.8 million Janssen/Johnson & Johnson doses brings the total this week to 18 million; that's 2.6 million doses per day, well above the promised one million per day. The supply has increased from 8.6 million doses per week at the change of administration. We need every one of those, now more than ever.

Here's the latest on projected vaccine supply: Short-term, by the end of March, we should have enough vaccine delivered to fully vaccinate 130 million people. That's more than a third of our population within the next few weeks. Moderna will have delivered 100 million doses by the end of March, 200 million by the end of May, and 300 million by the end of July. Pfizer/BioNTech will have delivered 120 million doses by the end of March, 200 million by the end of May, and 300 million by the end of July. And Janssen/Johnson & Johnson will have delivered 20 million by the end of March and 100 million by the end of July. With the mix of one-dose and two-dose vaccines available, this could give us enough to fully vaccinate 220 million

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 9 of 96

(over two-thirds of us and nearly all of the adults) by the end of May and more than enough for everyone (who wants it) by the end of July. There is an additional goal to get all K-12 teachers and child-care workers a first dose by the end of this month, and that seems like a realistic goal given the supply. This is just extraordinary. I hope we can continue to ramp up vaccine acceptance too over that time; our real protection comes from getting everyone we can vaccinated.

We should note that the current administration has brokered a deal between Janssen/ Johnson & Johnson and their fierce competitor, Merck, whose vaccine candidates fizzled earlier, for Merck to manufacture Johnson & Johnson's vaccine, thereby boosting the available supply sooner. Merck is a huge and sophisticated manufacturer of vaccine and so is well-suited to step in and pick up additional capacity. This is expected to bring production up to where we should have enough vaccine for the entire adult population of the US by the end of May. That's a nice accomplishment.

There's a big push underway in Riverside County, California, to get farmworkers vaccinated. Mobile vaccination units are going out to the work site in locations arranged by the employers in order to administer vaccine to this vulnerable population. These are people, many of them undocumented, who are unlikely to show up at mass vaccination sites: They can't take time off during the day, they are fearful of gathering in public, and they lack Internet access and sometimes facility in English to sign up for appointments. And yet, they are at enormously heightened risk for Covid-19; in some groups as many as 40 percent of workers tested have tested positive for the infection. Now I'm aware there are folks who think it's wrong to hand out limited vaccine supplies to people who may not have arrived in the country legally and to those who are, for the most part, not in a traditionally-defined risk group. I will, however, encourage those folks to consider that, even if you have no care at all for the lives of these workers, they are a vital link in our food supply chain. Like those placed at such terrible risk in packing plants early in the pandemic, when these people get sick, our food supply is threatened; that makes them an essential link in the economy. If you find yourself compassion-challenged on this point, consider that it's good business—and good politics—to take care of your food supply.

So this would be a good time to mention that, in some states in the middle of the country, meatpacking workers are also being vaccinated. You may recall that, just about a year ago, these folks were ravaged by a wave of Covid-19 that roared through the plants in South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, and adjacent states. These not only caused early deaths, ongoing disability, suffering, and fear in far too many, but also caused disruptions in our food supply, plummeting production to about 60 percent of capacity in April. There were at least 22,000 infections and over 130 deaths. States where meatpackers are being targeted for vaccination (although some states still impose age limitations) include Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Kentucky, and North Carolina; some are conducting mass vaccination at plants. Expectations are that uptake will be far greater than in the general population; after all, people who've been through what they have are likely more willing to take steps to avoid seeing it again.

Here's a warning about something that's turned up since the pandemic started: an uptick in child ingestion of hand sanitizer. There were more than 20,000 exposures in young children last year, which is a big jump from 2019. Exposures to household cleaners has increased too, perhaps because children are spending so much time at home and disinfectants are being so frequently used. The sanitizer is a particular problem because these don't come with childproof caps and we tend to leave bottles sitting all around the house these days. Because of its high alcohol content, a small amount can run a child's blood alcohol concentration up pretty high. Exposures can result in irritation to the throat or stomach, a dangerous drop in blood sugar, severe intoxication, and in very severe cases, respiratory depression. Eye exposures can cause chemical injury to the eye.

It is recommended to be sure you are keeping sanitizers out of the reach of children. Poison control experts told the New York Times, if a child has swallowed some, you should not induce vomiting and call poison control. If the child gets some in their eyes, you will want to irrigate with a clean liquid and call poison control. If the child is unconscious, is difficult to wake up, or has trouble breathing, you should call 911. Better yet, prevent the problem; put those things up.

More data is emerging from the broad tracking of outcomes in Israel which has managed to deliver at

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 10 of 96

least one dose to half its population and full immunization to a third of them. (It helps when your population is just nine million and you have a robust national health system.) We've already seen solid support in the data for expecting a strong and effective immune response in the elderly. The latest good news is that we have more evidence of safety in pregnant and nursing people. We are also seeing evidence that vaccines are safe for people with food allergies and autoimmune diseases. All of this supports the general school of thought that sees these vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and Oxford/AstraZeneca) as safe for virtually all adults who do not have a specific allergy to one of the components. Good enough.

We talked a few days ago about the collapse of the flu season. Last year at this time, we had 174,037 confirmed cases of influenza, which is a fraction of the actual cases—in the past few years around 40 million cases. So far this year, there have been around 1400 cases confirmed—the lowest on record. The new news is that influenza in children has also bottomed out: From close to 200 deaths in children from influenza last flu season, we're now at just one this season.

We talked a few months ago about the contribution country singer Dolly Parton made to antibody research early in the pandemic. If you weren't with us at that time or want to look back, check out my Update #252 posted November 1 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4131815200168188>. I thought I'd just provide a short update today to let you know the 75-year-old singer received her first dose of vaccine today at the same institution where she funded that research, Vanderbilt University Medical Center. A tweet from her account showing a photo of her being vaccinated was captioned, "Dolly gets a dose of her own medicine." I like that.

Caitlyn Gooch grew up on a horse farm near Raleigh, North Carolina; she learned to ride at the age of three. Horses have been a big part of her life for as long as she can remember, and she wished she could share them with kids who would never have a chance to be around horses. Then while she was working at a youth center in 2017, she noticed some kids really struggled with reading. When she did some research on the subject, she learned the US has a big literacy problem: Nearly two-thirds of fourth-graders are below proficiency in reading, and in her own North Carolina the number is greater than half. A mother herself, Gooch told the Washington Post she figured she needed "a new way to get kids excited about reading." So she conceived a plan. She said, "My heart told me that if it involved horses, kids would want to pick up a book."

Connie Harr, manager at Wake County Libraries, was impressed when this cowgirl—boots and all—walked into her library with an idea: Every kid who checked out three or more books would be entered into a raffle. The prize would be a trip to the horse farm to meet the horses. Harr told the Post, "I agreed to give it a try, and it just took off. Hundreds of kids checked out books for a chance to win." They called it Saddle Up and Read. Huge success.

Gooch decided since that worked out so well, she should go a step further; so she posted an invitation on Facebook for parents to bring their kids out to the farm with a book so they could read to the horses. That was a hit too: "After they'd each read a book, I showed them how to brush my favorite horse, Goat, and taught them about horse safety." She kept developing her program with incentives like pony rides and free books. She's been raising money to cover the cost of the free books. She reached out especially to children of color, saying, "If kids don't develop good reading skills, they're going to be limited for life. . . . My goal is to get them so excited about reading that they'll pick up books on their own when they go home." She wanted these kids to be able to imagine themselves with the horses, so she provided books about Black equestrians. Around 500 children have made the trip to the farm to read to the horses.

When the pandemic began, the visits had to stop. So did in-person school, and students faced real challenges keeping up academically. Gooch saw this as an opportunity and took her horses on the road. She takes them to outdoor library events and book fairs. Each child gets to read a book to a horse and then take the book home. Turns out these horses are even willing to listen when the very young children just make up stories because they can't read at all. The horses thrive on all the attention and don't really care what book a kid reads to them; they're just there for the companionship.

One mom says her children have raised their reading levels and now want to check books out of the library. She told the Post, "For my youngest who used to be scared of horses, this has done wonders for

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 11 of 96

her confidence. It helped her to get over her fear. And both of my girls are now reading more books." One of the daughters adds, "I like feeding them, and I'm more comfortable reading to a horse than a human." I guess horses never judge you; they just listen.

And Gooch has plans to continue her mobile reading program after the pandemic. She wants to reach kids who don't have the opportunity to come to the farm, so she's planning to bring the farm to them. She sees horses and books as a perfectly natural fit, and it appears she's right. Nice work for someone who hasn't reached 30 yet.

Be well. We'll talk again.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 12 of 96

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	453	432	861	15	Minimal	4.2%
Beadle	2740	2609	5804	39	Substantial	24.4%
Bennett	382	370	1175	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1505	1477	2050	25	Minimal	9.3%
Brookings	3592	3498	11836	37	Moderate	1.8%
Brown	5142	4984	12594	88	Moderate	10.3%
Brule	692	677	1864	9	Minimal	9.7%
Buffalo	420	406	898	13	None	0.0%
Butte	979	943	3204	20	Moderate	6.5%
Campbell	129	125	256	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1300	1215	3888	21	Substantial	8.2%
Clark	372	357	942	5	Moderate	23.1%
Clay	1797	1758	5178	15	Moderate	8.2%
Codington	4001	3820	9586	77	Substantial	21.5%
Corson	468	453	995	12	Minimal	9.7%
Custer	752	729	2686	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2955	2869	6468	61	Moderate	7.0%
Day	665	618	1756	28	Substantial	5.9%
Deuel	474	459	1125	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1412	1373	3798	26	Substantial	7.6%
Douglas	434	413	901	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	482	460	1032	12	Minimal	4.0%
Fall River	529	501	2592	15	Moderate	9.2%
Faulk	361	340	688	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	976	907	2208	38	Substantial	13.4%
Gregory	540	497	1258	29	Moderate	8.3%
Haakon	252	236	530	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	714	650	1760	37	Substantial	26.4%
Hand	338	321	803	6	Moderate	11.1%
Hanson	363	350	706	4	Moderate	28.0%
Harding	91	90	181	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2303	2227	6514	36	Substantial	6.0%
Hutchinson	789	748	2349	24	Moderate	7.5%

Groton Daily Independent

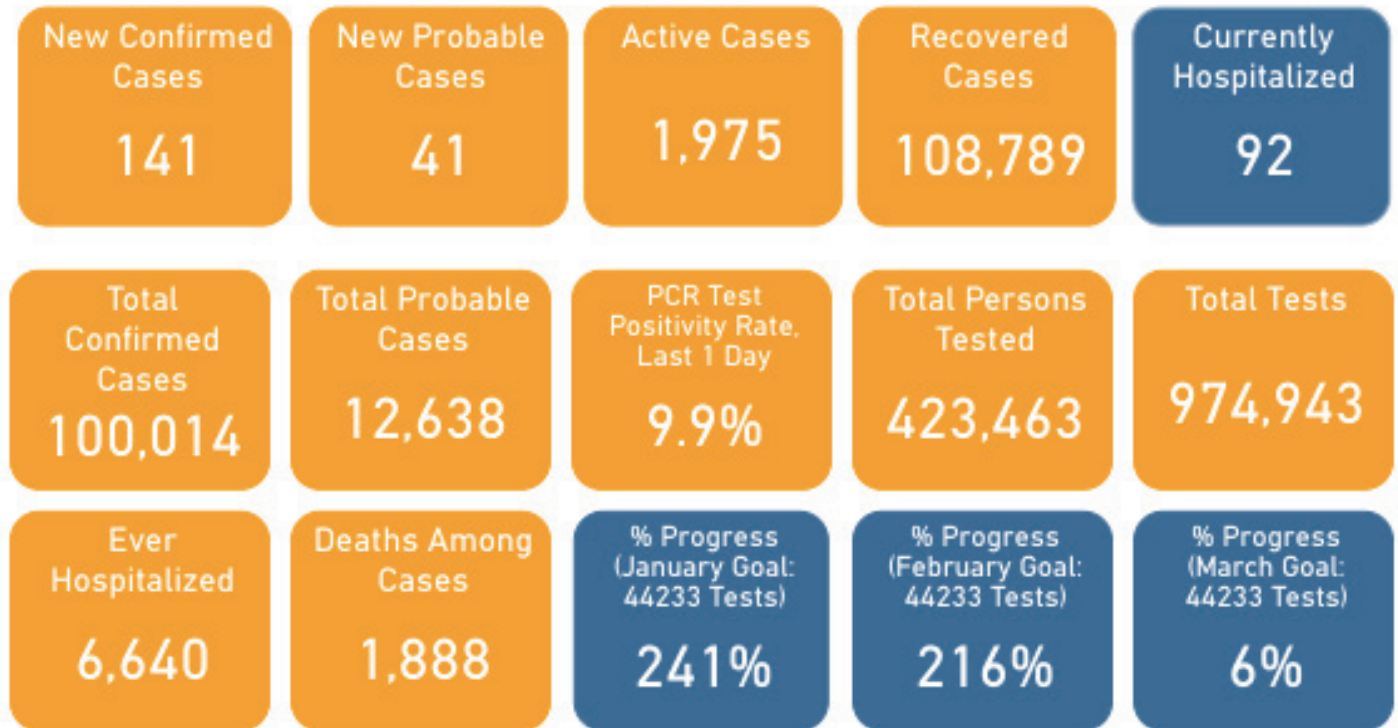
Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 13 of 96

Hyde	138	135	403	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	279	263	907	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	272	249	548	16	Minimal	10.0%
Jones	85	83	219	0	Minimal	12.5%
Kingsbury	639	611	1658	14	Moderate	3.9%
Lake	1194	1147	3273	17	Substantial	7.6%
Lawrence	2828	2753	8476	45	Moderate	5.9%
Lincoln	7768	7542	20049	77	Substantial	10.1%
Lyman	600	585	1866	10	Minimal	2.8%
Marshall	321	296	1178	5	Substantial	15.4%
McCook	744	709	1605	24	Moderate	4.0%
McPherson	239	231	548	4	Minimal	12.5%
Meade	2596	2513	7601	31	Substantial	11.4%
Mellette	251	242	724	2	Minimal	33.3%
Miner	271	253	570	9	Minimal	7.1%
Minnehaha	28079	27279	77457	332	Substantial	7.6%
Moody	619	591	1743	16	Moderate	5.9%
Oglala Lakota	2061	1991	6610	49	Moderate	7.2%
Pennington	12918	12522	38945	189	Substantial	10.9%
Perkins	347	329	804	14	Minimal	8.0%
Potter	372	361	825	4	Moderate	14.3%
Roberts	1193	1117	4099	36	Substantial	15.7%
Sanborn	331	321	682	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	798	766	2104	25	Minimal	3.0%
Stanley	331	323	918	2	Moderate	0.0%
Sully	137	132	309	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1219	1189	4092	28	Minimal	8.0%
Tripp	702	664	1470	16	Substantial	21.2%
Turner	1067	1002	2704	53	Moderate	7.1%
Union	1987	1911	6202	39	Substantial	6.7%
Walworth	725	697	1814	15	Moderate	7.0%
Yankton	2803	2743	9256	28	Moderate	6.1%
Ziebach	336	327	859	9	Minimal	7.1%
Unassigned	0	0	1807	0		

Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 14 of 96

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4525	0
10-19 years	12672	0
20-29 years	20008	7
30-39 years	18533	18
40-49 years	16081	35
50-59 years	15899	113
60-69 years	12908	249
70-79 years	6903	431
80+ years	5123	1035

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	58705	888
Male	53947	1000

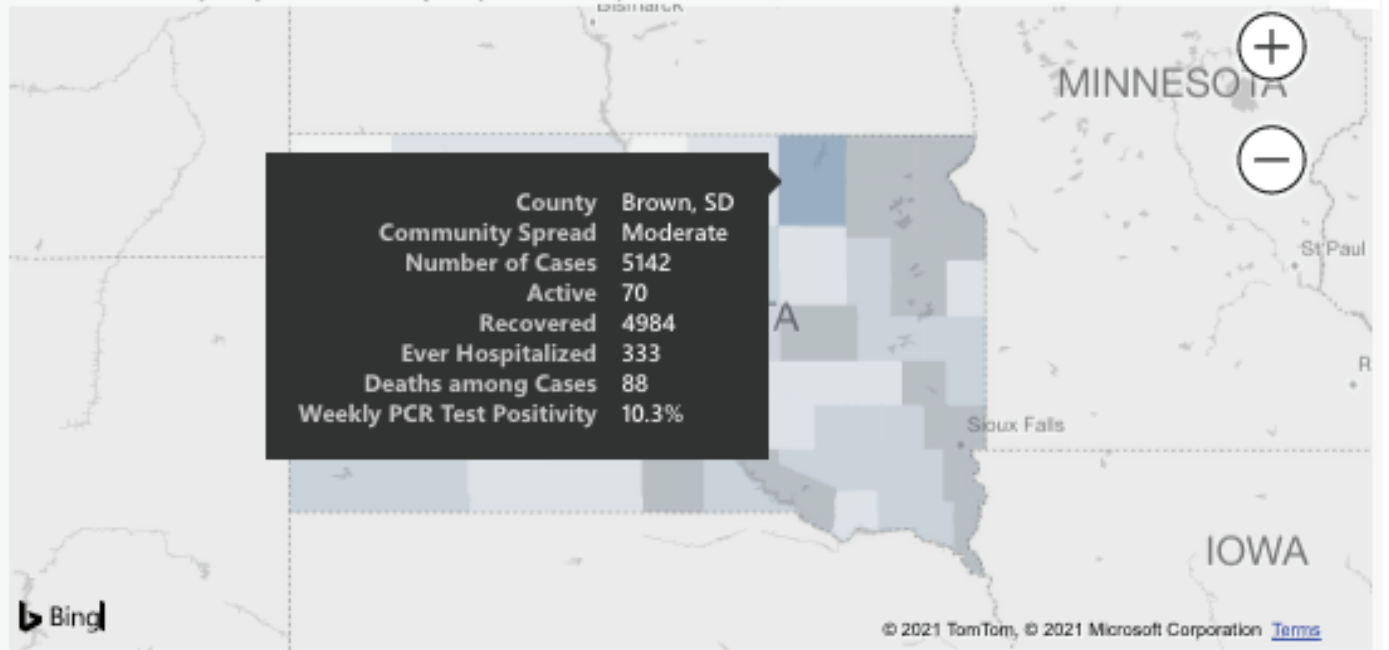
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 15 of 96

Brown County

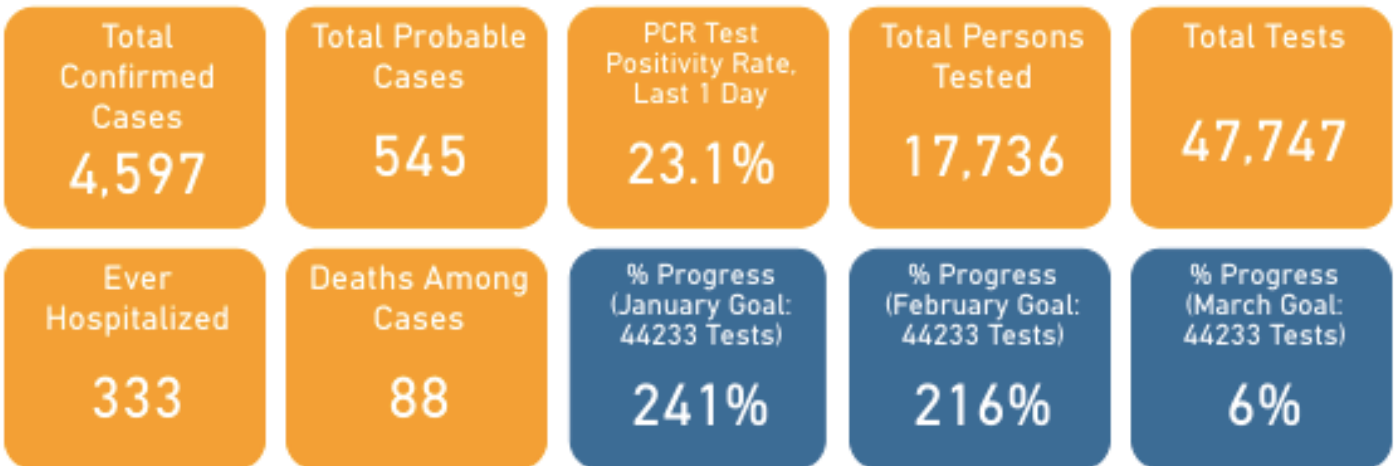


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread: None (white), Minimal (light blue), Moderate (medium blue), Substantial (dark blue)

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



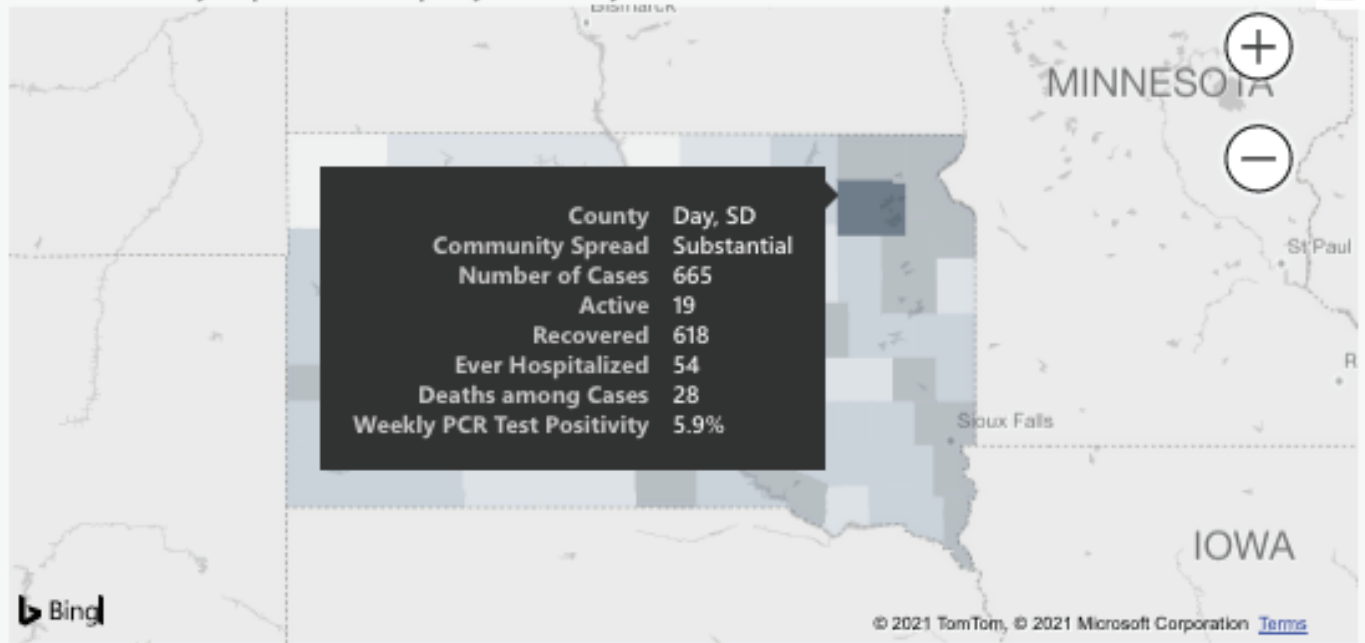
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 16 of 96

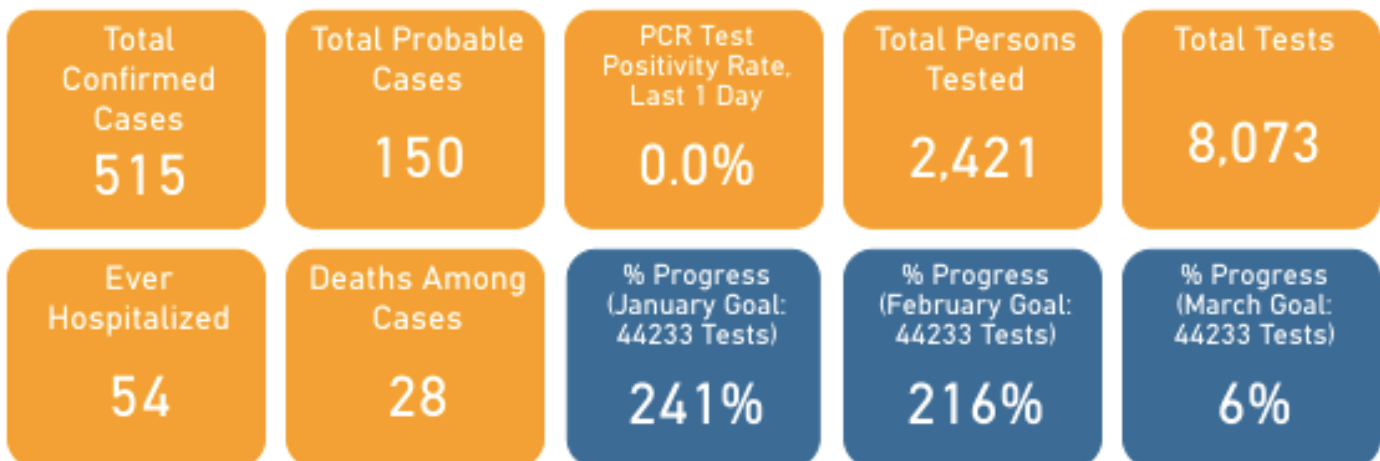
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 17 of 96

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

224,643

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

146,858

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

26%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	113,972
Pfizer	110,671

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	36,914
Moderna - Series Complete	38,529
Pfizer - 1 dose	32,159
Pfizer - Series Complete	39,256

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	26.02%
Series Complete	13.66%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16+ years. Includes

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	581	201	190	391
Beadle	4515	1,703	1,406	3,109
Bennett*	381	103	139	242
Bon Homme*	2445	1,125	660	1,785
Brookings	6565	2,885	1,840	4,725
Brown	9795	2,845	3,475	6,320
Brule*	1369	415	477	892
Buffalo*	112	72	20	92
Butte	1473	659	407	1,066
Campbell	793	283	255	538
Charles Mix*	2107	905	601	1,506
Clark	827	333	247	580
Clay	3505	1,025	1,240	2,265
Codington*	7080	2,420	2,330	4,750
Corson*	192	72	60	132
Custer*	1957	759	599	1,358
Davison	5560	1,504	2,028	3,532
Day*	1790	624	583	1,207
Deuel	1028	344	342	686
Dewey*	323	73	125	198
Douglas*	817	245	286	531
Edmunds	890	320	285	605
Fall River*	1943	675	634	1,309
Faulk	716	264	226	490
Grant*	1624	672	476	1,148
Gregory*	1167	461	353	814
Haakon*	415	147	134	281

Groton Daily Independent

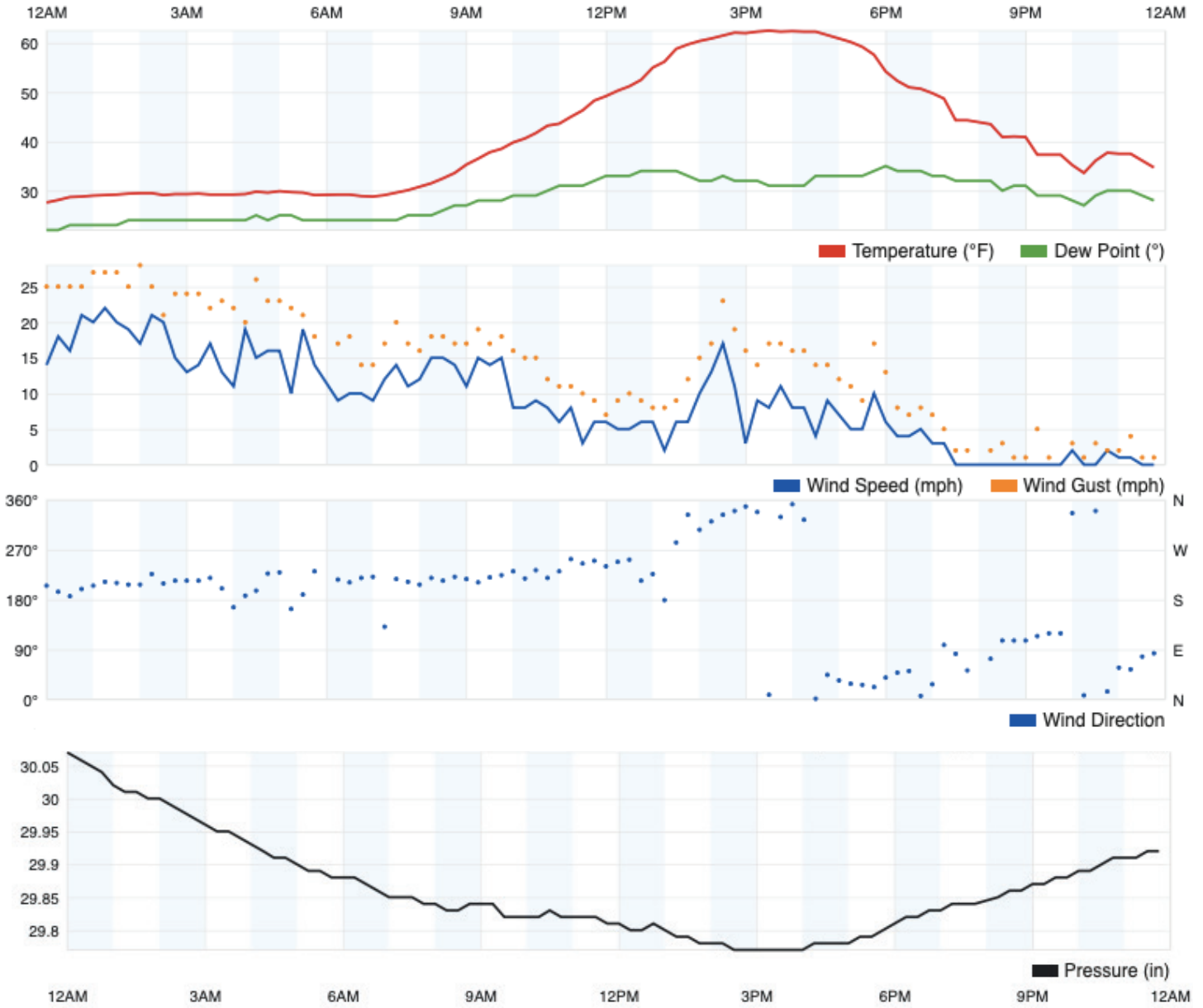
Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 18 of 96

Hamlin	1235	487	374	861
Hand	933	359	287	646
Hanson	341	123	109	232
Harding	54	38	8	46
Hughes*	5508	1,918	1,795	3,713
Hutchinson*	2401	833	784	1,617
Hyde*	377	153	112	265
Jackson*	301	107	97	204
Jerauld	545	277	134	411
Jones*	472	146	163	309
Kingsbury	1601	757	422	1,179
Lake	2699	987	856	1,843
Lawrence	5651	2,171	1,740	3,911
Lincoln	19270	4,518	7,376	11,894
Lyman*	547	177	185	362
Marshall*	1083	437	323	760
McCook	1647	519	564	1,083
McPherson	161	65	48	113
Meade*	4317	1,719	1,299	3,018
Mellette*	35	17	9	26
Miner	644	194	225	419
Minnehaha*	59114	15,310	21,902	37,212
Moody*	1120	476	322	798
Oglala Lakota*	130	52	39	91
Pennington*	26727	7,569	9,579	17,148
Perkins*	386	142	122	264
Potter	561	273	144	417
Roberts*	3199	1,315	942	2,257
Sanborn	729	229	250	479
Spink	2060	726	667	1,393
Stanley*	833	317	258	575
Sully	244	100	72	172
Todd*	128	40	44	84
Tripp*	1550	560	495	1,055
Turner	2595	675	960	1,635
Union	1911	859	526	1,385
Walworth*	1508	472	518	990
Yankton	7374	1,742	2,816	4,558
Ziebach*	46	12	17	29
Other	4636	1,068	1,784	2,852

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 19 of 96

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 20 of 96

Wednesday



Becoming
Sunny

High: 60 °F

Wednesday
Night



Partly Cloudy
then Patchy
Fog

Low: 27 °F

Thursday



Areas Fog
then Sunny

High: 58 °F

Thursday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 28 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 54 °F



Very Warm through the weekend!



Highs in 50s to low 60s

Except in the upper 40s Wednesday – Friday over portions of far northeastern SD & west central MN

Increased *Fire Weather Concerns*
especially *this weekend*, with breezy
winds out of the south!

Dry vegetation combined with warm, windy, and dry weather can quickly create dangerous fire conditions.

Properly discard cigarettes.
Keep vehicles off of dry grass.
Avoid activities with open flames or sparks.
Avoid power equipment that creates sparks.
Obey burn bans.
Evacuate if fire/smoke is heading your way.
Evacuate if ordered to do so by local officials.



Very warm weather will continue, with highs mainly in the 50s to low 60s. A few upper 40 degree temperatures will remain possible over portions of far northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota through Friday. Lows will be near 30 degrees each night. The main concern with the continued dry weather will be fire weather, especially as we move into the weekend when winds increase out of the south. Dry vegetation combined with warm, windy, and dry weather can quickly create dangerous fire conditions. When the dry weather combines with increased winds, take extra precautions by properly discarding cigarettes, keeping vehicles off dry grass, and avoiding activities with open flames and sparks.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 21 of 96

Today in Weather History

March 3, 1994: The melting of a very high snowpack resulted in flooding along the James River, as well as other lowlands and farmland. Widespread problems included damaged roads, washed-out culverts, and flood damage to homes, especially basement flooding.

1896: The temperature in downtown San Francisco, California, fell to 33 degrees, which was the lowest ever for the city in March.

1966: An F5 tornado hit Jackson, Mississippi, killing 54 persons.

1980 - A coastal storm produced 25 inches of snow at Elizabeth City, NC, and 30 inches at Cape Hatteras NC. At Miami FL the mercury dipped to 32 degrees. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1983 - The last of a series of storms to strike the California coast finally came to an end. Waves fifteen to twenty feet high pounded the coast for two days, and in a four day period up to 18 inches of rain drenched the Los Angeles and Santa Barbara area. On the morning of the first, thunderstorms spawned two tornadoes which moved through the Los Angeles area. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm brought heavy rain and gale force winds to Washington and Oregon. Quillayute WA received 2.67 inches of rain in 24 hours, and winds gusted to 60 mph at Astoria OR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A small but intense low pressure system roared across west central Mississippi at 90 mph early in the morning. A tornado in southern Mississippi picked up an automobile, carried it 150 feet, and tossed it through the brick wall of an unoccupied retirement home. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Wintry weather prevailed from the southern Rockies to the Upper Great Lakes. Neganee MI received 19 inches of snow, and up to 24 inches of snow blanketed Colorado. Blizzard conditions were reported in Minnesota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An upper level weather disturbance produced snow in the Colorado Rockies, with eight inches reported at Winter Park, and a storm moving off the Pacific Ocean began to spread rain and snow across the western U.S. March continued to start off like a lamb elsewhere around the country. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1991: A significant ice storm coated parts of central and northwestern New York State with up to two inches of ice. The damage was totaled at \$375 million. It was the most costly natural disaster ever in the state up until that time. Nearly half a million people were without power at the height of the storm, and many would not see their power restored until the 16th.

2003 - It was a day of temperature extremes. Miami reached a high temperature of 90 degrees, the earliest observed 90 degree temperature since March 5, 1964. Meanwhile Marquette, MI, dropped to 30 degrees below zero, the lowest temperature ever recorded in the city in March.

Groton Daily Independent

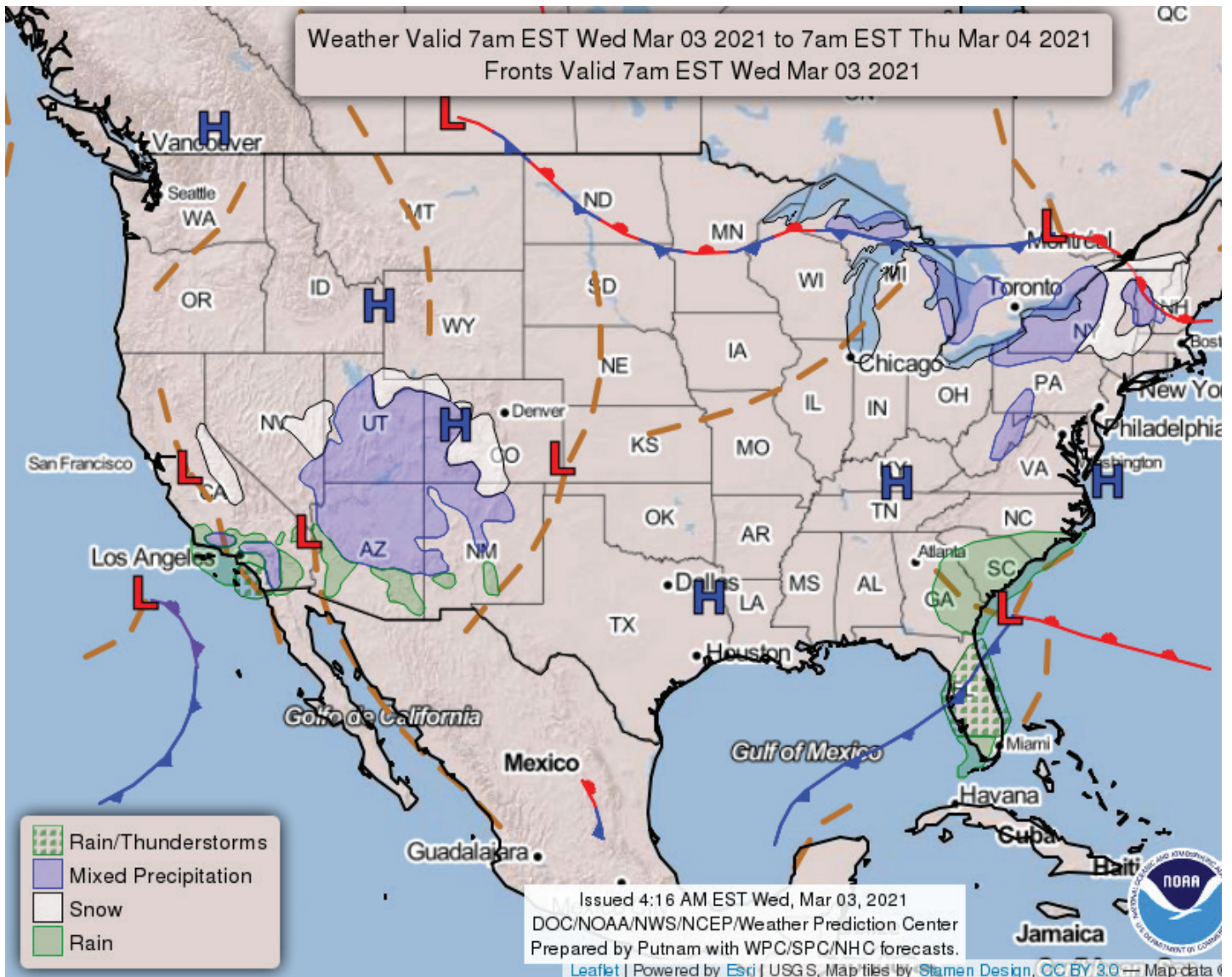
Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 22 of 96

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 63 °F at 4:07 PM (RECORD HIGH)
Low Temp: 28 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 28 mph at 1:31 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 72° in 1905
Record Low: -20° in 1919
Average High: 34°F
Average Low: 14°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.06
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.08
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:24 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:06 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 23 of 96



WHY NOW, GOD?

Feelings of being abandoned and forsaken are, perhaps, among the most painful feelings of life. In desperation, we cry for someone or anyone to come to our rescue. Tragedy strikes, hopes are dashed, one whom we deeply loved and have spent our lives with is suddenly taken from us. And there we are: alone and abandoned. Our cries go unheard – and it seems as though the heavens above have turned to brass and the clouds have become marble. So, we cry out in fear and frustration for our God. But He does not answer. He seems to have forgotten us and is not available.

Jesus experienced and knew those feelings. As life was ebbing from His body He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" David and Jesus felt abandoned, indeed were abandoned, by those who were their closest friends. They had invested time in training them, being open and honest with them, shared the ups and downs of life with them, and came to believe and trust in them. And, then in their darkest moments felt the pain of desertion and the fear and agony of being alone.

But they would not give up on God! The lamp of faith may have been dimmed by God's silence but it had not been extinguished by life's tragedies. Both confessed that 'He is still My God!'

God never promised that if we believed in Him our lives would be free from the fear of isolation or loneliness. He did, however, promise to be with us in our darkest moments. He did not promise to take us around the dark valleys of life but through them.

Prayer: We accept Your promises, Lord, and pray that in our moments of despair we will not lose faith in You. We know that You are always there! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Psalm 22:1

FINAL EXPENSES

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*Ages may vary by state. Guaranteed for one of these life insurance policies. Benefits reduced first two years.

Insurance Policy L770 (ID: L770ID; OK: L770OK; TN: L770TN).

6238

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 25 of 96

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 26 of 96

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

04-08-13-34-64, Mega Ball: 18, Megaplier: 2

(four, eight, thirteen, thirty-four, sixty-four; Mega Ball: eighteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$43 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$123 million

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Class A Region 1=

First Round=

Milbank 54, Redfield 31

Sisseton 65, Aberdeen Roncalli 39

Tiospa Zina Tribal 50, Webster 41

Class A Region 2=

First Round=

Clark/Willow Lake 67, Hamlin 46

Flandreau 61, Deuel 37

Class A Region 3=

First Round=

Garretson 53, Tri-Valley 46

West Central 64, Baltic 35

Class A Region 4=

First Round=

Dakota Valley 81, Beresford 52

Lennox 64, Canton 44

Tea Area 75, Elk Point-Jefferson 53

Class A Region 5=

First Round=

Parker 59, McCook Central/Montrose 53

Parkston 67, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 64, OT

Class A Regions 7&8=

First Round=

Hill City 64, Bennett County 56

Class B Region 1=

Quarterfinal=

Aberdeen Christian 69, Great Plains Lutheran 36

Warner 47, Leola/Frederick 37

Waubay/Summit 72, Northwestern 43

Waverly-South Shore 65, Langford 45

Class B Region 2=

Quarterfinal=

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 27 of 96

Herreid/Selby Area 73, Highmore-Harrold 61
Ipswich 54, Faulkton 48
Lower Brule 78, Sully Buttes 36
Potter County 73, North Central Co-Op 44
Class B Region 3=
Quarterfinal=
Castlewood 54, Wolsey-Wessington 45
DeSmet 79, Hitchcock-Tulare 47
Deubrook 70, Arlington 66, OT
Wessington Springs 66, Estelline/Hendricks 33
Class B Region 4=
Quarterfinal=
Dell Rapids St. Mary 57, Chester 42
Elkton-Lake Benton 50, Ethan 39
Hanson 73, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 50
Howard 63, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 25
Class B Region 5=
Quarterfinal=
Bridgewater-Emery 60, Alcester-Hudson 40
Canistota 87, Centerville 40
Freeman Academy/Marion 59, Gayville-Volin 51
Viborg-Hurley 64, Irene-Wakonda 31
Class B Region 6=
Quarterfinal=
Burke 82, Marty Indian 68
Corsica/Stickney 70, Kimball/White Lake 45
Gregory 76, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 57
Platte-Geddes 64, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 37
Class B Region 7=
Quarterfinal=
Kadoka Area 53, Jones County 45
Lyman 55, Philip 22
Wall 54, New Underwood 32
White River 83, Edgemont 27
Class B Region 8=
Quarterfinal=
Dupree 84, Harding County 72
Faith 75, Bison 42
Lemmon 67, Newell 19
Timber Lake 66, McIntosh 37

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

South Dakota House Speaker plans delay in AG impeachment

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Top South Dakota lawmakers announced a proposal on Tuesday to delay evaluating whether the state's attorney general should be impeached until the conclusion of the criminal case against him for hitting and killing a man with his car.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican, released a plan he will present to a House committee

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 28 of 96

on Wednesday, arguing that a delay was necessary in light of a judge's order last week that halted Gov. Kristi Noem and government officials from releasing evidence in the investigation. Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg — also a Republican — is facing three misdemeanor charges for striking and killing a man walking on the shoulder of a highway late on Sept. 12.

Ravnsborg initially told authorities that he thought he had struck a deer or another large animal and said he searched the unlit area with a cellphone flashlight. He said he didn't realize he had killed a man until the next day when he returned to the accident scene.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers had filed articles of impeachment against the state's top law enforcement officer last week, just hours after Noem had called for Ravnsborg to resign. The Republican governor also made the extraordinary move of releasing videos of interviews Ravnsborg had with criminal investigators. But her administration was later forced to remove the videos by a judge in the county where the criminal case against Ravnsborg is proceeding.

Since an impeachment proceeding is unprecedented in the state, the House Speaker has been tasked with forming the process. Gosch said public proceedings would be difficult, given the judge's order that state members could not release evidence, and he wanted to make sure any hearings were "fair and transparent."

"It's best that arguably these premature articles that were filed be held off until the judicial system is able to do its job," he said.

Gosch's proposal amounted to a step back from the impeachment proceedings after the governor and some lawmakers had used nearly every available means to get Ravnsborg to resign last week.

Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who introduced the articles of impeachment, said in a statement, "I'm disappointed that we are not moving forward more quickly, but understand the desire for full transparency," adding that he has not changed his mind that Ravnsborg breached the duties of the attorney general's office.

Gosch said he would propose removing the articles of impeachment from the legislative resolution and replacing them with a statement saying that after Ravnsborg's criminal trial, the House "may evaluate whether articles of impeachment ... are necessary and proceed accordingly."

Both House Republican Leader, Kent Peterson, and Democratic Leader, Jamie Smith, said they agreed with the delay.

A hearing date for Ravnsborg's criminal case has not been set.

Gosch said it would also require a special session of the Legislature to reconvene for impeachment, which would require support from two-thirds of both chambers. If the House decided to proceed with the impeachment, it would take a simple majority to advance the impeachment charges to the Senate. There, it would require two-thirds of senators to convict and remove him from office.

Noem would get to appoint a replacement if Ravnsborg leaves or is removed from office.

Senate wants 60% voter threshold for some ballot initiatives

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Tuesday paved the way for primary election voters to speed into law before the next general election a constitutional amendment requiring a higher voter threshold for future ballot initiatives that pass taxes or spending programs.

Democrats, and some Republicans, opposed the Senate resolution as an "unfair" move to circumvent ballot initiative campaigns that are already in process. But the Senate passed it by the thinnest of margins — a single vote — to put it to voters in the next primary election whether ballot initiatives should have a 60% vote requirement if they pass taxes or spend more than \$10 million in any of the five years after enactment.

The Senate's move to put the issue on the primary election ballot — where fewer voters will decide on it — was an effort to head off a looming Medicaid expansion ballot initiative before the November election.

Lawmakers have found themselves at odds with voters who have found an end-run around the Legislature

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 29 of 96

in recent years by passing laws through ballot initiatives. South Dakota voters passed both recreational and medical marijuana in November, but have seen the constitutional amendment allowing recreational pot overturned by a judge and Gov. Kristi Noem push a delay to legalizing medical marijuana.

Sen. Mike Diedrich, the assistant Republican leader, said he would have supported the constitutional amendment proposal if it had appeared in the general election, but voted against the proposal when the timeline was expedited because it would apply to ballot initiative campaigns already in process.

"It's unfair to those people who are following the laws," he said.

But Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, the Senate pro tem who initiated the move to expedite the constitutional amendment vote, said it was important to get "safeguards in place for the taxpayers."

He acknowledged that his expedited push was motivated by the Medicaid expansion campaign, but argued the vote threshold should apply to all ballot initiatives that levy taxes or spend significant state funds. The Legislature must gain a two-thirds majority for taxes and budget appropriations.

Democrats like Sen. Reynold Nesiba decried the effort as "undermining the will of the people," pointing out that ballot initiative campaigns already face requirements to gather thousands of petitions, as well as months of public scrutiny. He said the constitutional amendment for the higher vote threshold would be easier to pass in a primary election that draws fewer voters.

"We are cutting our people off at the knees," said Sen. Troy Heinert, the Democratic leader.

The constitutional amendment resolution passed in the House under the stipulation it would appear on the general election ballot. The House would have to agree to the Senate's proposal to put it on the primary ballot if it is to appear in the primary election.

Man wanted in 2019 Sioux Falls killing arrested in Tennessee

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Federal authorities say a fugitive wanted for the 2019 shooting death of a Sioux Falls man was arrested Tuesday near Memphis, Tennessee.

The U.S. Marshals Service said in a release that Max Bolden, 37, has been on the run since he allegedly killed 37-year-old Benjamin Donahue III in downtown Sioux Falls on Oct. 26, 2019.

Bolden was apprehended in a commercial area near Memphis. He is being held in the DeSoto County Jail and is awaiting his initial appearance and extradition proceedings to South Dakota.

"For the past year and a half, the U.S. Marshals Service fugitive task force in Sioux Falls has continually worked leads and conducted interviews in search of Bolden," the release said.

Noem's bills limiting conservation officers hit resistance

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's effort to limit the powers of conservation officers suffered a partial setback in the Legislature on Tuesday, with debate in one Senate committee resulting in a lively exchange between her staff and Republican senators.

As senators criticized Noem's proposal to keep conservation officers from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks from entering private property without permission, Noem's general counsel, Mark Miller, rose from the audience to speak. He was quickly rebuked by Republican Sen. Arthur Rusch, who told him he was out of order.

Despite Miller's argument that the bill would protect property rights, the panel of Republican senators unanimously dismissed it, with one powerful senator, Lee Schoenbeck, calling it "a slap in the face of conservation officers." However, the bill could be revived by a legislative maneuver called a "smoke out" that requires one-third of the Senate's support.

The Republican governor pressed senators to pass the bill in a letter on Tuesday, writing, "Property rights should be respected in South Dakota. That's what this bill does: respect property rights."

The Republican governor this year has pitched two bills aimed at placing limitations on conservation officers. As senators mulled over them Tuesday, the bills got mixed reviews: The Senate Judiciary Committee rejected Noem's bill to keep officers from entering private property without permission; while the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 30 of 96

Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee unanimously approved her proposal to stop officers from seizing hunting or fishing equipment.

The debate in the Senate Judiciary committee pitched a former Secretary of Game, Fish and Parks, John Cooper, against the current interim secretary, Kevin Robling, as well as Noem's general counsel, Miller, against an all-Republican panel of senators.

Noem last month highlighted the bill addressing private property access, saying it was an "opportunity for us to continue to strengthen the relationships that our conservation officers have with landowners."

The Department of Game, Fish and Parks currently has a policy of not allowing its officers to enter private property without permission, unless they have a reasonable suspicion that a crime is happening. The practice was developed over a decade ago to smooth tensions between property owners and conservation officers, and Robling said he wanted that policy to be enshrined in law.

Larry Nelson, a property owner in Harding County, said the fact that conservation officers are allowed to access his land without permission has made him reconsider whether he wants to give hunters access on the land at all.

But environmental groups pointed out the proposal would make it harder for conservation officers to enforce illegal hunting and fishing.

"Pursuing game or fish is a privilege, it's not a right in South Dakota," said Zach Hunke, the president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. "This bill, quite frankly, only benefits poachers."

In the end, the senators unanimously dismissed the bill, reasoning that a clause in it would bar courts from using evidence that conservation officers had gathered while they were in violation of the proposed law. Schoenbeck argued the bill would disrupt conservation officer's abilities to do other parts of their work, calling it "a radical deviation from a system that is working."

Ian Fury, Noem's spokesman, said after the bill's dismissal that she "will continue to protect the property rights of South Dakotans."

Meanwhile, the governor's proposal to stop conservation officers from taking hunting or fishing equipment from people violating the law — an act known as civil asset forfeiture — received a warmer reception from senators. The Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources endorsed it unanimously, sending it to the full Senate where it will face a final legislative hurdle before Noem can sign it into law.

Sen. Herman Otten, a Republican, said the proposal keeps officers from confiscating fishing equipment or hunting rifles just because someone goes over their hunting or fishing limit.

While the lone Democrat on the committee, Sen. Troy Heinert, voted to pass the bill, he said he had questions about whether it would keep conservation officers from enforcing serious poaching, such as from an airplane or snowmobile. He said he would continue to weigh the bill as it heads to a full meeting of the Senate, but appreciated the property protections it would give.

"I don't think they should take your pick up because you're hauling a poached deer," said Democratic Sen. Troy Heinert. "That makes no sense."

Carbon dioxide would be stored underground in North Dakota

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — An Iowa company is leading a \$2 billion effort to capture carbon dioxide from Midwestern ethanol plants and pipe it to North Dakota where it would be buried deep underground.

The greenhouse gas is generated during the fermentation process and contributes to climate change when it's released into the atmosphere.

Summit Carbon Solutions' project would gather carbon dioxide from at least 17 ethanol plants and pipe it to North Dakota where it would be injected into wells and stored underground.

The carbon dioxide would be compressed into liquid form at the ethanol plants where feeder pipelines would send it to a larger pipeline that would extend across the Upper Midwest to North Dakota, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

The project adds to a growing list of carbon capture and storage projects in North Dakota where extensive research has been done on the makeup of rocks as deep as 10,000 feet underground to find the

ideal layer where carbon dioxide could stay buried forever.

That's part of what attracted the company to the state, said Bruce Rastetter, CEO of Summit Agricultural Group, the parent of Summit Carbon Solutions.

"You have the geology formations," he said.

Another factor that makes North Dakota an attractive option is the state's authority to regulate the wells in which carbon dioxide would be injected. In 2018, it became the first state to assume that authority from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

According to Summit, the project has the potential to capture and store up to 10 million tons of carbon dioxide per year, which it said would be equivalent to taking 2 million cars off the road.

Summit said construction of the project could take at least 16 months and that it would create 10,000 temporary jobs. It expects the project to be operational by 2024.

Summit is also exploring other options, including injecting the gas into depleted oil fields to boost oil production, Rastetter said.

A federal tax credit is helping bolster that process, known as enhanced oil recovery, as well as underground storage. Rastetter said Summit's project wouldn't be possible without it.

Ethanol plants in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa plan to participate.

Sanford extends PGA coronavirus testing through June

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The PGA tour is expanding its coronavirus testing partnership with Sanford Health.

The Sioux Falls-based health care system will continue to test players, caddies, and essential personnel at tournaments through the end of June.

Since the collaboration began last June, Sanford has done more than 18,000 tests on the PGA and Champions Tours, KSFY-TV reported.

Officials say it's been a win-win for everyone, including the lab technicians.

"Our lab teams have been able to see parts of the country that perhaps they would never see before, and we've been able to help the tour to really have an effective and safe environment for their players. The players have been very appreciative of that," said Sanford Health Exec. VP Micah Aberson.

Sanford Health lab technicians travel to tournaments in one of three mobile testing units deployed across the country. It arrives the Saturday prior to the tournament to begin processing tests.

US forces: Rockets hit airbase in Iraq hosting US troops

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — At least 10 rockets targeted a military base in western Iraq that hosts U.S.-led coalition troops on Wednesday, the coalition and the Iraqi military said. It was not immediately known if there were any casualties.

The rockets struck Ain al-Asad airbase in Anbar province at 7:20 a.m., coalition spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto said. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Iraqi military released a statement saying the attack did not cause significant losses and that security forces had found the launch pad used for the rockets. It was found in the al-Baghdadi area of Anbar, an Iraqi military official said on condition of anonymity to discuss the attack with the media.

It was the first attack since the U.S. struck Iran-aligned militia targets along the Iraq-Syria border last week, killing one militiaman and stoking fears of a possible repeat of a series of tit-for-tat attacks that escalated last year, culminating in the U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassim Soleimani outside the Baghdad airport.

Wednesday's attack targeted the same base where Iran struck with a barrage of missiles in January last year in retaliation for the killing of Soleimani. Dozens of U.S. service members were injured, suffering concussions in that strike.

British Ambassador to Iraq Stephen Hickey condemned the attack, saying it undermined the ongoing

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 32 of 96

fight against the Islamic State group. "Coalition forces are in Iraq to fight Daesh at the invitation of the Iraqi government," he tweeted, using the Arabic acronym for IS. "These terrorist attacks undermine the fight against Daesh and destabilize Iraq."

Denmark, which like the U.S. and Britain also has troops at the base, said coalition forces at Ain al-Asad were helping to bring stability and security to the country.

"Despicable attacks against Ain al-Asad base in #Iraq are completely unacceptable," Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod tweeted. The Danish armed forces said two Danes, who were in the camp at the time of the attack, are unharmed.

Wednesday's attack comes two days before Pope Francis' is scheduled to visit Iraq in a much anticipated trip that will include Baghdad, southern Iraq and in the northern city of Irbil.

Last week's U.S. strike along the border had been in response to a spate of rocket attacks that targeted the American presence, including one that killed a coalition contractor from the Philippines outside the Irbil airport.

After that attack, the Pentagon said the strike was a "proportionate military response" taken after consulting coalition partners.

Marotto said the Iraqi security forces were leading an investigation into the attack on Ain al-Asad.

U.S. troops in Iraq significantly decreased their presence in the country last year under the Trump administration. The forces withdrew from several Iraqi based across the country to consolidate chiefly in Ain al-Asad and Baghdad.

Frequent rocket attacks targeting the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses the U.S. Embassy, during President Donald Trump's time in office frustrated the administration, leading to threats of embassy closure and escalatory strikes.

Associated Press writer Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Denmark, contributed to this report.

Reports: Myanmar security forces shoot dead 6 protesters

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Myanmar security forces shot and killed at least six people Wednesday, according to accounts on social media and local news reports, as authorities extended their lethal crackdown on protests against last month's coup.

Videos from various locations showed security forces firing slingshots at demonstrators, chasing them down and even brutally beating an ambulance crew.

Demonstrators have regularly flooded the streets of cities across the country since the military seized power on Feb. 1 and ousted the elected government of leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Their numbers have remained high even as security forces have repeatedly fired tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds to disperse the crowds, and arrested protesters en masse.

The intensifying standoff is unfortunately familiar in the country with a long history of peaceful resistance to military rule — and brutal crackdowns. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in the Southeast Asian nation after five decades of military rule.

According to the U.N. Human Rights Office, security forces killed at least 18 protesters Sunday. On Wednesday, there were reports of six more deaths in three different cities, including a 14-year-old boy.

The escalation of violence has led to increased diplomatic efforts to resolve Myanmar's political crisis — but there appear to be few viable options.

The U.N. Security Council is expected to hold a closed meeting on the situation on Friday, council diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to give the information before the official announcement. The United Kingdom requested the meeting, they said.

Still, any kind of coordinated action at the United Nations will be difficult since two permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia, would almost certainly veto it. Some countries have imposed or are considering imposing their own sanctions.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Myanmar is a member, held a teleconference

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 33 of 96

meeting of foreign ministers on Tuesday to discuss the crisis.

But there, too, action is unlikely. The regional group of 10 nations has a tradition of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. A statement by the chair after the meeting merely called for an end to violence and for talks on how to reach a peaceful settlement.

Ignoring that appeal, Myanmar's security forces on Wednesday continued to attack peaceful protesters.

Details of the crackdowns and casualties are difficult to independently confirm, especially those occurring outside the bigger cities. But the accounts of most assaults have been consistent in social media and from local news outlets, and usually have videos and photos supporting them. It is also likely that many attacks in remote areas go unreported.

In Mandalay, the country's second-biggest city, two people were reportedly shot dead. Photos posted on social media showed a young woman peacefully taking part in the protest, and later apparently lifeless with a head wound. Accounts on social media said a man was also killed.

Riot police in the city, backed by soldiers, broke up a rally and chased around 1,000 teachers and students from a street with tear gas as gun shots could be heard.

Video from The Associated Press showed a squad of police firing slingshots in the apparent direction of demonstrators as they dispersed.

In the central city of Monywa, which has turned out huge crowds, three people were shot Wednesday, including one in the head, the Democratic Voice of Burma, an independent television and online news service, reported. Reports on social media said two died.

In Myingyan, in the same central region, multiple social media posts reported the shooting death of a 14-year-old boy. Photos that posters said were of his body showed his head and chest soaked with blood as he was carried by fellow protesters. A second shooting death was reported later on social media.

Live fire also was reported to have caused injuries in Magwe, also in central Myanmar; in the town of Hpakant in the northern state of Kachin; and in Pyinoolwin, a town in central Myanmar better known to many by its British colonial name, Maymyo.

The usual daily protests in Yangon, the country's largest city, were met with tear gas and rubber bullets but no confirmed accounts of deaths there emerged Wednesday.

However, a widely circulated video taken from a security camera showed police in Yangon brutally beating members of an ambulance crew — apparently after they were arrested.

Police kick the three crew members and thrashed them with rifle butts. At one point, about half a dozen men are pummeling the crew at the same time.

The security forces are believed to single out medical workers for arrest and mistreatment because members of the medical profession launched the country's civil disobedience movement to resist the junta.

Myanmar authorities charge Associated Press journalist

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Authorities in Myanmar have charged Associated Press journalist Thein Zaw and five other members of the media with violating a public order law that could see them imprisoned for up to three years, a lawyer said Tuesday.

The six were arrested while covering protests against the Feb. 1 military coup in Myanmar that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The group includes journalists for Myanmar Now, Myanmar Photo Agency, 7Day News, Zee Kwet online news and a freelancer.

Lawyer Tin Zar Oo, who represents Thein Zaw, said the six have been charged under a law that punishes anyone who causes fear among the public, knowingly spreads false news, or agitates directly or indirectly for a criminal offense against a government employee.

The law was amended by the junta last month to broaden its scope and increase the maximum prison term from two years.

AP's Thein Zaw, 32, was taken into custody on Saturday morning in Yangon, the country's largest city. He is reported to be held in Insein Prison in northern Yangon, notorious for housing political prisoners under previous military regimes.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 34 of 96

According to the lawyer, Thein Zaw was remanded into custody by a court and can be held until March 12 without another hearing or further action.

The AP has called for his immediate release.

"Independent journalists must be allowed to freely and safely report the news without fear of retribution," Ian Phillips, AP vice president for international news, said after the arrest. "AP decries in the strongest terms the arbitrary detention of Thein Zaw."

The Committee to Protect Journalists joined that call.

"Myanmar authorities must release all journalists being held behind bars and stop threatening and harassing reporters for merely doing their jobs of covering anti-coup street protests," said Shawn Crispin, CPJ's senior Southeast Asia representative. "Myanmar must not return to the past dark ages where military rulers jailed journalists to stifle and censor news reporting."

Thein Zaw was arrested as police charged toward protesters gathered at an intersection in Yangon that has become a meeting point for demonstrators.

Authorities escalated their crackdown on the protesters this past weekend, carrying out mass arrests and using lethal force. The U.N. Human Rights offices said it believes at least 18 people were shot dead Sunday in several cities when security forces opened fire on demonstrating crowds.

The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule.

In December 2017, two journalists working for the Reuters news agency were arrested while working on a story about Myanmar's Rohingya minority. They were accused of illegally possessing official documents, although they argued that they were framed because of official opposition to their reporting.

Although their case attracted international attention, they were convicted the following year and were sentenced to seven years behind bars. They were freed in 2019 in a mass presidential pardon.

Under-fire Scottish leader defends handling of sex claims

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon strongly denied being part of a plot against her predecessor, as she testified under oath Wednesday in a political saga that is tearing apart her party and imperiling her position as Scotland's leader.

Sturgeon defended the way her government handled sexual assault claims against former First Minister Alex Salmond, saying the #MeToo movement had made it clear that sexual abuse allegations about powerful people must not be "ignored or swept under the carpet."

Sturgeon was giving her side of the story to a committee of lawmakers investigating a political and personal feud that is wracking Scotland's pro-independence movement and the governing Scottish National Party. Its antagonists are Salmond and Sturgeon, two former allies and friends who have dominated Scottish politics for decades.

Salmond was tried and acquitted last year on sexual assault charges, and claims the misconduct allegations brought by several women were part of a conspiracy to wreck his political career.

He accuses Sturgeon of lying about when she learned of the allegations and breaking the code of conduct for government ministers. He alleges her government undermined democratic principles and the rule of law by allowing the distinctions between government, party and civil service to become blurred, and claims it acted wrongly in contesting a legal challenge from him despite knowing it would likely lose.

Scotland's highest civil court ruled in 2019 that the way the Scottish government had handled the misconduct allegations was unlawful, and awarded Salmond 500,000 pounds (\$695,000) in expenses.

Sturgeon told a Scottish Parliament inquiry into the way sexual misconduct complaints were handled that the government had made mistakes. But she insisted no one had "acted with malice or as part of a plot against Alex Salmond."

"A number of women made serious complaints about Alex Salmond's behavior," she said. "The government, despite the mistakes it undoubtedly made, tried to do the right thing. As first minister I refused to follow

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 35 of 96

the age-old pattern of allowing a powerful man to use his status and connections to get what he wants.”

Salmond, who led the SNP for two decades and was Scotland’s first minister between 2007 and 2014, built the separatist party into a major political force and took the country to the brink of independence by holding a 2014 referendum.

He stepped down as first minister after the “remain” side won, and Sturgeon, his friend and deputy, replaced him.

In 2019, Salmond was charged with sexual assault and attempted rape after allegations by nine women who had worked with him as first minister or for the party. Salmond called the charges “deliberate fabrications for a political purpose,” and was acquitted after a trial in March 2020.

Salmond has called the experience of the last few years a “nightmare.” Sturgeon expressed sympathy for her former friend, but said she had searched in vain during his testimony last week “for any sign, any sign at all, that he recognized how difficult this has been for others too.”

“That he was acquitted by a jury of criminal conduct is beyond question,” she said. “But I know just from what he told me, that his behavior was not always appropriate. And yet across six hours of testimony, there was not a single word of regret, reflection or even simple acknowledgement of that.”

The political soap opera in Edinburgh could have major implications for the future of Scotland and the U.K.

Scottish voters rejected independence in the 2014 referendum, which was billed at the time as a once-in-a-generation decision. But the SNP says Brexit has fundamentally changed the situation by dragging Scotland out of the European Union even though a majority of Scottish voters in the U.K.’s 2016 EU membership referendum opted to remain in the EU. The U.K. as a whole voted narrowly to leave the bloc and finalized the break on Jan. 1.

An election for the Scottish Parliament is due in May, and the SNP has a strong lead in opinion polls. Sturgeon says if she wins a majority, she will push for a new independence referendum for Scotland and challenge British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the courts if his government refuses to agree.

EXPLAINER: Pope’s risky Iraq trip aims to boost Christians

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis is pushing ahead with the first papal trip to Iraq despite rising coronavirus infections, hoping to encourage the country’s dwindling number of Christians who were violently persecuted during the Islamic State’s insurgency while seeking to boost ties with the Shiite Muslim world.

Security is a concern for the March 5-8 visit, given the continued presence of rogue Shiite militias and fresh rocket attacks. Francis, who relishes plunging into crowds and zipping around in his popemobile, is expected to travel in an armored car with a sizeable security detail. The Vatican hopes the measures will have the dual effect of protecting the pope while discouraging contagion-inducing crowds.

Francis’ visit is the culmination of two decades of efforts to bring a pope to the birthplace of Abraham, the prophet central to Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths, after St. John Paul II was prevented from going in 1999.

“We can’t disappoint this people a second time,” Francis said Wednesday in urging prayers for the trip.

The trip will give Francis — and the world — a close-up look at the devastation wrought by the 2014-2017 IS reign, which destroyed hundreds of Christian-owned homes and churches in the north, and sent tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities fleeing.

The trip will include a private meeting with Iraq’s top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a revered figure in Iraq and beyond.

WHAT’S THE VIRUS SITUATION IN IRAQ?

Iraq is currently seeing a resurgence of infections, with daily new cases nearing the height of its first wave.

For months, Francis has eschewed even small, socially distanced public audiences at the Vatican, raising questions about why he would expose Iraqis to the risk of possible infection. Francis, the Vatican delega-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 36 of 96

tion and traveling media have been vaccinated, but few ordinary Iraqis have been given shots.

The Vatican has defended the visit, insisting that it has been designed to limit crowds and that health measures will be enforced. But even then, 10,000 tickets have been prepared for the pope's final event, an outdoor Mass at a stadium in Irbil.

Spokesman Matteo Bruni said the important thing is that Iraqis will be able to watch Francis on TV and "know that the pope is there for them, bringing a message that it is possible to hope even in situations that are most complicated."

He acknowledged there might be consequences to the visit, but said the Vatican measured the risks against the need for Iraqis to feel the pope's "act of love."

HOW WILL CHRISTIANS REACT TO POPE'S INTERFAITH MESSAGE?

Before IS seized vast swaths of northern Iraq, the Rev. Karam Shamasha ministered to 1,450 families in his hometown of Telskuf, 20 miles (about 30 kilometers) north of Mosul. Today, the families of his Chaldean Catholic parish number 500, evidence of the massive exodus of Christians who fled the extremists and never returned.

Shamasha says Francis will be welcomed by those who stayed, even though his message of interfaith harmony is sometimes difficult for Iraqi Christians to hear. They faced decades of discrimination and envy by the Muslim majority well before IS.

"The first ones who came to rob our houses were our (Muslim) neighbors," Shamasha told reporters ahead of the trip. Even before IS, when a Christian family built a new house, Muslim neighbors would sometime say "Good, good, because you're building a house for us' because they know or believe that in the end, Christians will disappear from this land and the houses will be theirs," he said.

Francis is going to Iraq precisely to encourage these Christians to persevere and remain, and to emphasize that they have an important role to play in rebuilding Iraq. Iraqi Christians were believed to number around 1.4 million in 2003. Today there are about 250,000 left.

Arriving in Baghdad, Francis will meet with priests, seminarians and nuns in the same cathedral where Islamic militants in 2010 slaughtered 58 people in what was the deadliest assault targeting Christians since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

On Francis' final full day in Iraq, he will pray in a Mosul square surrounded by four destroyed churches, and visit another church in the Christian city of Qaraqosh that has been rebuilt in a sign of hope for Christianity's future there.

WHY WILL FRANCIS MEET WITH GRAND AYATOLLAH?

One of the highlights of the trip is Francis' meeting with al-Sistani, the grand ayatollah whose 2014 fatwah calling on able-bodied men to fight IS swelled the ranks of Shiite militias that helped defeat the group.

Francis has spent years trying to forge improved relations with Muslims. He signed a historic document on human fraternity in 2019 with a prominent Sunni leader, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, the seat of Sunni learning in Cairo.

There are no plans to add the 91-year-old al-Sistani's signature to the document. But the fact that the meeting is happening at all is enormously significant, said Gabriel Said Reynolds, professor of Islamic studies and theology at the University of Notre Dame.

"It's hard not to see this as accompanying his relationship with Ahmed el-Tayeb," Reynolds said, noting al-Sistani's place as a revered figure of religious, political and intellectual influence in Iraq and beyond.

"I think there would be a lot for them to speak about," he said.

WHAT ARE THE SECURITY CONCERNS?

Security concerns were an issue well before twin suicide bombings claimed by IS ripped through a Baghdad market Jan. 21, killing at least 32 people.

They have only increased after a spate of recent rocket attacks, including at least 10 Wednesday, re-

sumed targeting the American presence in the country, attacks the U.S. has blamed on Shiite militias.

Those same groups, strengthened after al-Sistani's fatwa, are accused of terrorizing Christians and preventing them from returning home. Iraqi government and religious officials are concerned these militias could carry out rocket attacks in Baghdad or elsewhere to show their displeasure over al-Sistani's meeting with Francis.

Asked if this 33rd foreign visit was Francis' riskiest, Bruni replied diplomatically.

"I wouldn't get into a competition of riskiest journeys, but I would say this is certainly one of the most interesting."

Tactical shift: Europe seeks vaccine 'overdrive' to catch up

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Slow off the blocks in the race to immunize its citizens against COVID-19, Germany faces an unfamiliar problem: a glut of vaccines and not enough arms to inject them into.

Like other countries in the European Union, its national vaccine campaign lags far behind that of Israel, Britain and the United States. Now there are growing calls in this country of 83 million to ditch the rule-book, or at least rewrite it a bit.

Germans watched with morbid fascination in January as Britain trained an army of volunteers to deliver coronavirus shots, then marveled that the U.K. — hit far worse by the pandemic than Germany — managed to vaccinate more than half a million people on some days.

The U.S. drive-thru inoculation centers and the COVID-19 shots given out in American grocery store pharmacies drew bafflement in Germany — that is, until the country's own plans for orderly vaccine appointments at specialized centers were overwhelmed by the demand.

"Anglo-Saxon countries had a much more pragmatic approach," said Hans-Martin von Gaudecker, a professor of economics at the University of Bonn. "What normally makes German bureaucracy stolid and reliable becomes an obstacle in a crisis and costs lives."

The European Medicines Agency approved the AstraZeneca vaccine for all age groups, but several EU nations, including Germany, imposed tighter age limits.

With its stockpile of AstraZeneca vaccine doses set to top 2 million, Germany is looking to make more people eligible for the shots that have so far been restricted to a fraction of the population: people in the top priority group who are under 65.

France changed tactics earlier this week, allowing some people over 65 to get the AstraZeneca vaccine after initially restricting its use to younger people. Health Minister Olivier Veran said the shot would soon also be available to people over 50 with health problems that make them more vulnerable.

France, which at more than 87,000 dead has among the highest coronavirus tolls in Europe, had used only 25% of the 1.6 million AstraZeneca vaccines it has received as of Tuesday.

European nations' age restrictions on AstraZeneca compounded problems caused by initial delivery delays and some public reticence toward the vaccine.

Yet data this week from England's mass vaccination program showed that both AstraZeneca and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine were around 60% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in people over 70 after just a single dose. The analysis released by Public Health England, which hasn't been peer reviewed yet, also showed that both vaccines were about 80% effective in preventing hospitalizations among people over 80.

Belgium and Italy, too, are loosening their age restrictions for the AstraZeneca vaccine as they scramble to confront a looming third spike in COVID-19 cases driven by more contagious virus variants.

In Italy, Premier Mario Draghi's new government ousted the COVID-19 emergency czar this week and put an army general with expertise in logistics and experience in Afghanistan and Kosovo in charge of the country's vaccination program.

Denmark, meanwhile, stands out as an EU vaccination success story. The Scandinavian nation leads the bloc's vaccination tables along with tiny Malta and expects to vaccinate all adults by July — far ahead of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 38 of 96

the EU goal of 70% of adults vaccinated by September.

Rather than hold back doses for the required second shot, Danish health authorities followed the British model of using all available vaccines as they came in — an approach more EU countries are now considering.

And all of Denmark's 6 million people have digital health records linked to a single ID number, allowing authorities to pinpoint exactly who is eligible for vaccination and reach out to them directly. British authorities also text people directly to set up shots.

"There are historical reasons why we don't have a centralized register like in Denmark," said von Gaud-ecker, citing Germany's grim history of state oppression under Nazism and Communism.

"Of course a state can do terrible things with data," he said. "But it can also potentially do great things with data."

Better targeting available doses for those who need them is one way European countries hope to stay ahead of the virus in the coming months, as more contagious variants spread.

France and Spain plan to give just one shot of the two-dose vaccines to some people who have recovered from COVID-19, arguing that recent infections act as partial protection against the virus.

Italy, France and the Czech Republic are prioritizing vaccinations in outbreak hotspots. Hungary's leader got a Chinese COVID-19 shot over the weekend and his country and Slovakia are buying Russia's Sputnik V to supplement other vaccines delivered by the EU. Poland's president has suggested that his country may follow Hungary's lead in getting Chinese vaccines.

The number of available vaccines across the EU could swell further next week if the European Medicines Agency follows the lead of the U.S. in approving the single-dose vaccine made by Johnson & Johnson. President Joe Biden has indicated the U.S. now expects to take delivery of enough coronavirus vaccine for all adults by the end of May — two months earlier than anticipated.

"If we can't vaccinate the little we do have, then we're obviously going to have an even bigger problem when we get a lot of vaccine," said Baerbel Bas, a lawmaker with Germany's center-left Social Democratic Party.

Germany's health minister said more than 5% of the population have now received a first dose.

"But it's clear, we need more tempo," Jens Spahn said, adding that vaccine centers will be given greater flexibility to decide who to give the shots to.

Ursula Nonnemacher, the top health official in Germany's state of Brandenburg, which encircles Berlin, vowed not to leave any precious vaccine doses in storage as she announced the start of vaccinations Wednesday in some doctors' practices.

"Now we're shifting into overdrive," she said.

Raf Casert in Brussels, Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Aritz Parra in Madrid, Angela Charlton in Paris, Frances D'Emilio in Rome and Monika Sciclowska in Warsaw contributed to this report.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at:
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>
<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Strong earthquake shakes central Greece, felt in Balkans

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — An earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of over 6.0 struck central Greece on Wednesday and was felt as far away as the capitals of neighboring Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or damages.

The quake sent people rushing out of homes and office buildings into the streets in the town of Larissa. It's epicenter was 22 kilometers (13.7 miles) west-northwest of the town and it struck just after 12:15 p.m. (1015 GMT), according to the European-Mediterranean Seismological Center, which put the preliminary

magnitude at 6.2.

The United States Geological Survey and the Global Seismic Monitor Geofon put the quake's preliminary magnitude at 6.3 while the seismological institute of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki put the magnitude at 6.0.

It is common for magnitudes to vary between seismological institutes in the early hours after an earthquake.

Numerous aftershocks rattled the area, including one with a preliminary magnitude of 4.9.

Greece lies in a highly seismically active region. The vast majority of earthquakes cause no damage or injuries.

Last October, an earthquake that struck the eastern Greek Aegean island of Samos and the nearby Turkish coast killed two people on Samos and at least 75 people in Turkey.

Analysis: Biden aims to manage expectations with pandemic

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden doesn't just have to manage the coronavirus pandemic, he also has to manage people's expectations for how soon the country will come out of it.

And on the latter task, projecting too much optimism can be as risky as offering too little, requiring what one public health expert calls a "necessarily mixed message."

At every turn, as the Biden administration works to inoculate every adult American, the president is tempering bullish proclamations about the nation's vaccine supply with warnings about the challenges ahead.

His big announcement Tuesday that there would be enough vaccine for all adults by the end of May, two months earlier than previous predictions, came with a chaser from Biden that it could be a full year before the nation gets back to normal.

But even then, his pledge skated over the idea that while the administration expects to have procured enough vaccine by the end of the May, there is no guarantee that all those shots will get into arms by then.

The Biden administration has been moving to scale up capacity to administer vaccines at an ever-faster clip. But by April, administration officials expect supply of the vaccine to outpace demand, requiring increased outreach to persuade hesitant Americans to roll up their sleeves.

Biden's overarching strategy thus far has been to under-promise and over-deliver, a proven political strategy that comes with reminders that Americans need to remain vigilant as more contagious variants of the virus take hold.

In his first days in office, Biden had promised enough vaccine for all adults by the end of summer. He moved the timetable up to the end of July through additional purchases of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. This past weekend's approval of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, combined with a new production deal with Merck and manufacturing improvements for the existing shots, gave Biden confidence Tuesday to set May as the new milestone.

Yet even as he holds up the vaccinations as a promising step toward normalcy, Biden has been loath to set a clear timetable.

"I've been cautioned not to give an answer to that because we don't know for sure," he said Tuesday after announcing the stepped-up vaccine timetable. And then he offered his subdued goal for "this time next year" or better.

"But again," he added, "it depends upon if people continue to be smart and understand that we still can have significant losses."

Unlike his predecessor, who frequently established goals he could not meet, Biden has tried to set modest expectation and then beat them. His initial goal to administer 100 shots in his first 100 days will be easily surpassed.

But even as the timetable for vaccine supply has sped up, the president has repeatedly pushed back his guess about when things will get back to normal. He raised eyebrows recently when he suggested Christmas, and then again on Tuesday when he pointed to early 2022.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 40 of 96

Biden's hesitance, aides say, stems from lingering uncertainty over the potential for vaccinated individuals to still transmit infections, as well as concerns over rising coronavirus variants that could challenge the effectiveness of the shots.

It's an outgrowth of his pledge to "follow the science" in his decision-making on the pandemic — an explicit rejection of former President Donald Trump's unrealistic predictions and unfounded prescriptions for the public. But some public health experts worry that Biden may be overcorrecting.

Once there is more vaccine saturation, some experts say, the messaging will need to shift to how to safely reopen, with less emphasis on dire warnings and more of a push on how the effectiveness of the vaccine allows for a return to day-to-day life. On Thursday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is set to offer initial guidance for what vaccinated individuals can and can't safely do.

Former CDC Director Tom Frieden called it a "necessarily mixed message," pointing to progress with vaccines and cases coming down from January highs, but also the persistent rate of infection and the rise of variants.

"On one hand you want people to know we have reason to hope the end may be near, but also, don't let down your guard," said Frieden, president and CEO of Resolve to Save Lives. "Almost always you're setting public policy based on the best available evidence, where not everything is certain. But in this case, you do want to apply the basic concept of better safe than sorry."

The virus' ability to cause mass death may be fading because some of the most vulnerable populations have been vaccinated, but even so, COVID-19 has the potential to remain a potent killer.

Frieden said the next several weeks would be instructive: "We'll know which way cases are going. Are we going into a fourth surge? Are we stalling out at a very high level of infection? Or will the decline resume?"

Trump's unrealistic assessments of the pandemic's trajectory left Americans uncertain what to expect. He set a goal to reopen the country by last Easter, nearly 11 months ago, and in the fall frequently declared that the vaccines would be available "in weeks" even though public health experts warned they would not come until after the election.

Moreover, Trump played down the severity of the crisis, leading many of his supporters to disregard basic health guidelines and fall ill, while also erroneously proclaiming on the fall campaign trail that the nation was "rounding the corner" on the pandemic, an incorrect prediction not forgiven by voters.

"Managing expectations is the first step to effective crisis response," said Alex Conant, a senior campaign adviser to Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential campaign. "If you exceed expectations, you're a hero. If you fail to meet them, you're a failure. You want to be honest with people about what is attainable and then make sure you hit those goals. Trump tried to win news cycles; Biden has been trying to win elections."

While Tuesday's optimistic announcement about the vaccine supply sent hopes soaring, it also raised pressure on the Biden administration to actually get them administered to Americans. Failure to do so would be viewed as a bitter disappointment and clear political setback.

"The buck stops with the president," Conant said. "If Americans can't get access to vaccines, they are going to blame the guy in charge."

Lemire reported from New York.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jonathan Lemire and Zeke Miller have covered politics and the White House for The Associated Press since 2013 and 2017, respectively.

Biden brings no relief to tensions between US and China

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden took office promising to move quickly to restore and repair America's relations with the rest of the world, but one major nation has yet to see any U.S. effort to improve ties: China.

From Iran to Russia, Europe to Latin America, Biden has sought to cool tensions that rose during Presi-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 41 of 96

dent Donald Trump's four years in office. Yet, there have been no overtures to China.

Although the Biden administration has halted the ferocious rhetorical attacks and near daily announcements of new sanctions on China that had become commonplace under Trump, it has yet to back down on any of Trump's actions against Beijing.

This persistent state of low-intensity hostility has profound implications. China and the United States are the world's two largest economies and the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases. Their power struggle complicates global efforts to deal with climate change and recover from the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden's tough stance has its roots in the competition for global power, but it's also a result of the 2020 presidential election campaign in which Trump and his allies repeatedly sought to portray him as soft on China, particularly during the pandemic that originated there. There's also little appetite from lawmakers in either party to ease pressure on China.

Thus in their first month in office, Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have reaffirmed many of the Trump administration's most significant steps targeting China, including a determination that its crackdown on Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in western Xinjiang region constitutes a "genocide" and a flat-out rejection of nearly all of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea.

Nor has the new administration signaled any let-up in Trump's tariffs, restrictions on Chinese diplomats, journalists and academics in the U.S. or criticism of Chinese policies toward Tibet, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It's also critical of Beijing's attempts to further its increasing global influence through telecommunications technology, social media and educational and cultural exchanges.

Biden's nominee to head the CIA, William Burns, was explicit about his concerns over many of these issues at his confirmation hearing Wednesday. And, the newly confirmed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, made a point of highlighting her unease with the state of affairs and pledged to combat Chinese attempts to exert undue pressure on other countries at the U.N.

The backdrop is clear: The United States is convinced that it and China are engaged in a duel for global dominance. And neither is prepared to back down.

China has sounded at times hopeful that Biden will reverse what foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said were Trump administration actions that "caused immeasurable damage to the relationship between the two countries."

Those remarks followed a speech in which China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, demanded that Biden's administration lift restrictions on trade and people-to-people contacts and cease what Beijing considers unwarranted interference in the areas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

Wang urged the U.S. to "stop smearing" the reputation of China's ruling Communist Party. "We hope that the U.S. policy makers will keep pace with the times, see clearly the trend of the world, abandon biases, give up unwarranted suspicions and move to bring the China policy back to reason to ensure a healthy, steady development of China-U.S. relations," he said.

But the anti-China rhetoric hasn't eased. Top Biden administration officials have vowed to use American power to contain what many Democrats and Republicans see as growing Chinese threats to U.S. interests and values in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

They have all repeatedly referred to China as a strategic rival or foe, not a partner or potential friend, and have also evinced their belief that America must "outcompete" China.

"Outcompeting China will be key to our national security in the decades ahead," Burns said at his confirmation hearing. "China is a formidable authoritarian adversary, methodically strengthening its capabilities to steal intellectual property, repress its own people, bully its neighbors, expand its global reach, and build influence in American society."

"It is hard for me to see a more significant threat or challenge for the United States as far out as I can see into the 21st century than that one. It is the biggest geopolitical test that we face," he said.

At least some Asia hands in the United States see Biden as moving slowly toward potential reengagement with China in part because he wants to shore up his domestic position and make clear the U.S. is

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 42 of 96

not a victim of Chinese predation.

"They are restraining themselves from the normal syndrome of a new administration running into problem-solving with China," said Danny Russel, who was assistant secretary of state for Asia during the Obama administration and is now vice president of the Asia Society Policy Institute.

Russel said Biden is "sending out messages that have the effect of showing he's not soft on China, that he's not a patsy for China, that he isn't so desperate for a breakthrough on climate change that he's going to trade away our national security interests."

Chinese academics see little difference in Biden's approach.

"Continuity takes precedent over adjustment and change," said Zhu Feng, professor of international relations at elite Nanjing University.

Biden will have to deal with a China that is far more powerful and influential than under past U.S. administrations, said Yu Wanli, a professor of international relations at Beijing Language and Culture University.

"There has been huge deviation between what they believe China is and what China really is," Yu said. "Their China policies are based on illusions, which must result in some bad consequences. It takes time for them to come back to reality."

Apart from its support for Taiwan, the U.S. views China's policies in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and elsewhere as matters of human rights, whereas China sees them as questions of sovereignty, Yu said. "Frictions will still exist, and the pattern will still be the same."

Trump's cash plea could complicate GOP fundraising efforts

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — "Trump needs you," one fundraising email implored.

"President Trump's Legacy is in your hands," another pleaded.

Others advertised "Miss Me Yet?" T-shirts featuring Donald Trump's smiling face.

While some Republicans grapple with how fiercely to embrace the former president, the organizations charged with raising money for the party are going all in. The Republican National Committee and the party's congressional campaign arms are eager to cash in on Trump's lure with small donors ahead of next year's midterm elections, when the GOP hopes to regain control of at least one chamber of Congress.

But there's a problem: Trump himself. In his first speech since leaving office, the former president encouraged loyalists to give directly to him, essentially bypassing the traditional groups that raise money for GOP candidates.

"There's only one way to contribute to our efforts to elect 'America First' Republican conservatives and, in turn, to make America great again," Trump said Sunday at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida. "And that's through Save America PAC and donaldjtrump.com."

The comment was particularly notable because Trump is generally loath to ask for money in person. It amounts to the latest salvo in the battle to shape the future of the GOP, with Trump making clear that he holds no allegiance to the party's traditional fundraising operation as he tries to consolidate power.

That could help him add to an already commanding war chest, aiding his effort to influence the party. Save America has more than \$80 million cash on hand, including \$3 million raised after the CPAC speech, according to a person familiar with the total.

Some of that money could help Trump settle scores with incumbent members of Congress who have crossed him. In his Sunday speech, Trump read aloud the names of every Republican who voted against him and called for them to be defeated. He's already endorsed a Republican challenger to GOP Rep. Anthony Gonzalez of Ohio, who voted to impeach him over the U.S. Capitol riot.

"Trump's call to give directly to him shows that the normal organs of the party ... are going to have to fight for relevance in the 2022 cycle," said Dan Eberhart, a longtime Republican donor who has given large sums to all three as well as to Trump's campaign.

Bill Palatucci, a RNC member from New Jersey, called Trump's comments "unwelcome" and "counterproductive" and voiced concern that the GOP would suffer further losses, like Georgia's Senate runoff elections

in January, if they don't work together.

"Listen it's a free country. Anybody can form a federal PAC or a super PAC and there's always lots of competition for dollars. But the crossing the line there is then to also tell people to not give to the important committees of the national party," said Palatucci. "There's got to be a willingness on the former president to look beyond his own self-interest."

The RNC and spokespeople for the House and Senate campaign committees declined to comment. But others sought to downplay the apparent tensions. They noted, for instance, that Trump is scheduled to speak at the RNC's spring donor retreat — a major fundraising source — in April in Palm Beach.

And Trump told the party's chair, Ronna McDaniel, in recent days that he wants to continue fundraising for the RNC, according to a person briefed on the conversation who, like others, spoke on condition of anonymity to disclose private conversations.

Before making his money pitch on Sunday, Trump's team quietly updated its fundraising filings. They converted his Save America leadership PAC to an entity that can also support other candidates, and turned his main Donald J. Trump for President campaign committee into the Make America Great Again, or MAGAPac. Money raised through Trump's website now goes to Save America JFC, a joint fundraising agreement between the two.

While Trump left office as a deeply unpopular figure, he remains a powerful draw for small-dollar, grass-roots donors, a reality that has been abundantly clear in fundraising appeals over the last week.

Over the course of a single hour last Thursday, the RNC, both GOP congressional campaign committees and the Republican State Leadership Committee, which tries to elect Republicans to state office, blasted supporters with urgent fundraising appeals that included urgent references to Trump.

And the National Republican Senatorial Committee warned this week that its "limited edition" T-shirts featuring Trump were almost sold out.

Regardless of Trump's next move, the GOP is unlikely to remove him from its sales pitch anytime soon. "Our digital fundraising strategy is simple: raise as much money as possible," said Andrew Romeo, a spokesman for the RSLC.

National security officials to testify on Jan. 6 mistakes

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal national security officials are set to testify in the second Senate hearing about what went wrong on Jan. 6, facing questions about missed intelligence and botched efforts to quickly gather National Guard troops that day as a violent mob laid siege to the U.S. Capitol.

Senators are eager Wednesday to grill the officials from the Pentagon, the National Guard and the Justice and Homeland Security departments about their preparations as supporters of then-President Donald Trump talked online, in some cases openly, about gathering in Washington and interrupting the electoral count.

At a hearing last week, officials who were in charge of security at the Capitol blamed each other as well as federal law enforcement for their own lack of preparation as hundreds of rioters descended on the building, easily breached the security perimeter and eventually broke into the Capitol itself. Five people died as a result of the rioting.

So far, lawmakers conducting investigations have focused on failed efforts to gather and share intelligence about the insurrectionists' planning before Jan. 6 and on the deliberations among officials about whether and when to call National Guard troops to protect Congress. The officials at the hearing last week, including ousted Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund, gave conflicting accounts of those negotiations. Robert Contee, the acting chief of police for the Metropolitan Police Department, told senators he was "stunned" over the delayed response and said Sund was pleading with Army officials to deploy National Guard troops as the rioting rapidly escalated.

Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, one of two Democratic senators who will preside over Wednesday's hearing, said in an interview Tuesday that she believes every moment counted as the National Guard decision was delayed and police officers outside the Capitol were beaten and injured by

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 44 of 96

the rioters.

"Any minute that we lost, I need to know why," Klobuchar said.

The hearing comes as thousands of National Guard troops are still patrolling the fenced-in Capitol and as multiple committees across Congress are launching investigations into mistakes made on Jan. 6. The probes are largely focused on security missteps and the origins of the extremism that led hundreds of Trump's supporters to break through the doors and windows of the Capitol, hunt for lawmakers and temporarily stop the counting of electoral votes. Congress has, for now, abandoned any examination of Trump's role in the attack after the Senate acquitted him last month of inciting the riot by telling the supporters that morning to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat.

As the Senate hears from the federal officials, acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman will testify before a House panel that is also looking into how security failed. In a hearing last week before the same subcommittee, she conceded there were multiple levels of failures but denied that law enforcement failed to take seriously warnings of violence before the Jan. 6 insurrection.

In the Senate, Klobuchar said there is particular interest in hearing from Maj. Gen. William Walker, the commanding general of the D.C. National Guard, who was on the phone with Sund and the Department of the Army as the rioters first broke into the building. Contee, the D.C. police chief, was also on the call and told senators that the Army was initially reluctant to send troops.

"While I certainly understand the importance of both planning and public perception — the factors cited by the staff on the call — these issues become secondary when you are watching your employees, vastly outnumbered by a mob, being physically assaulted," Contee said. He said he had quickly deployed his own officers and he was "shocked" that the National Guard "could not — or would not — do the same."

Contee said that Army staff said they were not refusing to send troops, but "did not like the optics of boots on the ground" at the Capitol.

Also testifying at the joint hearing of the Senate Rules Committee and the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committees are Robert Salesses of the Defense Department, Melissa Smislova of the Department of Homeland Security and Jill Sanborn of the FBI, all officials who oversee aspects of intelligence and security operations.

Lawmakers have grilled law enforcement officials about missed intelligence ahead of the attack, including a report from an FBI field office in Virginia that warned of online posts foreshadowing a "war" in Washington. Capitol Police leaders have said they were unaware of the report at the time, even though the FBI had forwarded it to the department.

Testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday, FBI Director Christopher Wray said the report was disseminated through the FBI's joint terrorism task force, discussed at a command post in Washington and posted on an internet portal available to other law enforcement agencies.

Though the information was raw and unverified and appeared aspirational in nature, Wray said, it was specific and concerning enough that "the smartest thing to do, the most prudent thing to do, was just push it to the people who needed to get it."

"We did communicate that information in a timely fashion to the Capitol Police and (Metropolitan Police Department) in not one, not two, but three different ways," Wray said, though he added that since the violence that ensued was "not an acceptable result," the FBI was looking into what it could have done differently.

Biden health pick taking heat for support of abortion rights

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's pick for health secretary is taking heat from Republicans for his actions in support of abortion rights. They want to define him — and the new administration — as out of the mainstream.

The nomination of Xavier Becerra faces a key vote Wednesday in the Senate Finance committee. It's a test, too, for national groups opposed to abortion, trying to deny a president who favors abortion rights

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 45 of 96

his choice to run the Department of Health and Human Services.

Becerra is paying a price for defending, as California attorney general, some of the nation's most liberal laws and policies on abortion rights.

"It goes to show that California abortion policies are progressive enough that being associated with them is something that anti-abortion lawmakers want to make disqualifying for a Cabinet position," said Mary Ziegler, a law professor at Florida State University, who specializes in the legal history of reproduction.

Nationally, the abortion issue appears in flux. Lawmakers in 19 state legislatures have introduced almost 50 bills this year to ban most or all abortions, according to the nonpartisan Guttmacher Institute. In South Carolina, Republican Gov. Henry McMaster signed a measure banning most abortions, though it was almost immediately suspended by a federal judge.

Abortion opponents are hoping that litigation over a state law will reach the Supreme Court, now clearly leaning to the right. It could serve as a vehicle for overturning the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion. Yet despite the surge of state activity, the underlying political reality is tricky.

During the 2020 election, about 6 in 10 voters said abortion should be legal in most or all cases, according to VoteCast, an in-depth survey of the U.S. electorate conducted by NORC at The University of Chicago for The Associated Press. Roughly the same percentage of Republicans said abortion should usually be legal, the survey showed.

Becerra, 63, was a reliable Democratic vote for abortion rights during more than 20 years representing a Los Angeles-area district in the U.S. House. But he wasn't a leading voice. His issues were immigration, access to health care and education.

Perceptions changed after Becerra was appointed California attorney general in 2017. He sued the Trump administration over its restrictions on abortion, although his office says that only four of the 124 lawsuits Becerra filed against the previous administration dealt with abortion, birth control or conscience rights — key issues for religious conservatives. Becerra went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to defend a California law that required crisis pregnancy centers to provide information about abortion — and lost.

His legal advocacy grated on abortion opponents. "What I just see is his getting involved in way too many abortion cases," said Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America. "He just made it part of his foundation. Yes, the laws were bad in California, but he has an abortion agenda."

Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., echoed those views. "It does seem like as attorney general you spent an inordinate amount of time and effort suing pro-life organizations," he said, questioning Becerra recently. "If confirmed, how do you assure us? Because I think the majority of the American people would not want their secretary of Health and Human Services focused or fixated on expanding abortion when we got all of these public health issues to deal with."

"I understand that Americans have different deeply held beliefs on this particular issue," Becerra responded, adding that "it's my job to defend the rights of my state." He has also pointed out that his wife, Dr. Carolina Reyes, is an obstetrician recognized for caring for women with high-risk pregnancies.

The chairman of the Finance Committee, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., accused some Republican senators of ignoring the coronavirus pandemic "to peddle misleading or demonstrably false attacks on Attorney General Becerra's record defending access to reproductive health care."

There doesn't seem to be much room for dialogue. "It's really hard to see where he is going to find, or be willing to find, any common ground with pro-lifers," Carol Tobias, president of the National Right to Life Committee, said of Becerra.

Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., told Becerra that "I've got serious concerns with the radical views that you've taken in the past on the issue of abortion." And Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., accused Becerra of "targeting religious liberty" when he sued the Trump administration over its rules giving employers with religious or moral objections more leeway to opt out of covering birth control.

How far the Biden administration will get in expanding access to abortion is questionable. Democrats in Congress don't appear to have the votes to overturn the Hyde Amendment, the term for a series of federal laws that bar taxpayer funding of abortion except in cases of rape or incest or to save the life of

the woman. Biden, who supported Hyde restrictions throughout his congressional career, flipped his stance as a presidential candidate. Becerra has told senators he'll follow the law.

Abortion rights opponents say they do not trust Becerra. "He has credentialed himself to be an abortion absolutist — it's just who he is," said Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the Susan B. Anthony List, which backs female office-seekers opposed to abortion.

But Becerra has received the backing of a prominent Catholic, Sister Carol Keehan, the retired head of the Catholic Health Association of the United States. She disagrees with his support for abortion rights, but finds common ground elsewhere.

"He's got a heart for making sure that people have the ability to access health care in this country," said Keehan. "I happen to believe the way you reduce abortion is by giving people decent health care."

Beaumont reported from Des Moines, Iowa.

French families sue over extensive nursing home virus deaths

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A Paris court is holding a hearing Wednesday in a class-action effort to hold French health authorities and companies accountable after thousands with the virus died in nursing homes, and families were locked out and left in the dark about what was happening to their isolated loved ones.

The hearing is a first step in likely a years-long legal marathon. Families hope it shines a light on what went wrong last year as the virus devastated France's oldest generation and deprived their children and grandchildren of a chance to help or even say goodbye.

"We want to ensure that mistakes aren't repeated, that someone is held responsible," said plaintiff Sabrina Deliry, who has mobilized families around France since her mother's Paris nursing home was first locked down a year ago.

The hearing Wednesday involves a special measure to demand access to documents or other material involving decisions at nursing homes. It is among many legal efforts around the mismanagement of the pandemic that are working through the French justice system. Others include manslaughter charges, or target top government ministers, but this could be one of the most far-reaching cases.

It targets several nursing homes, the national health agency DGS, the Paris public hospital authority and others. Plaintiffs include family members of nursing home residents, doctors and associations.

Their complaint focuses on multiple issues at French homes for the elderly and disabled during the first half of 2020. Those flaws included mask shortages for residents and staff; testing shortages; the use of a powerful sedative called Rivotril on some residents while homes were locked down; and opaque decisions on which residents received hospital treatment for the virus and which were left to suffer or die in their nursing homes.

The national health agency, the Paris hospital authority and two of the nursing homes named did not respond to requests for comment ahead of the hearing.

After France recorded Europe's first virus infections and deaths a year ago, French officials shut down nursing homes to outsiders and kept residents inside. The government said it had to act fast to protect the country's most vulnerable populations. But many families say the lockdown deprived them of decision-making abilities for their loved ones, and that in some cases the enforced isolation worsened cognitive and other health problems.

Recognizing these concerns, President Emmanuel Macron relaxed some rules for nursing homes ahead of everything else as France's first lockdown eased. But for many, the damage had already been done. And new waves of infections in the summer, fall and winter sent many nursing homes back into temporary, repeated shutdowns.

Official figures show that nearly 25,000 people with the virus have died in French nursing homes out of more than 87,000 lives lost nationwide — a death toll still climbing by hundreds every day. But thousands of other French nursing home residents who contracted COVID-19 died after being hospitalized,

and studies suggest they make up as many as half of France's overall virus victims. That is among the highest proportions worldwide.

French officials say mask shortages at the outset of the pandemic were beyond their control and a global problem, and note that masks have been mandatory and widely available since last summer. Nursing home directors have defended their decisions to lock out visitors given the vulnerabilities of their residents.

Dr. Alain Masclet, head of group AR2S involved in the lawsuit, said the court process "will allow us to define what was forgotten, the shortages, the failures."

The goal, he said, should be to ensure: "Never again."

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

Intense preparations before pontiff meets Iraqi ayatollah

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — In Iraq's holiest city, a pontiff will meet a revered ayatollah and make history with a message of coexistence in a place plagued by bitter divisions.

One is the chief pastor of the world-wide Catholic Church, the other a pre-eminent figure in Shiite Islam whose opinion holds powerful sway on the Iraqi street and beyond. Their encounter will resonate across Iraq, even crossing borders into neighboring, mainly Shiite Iran.

Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani are to meet on Saturday for at most 40 minutes, part of the time alone except for interpreters, in the Shiite cleric's modest home in the city of Najaf. Every detail was scrutinized ahead of time in painstaking, behind-the-scenes preparations that touched on everything from shoes to seating arrangements.

The geopolitical undertones weigh heavy on the meeting, along with twin threats from a viral pandemic and ongoing tensions with rocket-firing Iranian-backed rogue groups.

For Iraq's dwindling Christian minority, a show of solidarity from al-Sistani could help secure their place in Iraq after years of displacement — and, they hope, ease intimidation from Shiite militiamen against their community.

Iraqi officials in government, too, see the meeting's symbolic power — as does Tehran.

The 90-year-old al-Sistani has been a consistent counterweight to Iran's influence. With the meeting, Francis is implicitly recognizing him as the chief interlocutor of Shiite Islam over his rival, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. News of the meeting heightened long-standing rivalries between the Shiite seminaries of Najaf and Iran's city of Qom over which stands at the center of the Shiite world.

"It will be a private visit without precedent in history, and it will not have an equal to any previous visits," said a religious official in Najaf, involved in the planning.

For the Vatican, it was a meeting decades in the making, one that eluded Francis' predecessors.

"Najaf did not make it easy," said one Christian religious official close to the planning from the Vatican side, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the visit's delicacy.

In December, Louis Sako, the patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church told The Associated Press the church was trying to schedule a meeting between Francis and the ayatollah. It was included in the first draft of the program, "but when the (Vatican) delegation visited Najaf, there were problems," he said, without elaborating.

The church kept insisting.

"We know the importance and impact of Najaf in the Iraqi situation," Sako said. What value would the pope's message of coexistence in Iraq have, they determined, if he did not seek the support of its most powerful and respected religious figure?

Sako finally confirmed the meeting in January, weeks after the pontiff's itinerary had been assembled.

Rarely does al-Sistani weigh in on governance matters. When he has, it has shifted the course of Iraq's modern history.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 48 of 96

An edict from him provided many Iraqis reason to participate in the January 2005 elections, the first after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. His 2014 fatwa calling on able-bodied men to fight the Islamic State group massively swelled the ranks of Shiite militias. In 2019, as anti-government demonstrations gripped the country, his sermon led to the resignation of then-prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

The Vatican's hope was that Francis would sign a document with al-Sistani pledging human fraternity, just as he did with Sunni Islam's influential grand imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, based in Egypt.

The signature was among many elements the two sides negotiated over extensively. In the end, Shiite religious officials in Najaf told the AP a signing was not on the agenda, and al-Sistani will issue a verbal statement instead.

Each minute of Saturday's meeting will likely unfold as meticulously as a scripted stage play.

The 84-year-old pontiff's convoy will pull up along Najaf's busy column-lined Rasool Street, which culminates at the Imam Ali Shrine, one of the most revered sites in the world for Shiites.

To the side is an alleyway too narrow for cars. Here, Francis will walk the 30 meters (yards) to al-Sistani's modest home, which the cleric has rented for decades. Waiting to greet him at the entrance will be al-Sistani's influential son, Mohammed Ridha.

Inside, and some steps to the right, the pontiff will come face to face with the ayatollah.

Each will make a simple gesture of mutual respect.

Francis will remove his shoes before entering al-Sistani's room.

Al-Sistani, who normally remains seated for visitors, will stand to greet Francis at the door and walk him to an L-shaped blue sofa, inviting him to take a seat.

"This has not taken place by his Eminence with any guest before," said a Najaf religious official.

He will stand despite his fragile health, said the religious officials. Since fracturing his thigh last year, the cleric has been firmly ensconced indoors. Francis suffers from sciatica.

The Pope will be offered tea.

"His Eminence will provide His Holiness a message of peace and love for all humanity," said the official.

Gifts will be exchanged.

It is not clear what Najaf will bestow, but Francis will almost certainly present al-Sistani with bound copies of his most important writings, top among them his latest encyclical "Brothers All," about the need for greater fraternity among all peoples to bring about a more peaceful, ecologically sustainable and just world.

Until now, papal plans to visit Iraq have ended in failure.

The late Pope John Paul II was unable to go in 2000, when negotiations broke down with the government of then-Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

One setback after another nearly scuttled this one too.

Iraq fell to a second wave of the coronavirus last month spurred by the new, more infectious strain that first broke out in the U.K. At the same time, a spate of rocket attacks resumed targeting the American presence in the country. The U.S. has blamed Iran-aligned militias.

Those same groups, strengthened after al-Sistani's fatwa, are accused of terrorizing Christians and preventing them from returning home. Iraqi government and religious officials are concerned these militias could carry out rocket attacks in Baghdad or elsewhere to show their displeasure over al-Sistani's meeting with Francis.

As pope, Francis sits atop an official hierarchy ruling the Catholic Church. Al-Sistani's position is more informal, based on tradition and reputation. He is considered one of the most prestigious Shiite religious scholars in the world, the leading light at the Najaf seminaries, earning him worldwide reverence.

Iran's Khamenei and the Qom seminaries compete for that prestige. Al-Sistani's school of thought opposes direct rule by clerics, the system in place in Iran, where Khamenei has the final word in all matters.

"The visit could potentially upset some people and they might try to delay or cancel the visit, I hold this concern," said a second official in Najaf. "Who could be upset? Qom's Hawza," he said, using the Arabic term referring to the seminaries.

Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's chief justice, considered a potential presidential candidate or even successor to

Khamenei, was unsuccessful in his attempts to meet al-Sistani on a recent trip.

"This increased tension with the Iranians, as His Eminence did not see Raisi but will see His Holiness the Pope," said the official.

Politics and rivalries aside, almost everyone across Iraq's multi-confessional fabric will have something to gain from the short encounter.

"I see the pope's visit to Najaf as the culmination of a global movement in the Islamic-Christian tradition to promote security and peace in our country," Iraq's Culture Minister Hassan Nadhem told the press recently. "As we are still tinged with tendencies toward violence and intolerance."

Associated Press writer Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed to this report.

Australian AG Porter denies rape accusation, won't resign

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press
CANBERRA, Australia (AP) —

Australia's attorney-general denied having sexual contact with a 16-year-old who had accused him of raping her 33 years ago and said Wednesday he would not resign as the nation's top law officer.

Christian Porter instead said he would take leave to care for his mental health after the allegations recently became public.

"I'm going to take a couple of short weeks leave just for my own sanity," Porter told reporters. "I think that I will be able to return from that and do my job."

The accuser took her own life last year, and her allegations against Porter became public last week when they were sent anonymously to Prime Minister Scott Morrison and other lawmakers.

Media had reported the alleged rapist was one of the 16 men in Morrison's 22-member Cabinet, but Porter was widely identified online.

The 50-year-old former criminal prosecutor said he decided to speak out after police said Tuesday there was insufficient admissible evidence to proceed with a criminal investigation.

Prominent lawyers and the woman's friends have called for an independent inquiry to test the evidence against Porter.

Morrison has noted Porter's denials and said the allegations should be left with police to handle.

Porter said any inquiry into the allegation would require him to "disapprove something that didn't happen 33 years ago."

Buy Michael Bradley, the alleged victim's former lawyer, said there would "trial by media" in the absence of a formal inquiry.

"We should all not want that to happen, but it's going to happen if the allegation and his response are not tested in a proper formal process," Bradley said.

Porter said the reported rape allegation did not warrant him standing down from his job.

"If I stand down from my position as attorney-general because of an allegation about something that simply did not happen, then any person in Australia can lose their career, their job, their life's work based on nothing more than an accusation that appears in print," Porter said.

"If that happens, anyone in public life is able to be removed simply by the printing of an allegation," he added.

Porter said he was 17 when he competed alongside the then-16-year-old accuser on a four-member school debate team in January 1988. He said he had not heard from her since.

"I did not sleep with the (alleged) victim. We didn't have anything of that nature happen between us," Porter said.

"I remember the person as an intelligent, bright, happy person," he added.

The woman has not been named. Police are preparing evidence to help a coroner determine the cause of her death.

The case has added to intensifying scrutiny of attitudes toward sexual harassment and violence in Parliament after a staffer made an unrelated allegation two weeks ago that she had been raped by a senior

colleague in a minister's office.

The government notified Parliament House staff in an email this week of a new confidential complaints hotline for the reporting of serious workplace incidents.

Biden's Cabinet half-empty after slow start in confirmations

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's Cabinet is taking shape at the slowest pace of any in modern history, with just over a dozen nominees for top posts confirmed more than a month into his tenure.

Among Biden's 23 nominees with Cabinet rank, just 13 have been confirmed by the Senate, or a little over half. And among the 15 core nominees to lead federal agencies, 10 have been confirmed, or about two thirds. According to the Center for Presidential Transition, about a month into their first terms, the previous four presidents had 84% of their core Cabinet picks confirmed.

On Tuesday, Biden's Cabinet was thrown into further uncertainty when his nominee to lead the White House budget office, Neera Tanden, withdrew from consideration after her nomination faced opposition from key senators on both sides of the aisle.

The delay in confirmations means some departments are left without their top decision-makers as they attempt to put in place policies to address the overlapping crises brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala said there are a number of "big decisions" at HHS and across the federal government that are waiting on leadership from the top.

"It's very unfortunate. And in the middle of a huge health crisis, it's the wrong thing to do," she said. "Civil servants are capable, but they need leadership. And they're used to having leaders."

Shalala was confirmed two days after President Bill Clinton was sworn in, and said she had her chain of command ready to go and could immediately dig into a long list of decisions and policy changes.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, the Biden administration's HHS nominee, will get a committee vote Wednesday, and he's expected to receive easy confirmation. But Shalala pointed to a laundry list of issues — from oversight of hospitals, health care companies and nursing homes during the pandemic to issues surrounding drug pricing, telemedicine and child care services — that urgently need his input.

Lacking a department head, she said, "just slows everything down."

Matt Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit organization that tracks presidential transitions, said federal departments tend to act more conservatively around decision-making and shifting policies without the top brass in place.

"Missing the top person means that it's pretty difficult to actually address the very big questions and to make big changes," he said. "And there's a natural conservatism in place when people don't know yet what the top person is going to really want."

The slow pace in confirmations partly results from the delay in the transition process resulting from President Donald Trump's attempts to dispute his loss in the 2020 presidential race and from what the Biden White House says was a lack of cooperation from Trump administration officials.

Senate Democrats did not win a majority of seats in the chamber until the Jan. 5 Georgia runoff elections, and then it took nearly a month for Democratic and Republican leadership to agree on a resolution governing the organization of the upper chamber, which further delayed committee work.

And Democrats privately acknowledge that Trump's second impeachment trial also slowed down the process some, eating up a week of valuable time in the Senate and bogging lawmakers down with other work beyond reviewing and processing Biden's nominees.

Still, Biden transition spokesman Andrew Bates said that after the delays "stemming from the previous administration's resistance to the will of the American people," the relatively smooth confirmation progress in recent weeks "is both welcome and appreciated."

He added, however, "it is hardly enough, and nominees with strong bipartisan support — and who are critical to defeating the pandemic and turning our economy around with the creation of millions of jobs — remain needlessly obstructed by individual members. That must change."

The Biden administration has prioritized confirming those nominees who are key to national security, the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 51 of 96

economy and public health decisions. Biden does have in place his director of national intelligence, and his top brass at the departments of State, Homeland Security and Defense, as well as his treasury secretary.

But in addition to waiting on Becerra at HHS, the administration lacks top leaders at the Justice Department, Housing and Urban Development and the Small Business Administration, departments that will be key to some of Biden's top priorities and the implementation of his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus aid bill, if it's passed into law later this month.

And the delay in confirming top posts also means a delay in confirming and seating deputy secretaries and undersecretaries, who are often in charge of the nitty gritty in implementing major policy. Shalala noted, for instance, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services will offer guidance on how insurers should cover coronavirus costs and implementation on aspects of the COVID-19 aid bill, and currently only has an acting administrator. She also noted HHS has deputies who oversee everything from refugee resettlement to child care programs.

And Tanden's withdrawal Tuesday raises further questions about the Biden administration's budget process.

The White House has yet to offer a timeline for releasing its budget, citing the transition delays and a lack of cooperation from the Trump administration. That puts them behind most recent presidents, who typically submit written budget topline to Congress by the end of February, though Trump didn't submit his until mid-March.

The Biden administration has not been completely hamstrung by the slow pace of confirmations, however. The White House has issued a number of executive orders outlining policy reviews and changes that are underway at federal departments, and civil servants are working through key policy decisions, even without Senate-confirmed leadership in place.

For instance, while Biden's nominee to head the Department of Education, Miguel Cardona, was just confirmed by the Senate on Tuesday, the department's acting head last month put out guidelines requiring states to administer standardized tests despite the pandemic.

And Stier noted that the Biden administration has installed hundreds of non-Senate-confirmed staff across the federal government, helping to provide guidance even without department heads in place. Biden himself swore in more than 1,100 non-Senate-confirmed staff throughout the federal government on the first day of his presidency, a number Stier said was unprecedented.

"It ameliorates the problem in that you then have in place people who can provide guidance to the career team about what the administration's positions and priorities are," Stier said.

Associated Press writers Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Matthew Daly, Collin Binkley and Ashraf Khalil contributed to this report.

Biden urges Senate Dems to rally behind \$1.9T virus bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden urged Senate Democrats to rally behind a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill and stood by his proposed \$1,400 payments to individuals, even as some party moderates sought to dial back parts of the package.

"He said we need to pass this bill and pass it soon. That's what the American people sent us here to do, and we have to get America the help it needs," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told reporters, describing a 20-minute conference call Biden had with Democratic senators Tuesday.

The president's cry for unity came as Democrats, with no votes to spare in a 50-50 Senate, sorted through lingering divisions over the emerging bill. Those included moderates' efforts to focus spending more narrowly on those hardest hit by the deadly pandemic and resulting economic contraction.

Biden took to Twitter to signal he wouldn't budge from his demand that lawmakers add a fresh \$1,400 payment to the \$600 that millions of individuals received from a December relief measure. That new installment comprises nearly a quarter of the overall bill's cost.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 52 of 96

"The fact is that \$600 is not enough. The Senate needs to pass the American Rescue Plan and finish the job of delivering \$2,000 in direct relief," Biden wrote in one of his infrequent uses of a medium his predecessor, Donald Trump, at times used over 100 times daily.

The huge relief package is a too-big-to-fail moment for the fledgling president, who would be politically staggered if Congress — controlled narrowly by Democrats but controlled nonetheless — failed to deliver. Conquering the virus that's killed half a million Americans and flung the economy and countless lives into tailspins is Biden's top initial priority.

So far, Republicans are following the template they set during Barack Obama's presidency. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said he hoped GOP senators would oppose the bill unanimously, as their House counterparts did early Saturday when that chamber approved its version of the measure.

McConnell accused Democrats of ignoring signs that the economy and the deadly virus' rampage were beginning to turn around and shunning Republicans. Biden met with 10 GOP senators last month who presented a \$600 billion plan one-third the size of his own, but efforts to find middle ground went nowhere.

"The new administration made a conscious effort to jam us," McConnell told reporters. "We'll be fighting this in every way that we can."

Democrats are using special rules that will let them avoid GOP filibusters that would require them to garner an impossible 60 votes to approve the legislation.

The Senate bill was expected to largely mirror the House-approved package, with the most glaring divergence the Senate's dropping of language boosting the federal minimum wage to \$15 hourly.

Schumer said Senate debate would commence as soon as Wednesday and predicted, "We'll have the votes we need to pass the bill." Democrats want to send a final package to Biden by March 14, when an earlier round of emergency jobless benefits expires.

The bill has hundreds of billions of dollars for schools and colleges, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, mass transit systems, renters and small businesses. It also has money for child care, tax breaks for families with children and assistance for states willing to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income residents.

Two people said Biden told Democrats they must sometimes accept provisions in a large measure that they don't like. And it was clear there were still moving parts.

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the Senate's most conservative Democrat, said he wanted to pare the bill's \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefit to \$300. That's the same amount Congress approved last December — on top of regular state benefits — and Manchin said the higher figure would discourage people from returning to work.

"It would be awful for the doors to open up and there's no one working," Manchin said of businesses reopening. Top Democrats and progressives oppose trimming those benefits, but Schumer suggested a final decision awaited, saying, "They're discussing it."

Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, said he wants the bill's \$350 billion for state and local governments to specify minimum amounts for municipal governments and has called for \$50 billion to improve broadband coverage.

Despite every Democrats' huge leverage because all their votes are needed, none have so far threatened to sink the legislation if they don't get their way. All are aware of how that would rattle Biden's presidency and Democrats' ability to be productive during this Congress.

"We want to get the biggest, strongest bill that can pass, and that's what we're going to do," Schumer said.

There were indications loose ends were falling into place. In one sign, 11 Democratic senators wrote Biden urging him to use a huge, upcoming infrastructure bill to create regularly paid relief and jobless benefits that would be automatically triggered by economic conditions.

Some progressives had wanted those payments included in the COVID-19 bill. Democrats' push to include it in later legislation suggested an effort to satisfy progressives while avoiding jeopardizing the current package.

Progressives, though, were still smarting over the virtual certainty that the Senate bill will lack the minimum wage boost, up from \$7.25 hourly locked in since 2009.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 53 of 96

The chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian said last week that including that increase violated Senate budget rules. Opposition by moderates including Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., has left Democrats without the votes needed to salvage it.

A fundraising email by Our Revolution, a progressive political committee that was started by backers of Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., underscored the left's anger. Sanders is chief Senate sponsor of the wage increase.

"The politician standing in the way of change is Vice President Kamala Harris," said the email, citing the possibility — already rejected by the White House — of her casting a tie-breaking Senate vote to overrule the parliamentarian. It said the organization will "hold her accountable if she decides to turn her back on essential workers."

Senate drafters of the legislation also stripped out a small provision that would have provided \$1.5 million for maintaining and operating a bridge in upstate New York connecting the U.S. and Canada. The funding was removed after some Republican lawmakers had criticized it as an example of a wasteful spending item that should not be part of the COVID relief bill.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro and AP writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Biden vows enough vaccine for all US adults by end of May

By ZEKE MILLER, LINDA A. JOHNSON and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said the U.S. expects to take delivery of enough coronavirus vaccine for all adults by the end of May — two months earlier than anticipated — and he pushed states to get at least one shot into the arms of teachers by the end of March to hasten school reopenings.

Biden also announced Tuesday that drugmaker Merck will help produce rival Johnson & Johnson's newly approved one-shot vaccine, likening the partnership between the two drug companies to the spirit of national cooperation during World War II.

"We're now on track to have enough vaccine supply for every adult in America by the end of May," Biden said.

Despite the stepped-up pace of vaccine production, the work of inoculating Americans could extend well into the summer, officials said, depending both on the government's capacity to deliver doses and Americans' willingness to roll up their sleeves.

Biden's announcements quickly raised expectations for when the nation could safely emerge from the pandemic with the promise of speedier vaccinations, but even as he expressed optimism, Biden quickly tempered the outlook for a return to life as it was before the virus hit.

"I've been cautioned not to give an answer to that because we don't know for sure," Biden said, before saying his hope for a return to normal was sometime before "this time next year."

As Biden spoke, states across the country were moving to relax virus-related restrictions. This despite the objections of the White House and the nation's top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, who have warned against any relaxation of virus protocols until more Americans are vaccinated.

In Texas, GOP Gov. Greg Abbott moved to lift his state's mask-wearing mandate and a host of other limitations. Michigan's Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer eased capacity limits on restaurants and both public and residential gatherings.

Fauci has previously said the nation must achieve a vaccination rate of about 80% to reach "herd immunity." Only about 8% of the population has been fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, though the pace of vaccination has been increasing. The U.S. set a new daily record for injections last Thursday and Friday.

In hopes of increasing vaccinations even further, the Biden administration told governors to make preparations to administer even more doses in the coming weeks. More shots are also headed toward the federally backed program to administer doses in retail pharmacies, which federal officials believe can double or triple their pace of vaccination.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 54 of 96

More than 800,000 doses of the J&J vaccine will also be distributed this week to pharmacies, on top of the 2.4 million they are now getting from Pfizer and Moderna.

Those pharmacies will be key in getting the vaccines into the arms of teachers — particularly in the roughly 20 states where they have not been prioritized for shots. The aim is to help reopen schools to better educate students who have been at risk of falling behind during the pandemic and reduce the burden on parents who have had to choose between childcare and a job.

“Let’s treat in-person learning as the essential service that it is,” Biden said. Teachers will be able to sign up directly through participating retail pharmacies, the administration said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki also announced Tuesday that the federal government was increasing supply of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines to states next week to 15.2 million doses per week, up from 14.5 million previously. States will also receive 2.8 million doses of the J&J shot this week.

On a call with governors Tuesday, White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients said states should prepare to administer 16 million to 17 million total weekly doses of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines by the end of March, climbing to 17 million to 18 million weekly by early April. The supply of J&J doses to states, expected to dip after the initial shipment this week, will climb to 4 million to 6 million weekly doses by the end of March and 5 million to 6 million doses weekly through the end of April.

Officials have said J&J faced unexpected production issues with its vaccine and produced only 3.9 million doses before being cleared for emergency use authorization on Saturday. The company has promised to deliver 100 million doses by the end of June.

Before the approval of the J&J shot, Biden had suggested that it would take until the end of July to have enough vaccine for every adult in the U.S.

Facing questions about the company’s slipping delivery schedule, J&J Vice President Richard Nettles told lawmakers on Capitol Hill last week that the company had faced “significant challenges” because of its “highly complex” manufacturing process.

Psaki said that an “across-the-administration effort” was required to get the two historic rivals to work together on the vaccines, even though conversations between J&J and Merck have been going on for months.

“There’s a difference between conversations and it moving forward,” she said.

The White House said Merck would devote two plants to the production process. One would make the vaccine and the other would handle inserting the vaccine into vials and ensuring strict quality controls. Psaki said the Biden administration was using its powers under the Defense Production Act to help Merck retool to work on the production.

Still it was not immediately clear when the effect of Merck’s assistance would be reflected in supply. Federal officials have cautioned that setting up the highly specialized manufacturing lines to produce vaccines would take months.

Compared to the two-dose versions produced by Moderna and Pfizer, the J&J vaccine is less resource-intensive to distribute and administer, making it critical for U.S. plans to spread vaccinations around the world — but only once Americans are inoculated. The J&J vaccine can be stored for months at refrigerated temperatures, rather than frozen, and doesn’t require patients to return for a second dose three or four weeks later.

J&J has set up a global production network that includes brewing bulk vaccine at its Janssen facility in the Netherlands, and with a company in the U.S., Emergent BioSolutions, and another in India, Biological E. Ltd. Other contract manufacturers are lined up to help with later steps, including putting the vaccine into vials, in the U.S., Italy, Spain and South Africa.

In the scramble to create COVID-19 vaccines, the three Western drug makers who’ve dominated the vaccine industry for decades — Merck & Co., Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline — surprisingly all fell short. Merck halted its own plans to develop a coronavirus vaccine earlier this year, finding that their candidates were generating an inferior immune system response compared with other vaccines. It said it would instead focus its work on developing treatments for COVID-19.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 55 of 96

Now, amid the global clamor for more vaccine doses, those heavyweights are helping manufacture doses for less-experienced rivals whose vaccines won the first emergency authorizations from regulators.

Merck has since said it was in talks to help other drug companies with vaccine production, but wouldn't say Tuesday whether other deals are imminent.

"Merck remains steadfast in our commitment to contribute to the global response to the pandemic and to preparing to address future pandemics," the Kenilworth, New Jersey-based company said in a statement.

Johnson reported from Fairless Hills, Pa. Lemire reported from New York. Lauran Neergaard in Washington and Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Washington, contributed to this report.

US infrastructure gets C- from engineers as roads stagnate

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — America's infrastructure has scored near-failing grades for its deteriorating roads, public transit and storm water systems due to years of inaction from the federal government, the American Society of Civil Engineers reports. Its overall grade: a mediocre C-.

In its "Infrastructure Report Card" released Wednesday, the group called for "big and bold" relief, estimating it would cost \$5.9 trillion over the next decade to bring roads, bridges and airports to a safe and sustainable level. That's about \$2.6 trillion more than what government and the private sector already spend.

"America's infrastructure is not functioning as it should, and families are losing thousands of dollars a year in disposable income as a result of cities having to fix potholes, people getting stuck in traffic or due to repairs when a water line breaks or the energy grid goes down," said Greg DiLoreto, one of the group's past presidents.

"It's critical we take action now," he said, expressing optimism that the federal government is now making it a "top priority."

During Donald Trump's four years in the White House, his administration often held "Infrastructure Week" events and touted transportation improvements. But it was not able to push Congress to pass any broad plan to update the nation's roads and bridges, rails and airports.

The overall C- grade on America's infrastructure — reflecting a "mediocre" condition with "significant deficiencies" — is a slight improvement from its D+ grade in 2017. The group cited in part state and local government and private-sector efforts, which have turned to new technology to pinpoint water main leaks and prioritize fixes.

But of the 17 categories making up the overall grade, 11 were in the D range that indicated a "significant deterioration" with a "strong risk of failure." They included public transit, storm water infrastructure, airports and roads and highways, which make up the biggest chunk of U.S. infrastructure spending at \$1.6 trillion, according to the group.

Four areas got Cs: bridges, which dropped from a C+ to a C in 2021, energy, drinking water and solid waste. Just two areas — ports and rail — scored higher, with a B- and B, respectively.

President Joe Biden's administration and lawmakers in recent weeks have begun laying the groundwork for a long-sought boost to the nation's roads, bridges and other infrastructure of \$2 trillion or more, to be unveiled after Congress approves legislation on COVID-19 relief. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who has been meeting with lawmakers about the effort, has said the aim would be to rejuvenate the post-coronavirus pandemic economy and boost crumbling roads and bridges while encouraging alternative forms of transportation to cars, as well as create thousands of green jobs by making environmentally friendly retrofits and public works improvements.

"This report card is a warning and a call to action," Buttigieg told The Associated Press. "A generation of disinvestment is catching up to us, and we must choose whether to allow our global competitors to pull ahead permanently, or to invest in the safety, equity, resilience and economic strength that superior infrastructure can bring to Americans."

Buttigieg announced on Tuesday the first low-cost federal transportation loan in the Biden administra-

tion, up to \$448 million to Texas for toll-road projects in Austin to ease congestion, touting bike-friendly features such as a planned 10-foot-wide paved sidewalk for cyclists and pedestrians with access to trails.

"As communities across the country continue to battle the pandemic, we are committed to being a partner to help them save money, reduce congestion and improve mobility, safety, and accessibility," said Buttigieg, a former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, who will address the engineers group later Wednesday.

In its report card, the group said years of inaction has had consequences. It cited growing costs being passed along to consumers as cities and states grapple with funding shortages to fix roads and bridges and delay other major upgrades to infrastructure.

The nation's weak infrastructure has been a problem for communities, including Texas' recent struggles with power outages and water shortages after a brutal winter storm. Unusually frigid conditions led to frozen pipes that burst and flooded homes, and millions of residents lost heat and running water.

According to the report card, the nation is only paying about half of what it needs to lift overall U.S. infrastructure to an acceptable "B" level. Left unaddressed, America's overdue infrastructure bill by 2039 will cost the average American household \$3,300 a year, or \$63 a week, the group said.

It urged strong leadership, greater investment and "new approaches," such as taking into account the reality of climate change in longer-term capital improvement plans.

"Big and bold action from Washington, as well as continued prioritization by states and localities, is needed to bring all our infrastructure to a state of good repair," the report card said.

California crash kills 13 of 25 people crammed into SUV

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

HOLTVILLE, Calif. (AP) — Authorities are investigating whether human smuggling was involved after a crash Tuesday involving an SUV packed with 25 people and a tractor-trailer that left 13 people dead and bodies strewn across a roadway near the U.S. Mexico border.

Most of the dead were Mexicans, a Mexican official said.

When police arrived, some of the passengers were trying to crawl out of the crumpled 1997 Ford Expedition while others were wandering around the fields. The rig's front end was pushed into the SUV's left side and two empty trailers were jackknifed behind it.

Twelve people were found dead when first responders reached the two-lane highway, which winds through fields in the agricultural southeastern corner of California about 125 miles (201 kilometers) east of San Diego. Another person died at a hospital, California Highway Patrol Chief Omar Watson said.

"It was a pretty chaotic scene," said Watson, who also described it as "a very sad situation."

Roberto Velasco, director of North American affairs for Mexico's Foreign Relations Department, confirmed Tuesday on his Twitter account that at least 10 of those killed have been identified as Mexicans. No identities have been released.

The cause of the collision was unclear, authorities said, and it also was not immediately known why so many people were crammed into a vehicle built to hold eight people safely.

Watson said the SUV only had front seats — the middle and back seats had been removed. That would allow more people to fit into the vehicle but makes it even more unsafe.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the SUV was carrying migrants who had crossed the border, ferrying farmworkers to fields, or was being used for some other purpose.

"Special agents from Homeland Security Investigations San Diego responded ... and have initiated a human smuggling investigation," the agency said in a statement, adding that other details weren't being released.

Macario Mora, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection, said agents were not pursuing the SUV at the time of the crash, which was initially rumored. The immigration status of the passengers was unknown.

"It was an unusual number of people in an SUV, but we don't know who they were," Mora said.

The people in the vehicle ranged in age from 15 to 53 and were a mix of males and females, officials said. The 28-year-old driver was from Mexicali, Mexico, just across the border, and was among those killed.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 57 of 96

The 68-year-old driver of the big rig, who is from nearby El Centro, was hospitalized with moderate injuries.

The passengers' injuries ranged from minor to severe and included fractures and head trauma. They were being cared for at several hospitals. One person was treated at a hospital and released.

The crash occurred around 6:15 a.m. at an intersection just outside Holtville, which dubs itself the world's carrot capital and is about 11 miles (18 kilometers) north of the U.S.-Mexico border. It was a sunny, clear morning and authorities said the tractor-trailer and its two empty containers were northbound on State Highway 115 when the SUV pulled in front of it from Norrish Road.

A California Highway Patrol report said the SUV entered an intersection directly in front of the big-rig, which hit the left side of the SUV. Both vehicles came to a halt on a dirt shoulder.

It's not clear if the SUV ran a stop sign or had stopped before entering the highway. It's also not yet known how fast the tractor-trailer was traveling.

The speed limit for tractor-trailers on the highway is 55 mph (88.5 kph), according to CHP Officer Jake Sanchez. The other road is also 55 mph for vehicles.

A 1997 Ford Expedition can carry a maximum payload of 2,000 pounds. If it had 25 people inside, that would easily exceed the payload limit, which taxes the brakes and makes it tougher to steer, said Frank Borris, former head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Office of Defects Investigation.

"You're going to have extended stopping distances, delayed reactions to steering inputs and potential over-reaction to any type of high-speed lane change," said Borris, who now runs a safety consulting business.

SUVs of that age tended to be top-heavy even without carrying a lot of weight, Borris said.

"With all of that payload above the vehicle's center of gravity, it's going to make it even more unstable," he said.

The crash occurred amid verdant farms that grow a wide variety of vegetables and alfalfa used for cattle feed.

Thousands of people cross into the U.S. each day to work in the fields. The harvest of lettuce and other winter vegetable crops runs from November until March, and buses and SUVs carrying farmworkers are often rumbling down the rural roads in the early morning hours.

The area has also seen smugglers carrying migrants in trucks and vehicles. Hundreds of migrants who died after crossing the border are buried in unmarked graves in Holtville's cemetery on the edge of town.

Associated Press reporters Stefanie Dazio in Los Angeles, Julie Watson in San Diego, Anita Snow in Phoenix, Tom Krisher in Detroit and Mark Stevenson in Mexico City contributed.

This story has been corrected based on updated information from officials to show the tractor-trailer driver is 68, not 69.

Budget nominee Tanden withdraws nomination amid opposition

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's pick to head the Office of Management and Budget, Neera Tanden, has withdrawn her nomination after she faced opposition from key Democratic and Republican senators for her controversial tweets.

Her withdrawal marks the first high-profile defeat of one of Biden's nominees. Thirteen of the 23 Cabinet nominees requiring Senate approval have been confirmed, most with strong bipartisan support.

"Unfortunately, it now seems clear that there is no path forward to gain confirmation, and I do not want continued consideration of my nomination to be a distraction from your other priorities," Tanden wrote in a letter to Biden. The president, in a statement, said he has "utmost respect for her record of accomplishment, her experience and her counsel" and pledged to find her another role in his administration.

Tanden's viability was in doubt after Democratic West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and a number of moderate Republicans came out against her last month, all citing her tweets attacking members of both parties prior to her nomination.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 58 of 96

Manchin, a key moderate swing vote in the Senate, said last month in a statement announcing his opposition that "her overtly partisan statements will have a toxic and detrimental impact on the important working relationship between members of Congress and the next director of the Office of Management and Budget." Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins, meanwhile, cited Biden's own standard of conduct in opposing Tanden, declaring in a statement that "her past actions have demonstrated exactly the kind of animosity that President Biden has pledged to transcend."

Tanden needed just 51 votes in an evenly-divided Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris acting as a tiebreaker. But without Manchin's support, the White House was left scrambling to find a Republican to support her.

Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who was seen as the last Republican holdout open to supporting Tanden, said Tuesday night that she never told the White House she was a no vote on Tanden, and that the administration never asked. But her support was believed to be key to Tanden's nomination after a number of other centrist Republicans came out against her, and Murkowski met with the nominee this week.

Murkowski told reporters she had asked Tanden, as she does all the nominees, to understand the challenges the Biden administration's policies are having on Alaska, where the economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas drilling and related activities.

"I have walked each and every one of them through these priorities, these challenges that we're facing right now as, as, Alaskans, and I'm saying, what can you do to help me?" Murkowski said. "Because we've got an industry that is that is really in a fragile position right now because of the administration executive orders."

The White House stuck with Tanden even after a number of centrist Republicans made their opposition known, insisting her experience growing up on welfare and background working on progressive policies as the president and CEO of the liberal-leaning Center for American Progress made her the right candidate for the moment. White House chief of staff Ron Klain initially insisted the administration was "fighting our guts out" for her.

Tanden faced pointed questions over her past comments about members from both parties during her confirmation hearing. Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent and prominent progressive lawmaker, accused her of issuing "vicious attacks" against progressives, and hadn't said whether he'd support her nomination.

Tanden apologized during that hearing to "people on either the left or right who are hurt by what I've said." Just prior to the hearing, she deleted hundreds of tweets, many of which were critical of Republicans.

Collins cited those deleted tweets in her statement, saying that the move "raises concerns about her commitment to transparency." She said Congress "has to be able to trust the OMB director to make countless decisions in an impartial manner, carrying out the letter of the law and congressional intent."

As recently as Monday, the White House indicated it was sticking by Tanden's nomination, with press secretary Jen Psaki noting Tanden's "decades of experience" in defending their pick.

"We will continue of course to fight for the confirmation of every nominee that the president puts forward," Psaki insisted, but she added, "We'll see if we have 50 votes."

A leading advocate for Tanden, Rep. Judy Chu, D-Calif., the chair of the Congressional Asian and Pacific American Caucus, called the withdrawal a "tragedy" that leaves the Cabinet with just one Asian American member.

"We expect the highest levels of professionalism and civility from our leaders in government, which is precisely what Neera displayed in taking responsibility for her past comments and committing to a change in tone. I'm disappointed that such a qualified candidate was subject to such a negative double standard," Chu said.

The head of the Office of Management and Budget is tasked with putting together the administration's budget, as well as overseeing a wide range of logistical and regulatory issues across the federal government.

Tanden's withdrawal leaves the Biden administration without a clear replacement. The apparent front-runner on Capitol Hill to replace Tanden was Shalanda Young, a former staff director for the House Ap-

appropriations Committee who has been actively pushed by members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Other names mentioned include Ann O'Leary, a former chief of staff for California Gov. Gavin Newsom, and Gene Sperling, who served as a top economic adviser to both Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed reporting.

Biden's Cabinet half-empty after slow start in confirmations

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's Cabinet is taking shape at the slowest pace of any in modern history, with just over a dozen nominees for top posts confirmed more than a month into his tenure.

Among Biden's 23 nominees with Cabinet rank, just 13 have been confirmed by the Senate, or a little over half. And among the 15 core nominees to lead federal agencies, 10 have been confirmed, or about two thirds. According to the Center for Presidential Transition, about a month into their first terms, the previous four presidents had 84% of their core Cabinet picks confirmed.

On Tuesday, Biden's cabinet was thrown into further uncertainty when his nominee to lead the White House budget office, Neera Tanden, withdrew from consideration after her nomination faced opposition from key senators on both sides of the aisle.

The delay in confirmations means some departments are left without their top decision-makers as they attempt to put in place policies to address the overlapping crises brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala said there are a number of "big decisions" at HHS and across the federal government that are waiting on leadership from the top.

"It's very unfortunate. And in the middle of a huge health crisis, it's the wrong thing to do," she said. "Civil servants are capable, but they need leadership. And they're used to having leaders."

Shalala was confirmed two days after President Bill Clinton was sworn in, and said she had her chain of command ready to go and could immediately dig into a long list of decisions and policy changes.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, the Biden administration's HHS nominee, will get a committee vote Wednesday, and he's expected to receive easy confirmation. But Shalala pointed to a laundry list of issues — from oversight of hospitals, health care companies and nursing homes during the pandemic to issues surrounding drug pricing, telemedicine and child care services — that urgently need his input.

Lacking a department head, she said, "just slows everything down."

Matt Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit organization that tracks presidential transitions, said federal departments tend to act more conservatively around decision-making and shifting policies without the top brass in place.

"Missing the top person means that it's pretty difficult to actually address the very big questions and to make big changes," he said. "And there's a natural conservatism in place when people don't know yet what the top person is going to really want."

The slow pace in confirmations partly results from the delay in the transition process resulting from President Donald Trump's attempts to dispute his loss in the 2020 presidential race and from what the Biden White House says was a lack of cooperation from Trump administration officials.

Senate Democrats did not win a majority of seats in the chamber until the Jan. 5 Georgia runoff elections, and then it took nearly a month for Democratic and Republican leadership to agree on a resolution governing the organization of the upper chamber, which further delayed committee work.

And Democrats privately acknowledge that Trump's second impeachment trial also slowed down the process some, eating up a week of valuable time in the Senate and bogging lawmakers down with other work beyond reviewing and processing Biden's nominees.

Still, Biden transition spokesman Andrew Bates said that after the delays "stemming from the previous administration's resistance to the will of the American people," the relatively smooth confirmation progress in recent weeks "is both welcome and appreciated."

He added, however, "it is hardly enough, and nominees with strong bipartisan support — and who are

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 60 of 96

critical to defeating the pandemic and turning our economy around with the creation of millions of jobs — remain needlessly obstructed by individual members. That must change.”

The Biden administration has prioritized confirming those nominees who are key to national security, the economy and public health decisions. Biden does have in place his director of national intelligence, and his top brass at the departments of State, Homeland Security and Defense, as well as his treasury secretary.

But in addition to waiting on Becerra at HHS, the administration lacks top leaders at the Justice Department, Housing and Urban Development and the Small Business Administration, departments that will be key to some of Biden’s top priorities and the implementation of his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus aid bill, if it’s passed into law later this month.

And the delay in confirming top posts also means a delay in confirming and seating deputy secretaries and undersecretaries, who are often in charge of the nitty gritty in implementing major policy. Shalala noted, for instance, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services will offer guidance on how insurers should cover coronavirus costs and implementation on aspects of the COVID-19 aid bill, and currently only has an acting administrator. She also noted HHS has deputies who oversee everything from refugee resettlement to child care programs.

And Tanden’s withdrawal Tuesday raises further questions about the Biden administration’s budget process.

The White House has yet to offer a timeline for releasing its budget, citing the transition delays and a lack of cooperation from the Trump administration. That puts them behind most recent presidents, who typically submit written budget topline to Congress by the end of February, though Trump didn’t submit his until mid-March.

The Biden administration has not been completely hamstrung by the slow pace of confirmations, however. The White House has issued a number of executive orders outlining policy reviews and changes that are underway at federal departments, and civil servants are working through key policy decisions, even without Senate-confirmed leadership in place.

For instance, while Biden’s nominee to head the Department of Education, Miguel Cardona, was just confirmed by the Senate on Tuesday, the department’s acting head last month put out guidelines requiring states to administer standardized tests despite the pandemic.

And Stier noted that the Biden administration has installed hundreds of non-Senate-confirmed staff across the federal government, helping to provide guidance even without department heads in place. Biden himself swore in more than 1,100 non-Senate-confirmed staff throughout the federal government on the first day of his presidency, a number Stier said was unprecedented.

“It ameliorates the problem in that you then have in place people who can provide guidance to the career team about what the administration’s positions and priorities are,” Stier said.

AP writers Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Matthew Daly, Collin Binkley and Ashraf Khalil contributed to this report.

Fauci presents his personal virus model to Smithsonian

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dr. Anthony Fauci, the face of the U.S. government’s pandemic response, has donated his personal 3D model of the COVID-19 virus to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

The museum on Tuesday honored Fauci with its Great Americans Medal.

“Dr. Fauci has helped save millions of lives and advanced the treatment and our understanding of infectious and immunologic diseases across more than five decades of public service,” said Anthea M. Hartig, the museum’s director. “His humanitarianism and dedication truly exemplify what it means to be a Great American.”

The museum asked Fauci to contribute a personal artifact to mark the pandemic, and he chose the lumpy blue and orange ball that he used to explain the complexities of the virus in dozens of interviews.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 61 of 96

The model was made with a 3D printer and shows what the Smithsonian's announcement calls "the various components of the SARS-CoV-2 virion (the complete, infectious form of the virus), including the spike protein."

Fauci showed off his new medal in a video call Tuesday night, calling it "an extraordinary and humbling" honor.

"This has been a terrible year in so many respects," he said. "Decades from now, people will be talking about the experience that we went through."

Fauci, 80, is the director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. After serving as the beleaguered and frequently sidelined face of the Trump administration's COVID response, Fauci was retained as a senior adviser to President Joe Biden.

The Great Americans Medal was founded in 2016. Previous honorees include former secretaries of state Madeleine K. Albright and Gen. Colin L. Powell, tennis star Billie Jean King and musician Paul Simon.

Fauci received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award, in 2008 from then-President George W. Bush for his decades of work, dating back to the earliest days of the AIDS crisis.

Texas and other states ease COVID-19 rules despite warnings

By PAUL J. WEBER and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Texas on Tuesday became the biggest state to lift its mask rule, joining a rapidly growing movement by governors and other leaders across the U.S. to loosen COVID-19 restrictions despite pleas from health officials not to let their guard down yet.

The Lone Star State will also do away with limits on the number of diners who can be served indoors, said Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who made the announcement at a restaurant in Lubbock.

The governors of Michigan, Mississippi and Louisiana likewise eased up on bars, restaurants and other businesses Tuesday, as did the mayor of San Francisco.

"Removing statewide mandates does not end personal responsibility," said Abbott, speaking from a crowded dining room where many of those surrounding him were not wearing masks. "It's just that now state mandates are no longer needed."

A year into the crisis, politicians and ordinary Americans alike have grown tired of rules meant to stem the spread of the coronavirus, which has killed over a half-million people in the United States. Some places are lifting infection control measures; in other places, people are ignoring them.

Top health officials, including the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, have responded by begging people repeatedly not to risk another deadly wave of contagion just when the nation is making progress in vaccinating people and victory over the outbreak is in sight.

U.S. cases have plunged more than 70% over the past two months from an average of nearly 250,000 new infections a day, while average deaths per day have plummeted about 40% since mid-January.

But the two curves have leveled off abruptly in the past several days and have even risen slightly, and the numbers are still running at alarmingly high levels, with an average of about 2,000 deaths and 68,000 cases per day. Health officials are increasingly worried about virus mutations.

"We stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground we have gained," CDC director Dr. Rochelle Walensky warned on Monday.

Even so, many Americans are sick of the shutdowns that have damaged their livelihoods and are eager to socialize again.

An Indianapolis-area bar was filled with maskless patrons over the weekend. In Southern California, people waited in lines that snaked through a parking lot on a recent weekday afternoon for the chance to shop and eat at Downtown Disney, part of Disneyland. (The theme park's rides remain closed.) And Florida is getting ready to welcome students on spring break.

"People want to stay safe, but at the same time, the fatigue has hit," said Ryan Luke, who is organizing a weekend rally in Eagle, Idaho, to encourage people to patronize businesses that don't require masks. "We just want to live a quasi-normal life."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 62 of 96

Michael Junge argued against a mask mandate when officials in the Missouri tourist town of Branson passed one and said he hasn't enforced it in his Lost Boys Barber Company. He said he is sick of it.

"I think the whole thing is a joke honestly," he said. "They originally said that this was going to go for a month and they have pushed it out to indefinitely. ... It should have been done a long time ago."

In San Francisco, an upbeat Mayor London Breed announced that California gave the green light to indoor dining and the reopening of movie theaters and gyms.

"You can enjoy your city, right here, right now," she said from Fisherman's Wharf, one of the city's biggest tourist attractions. She added: "We are not where we need to be yet, but we're getting there, San Francisco."

Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves said he is getting rid of most mask mandates and lifting most other restrictions, including limits on seating in restaurants, starting Wednesday.

"The governor's office is getting out of the business of telling people what they can and cannot do," the Republican said.

Florida, which is getting ready for spring break travelers to flock to its sunny beaches, is considered to be in an "active outbreak," along with Texas, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and South Carolina, according to the data-tracking website CovidActNow.

Florida Gov. Rick DeSantis made it clear during his annual State of the State address Tuesday that he welcomes more visitors to Florida in his drive to keep the state's economy thriving.

Florida municipalities can impose their own mask rules and curfews, restrict beach access and place some limits on bars and restaurants, but some have virtually no such measures in place.

Miami Beach will require masks indoors and out and restrict the number of people allowed on the beach as well as in bars and restaurants.

"If you want to party without restrictions, then go somewhere else. Go to Vegas," Miami Beach City Manager Raul Aguila said during a recent virtual meeting. "We will be taking a zero-tolerance attitude towards that behavior."

In Michigan, a group called All Business Is Essential has resisted Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's virus policies, and many people are ignoring mask requirements and other measures, said group leader Erik Kiilunen.

"At some point you've got to look yourself in the mirror and say, 'Do I want a zero-risk life?'" he said. "It's become a farce, really. People have quit living for a year, at what price?"

"I think everybody wants things to get back the way they were," said Aubrey D. Jenkins, the fire chief in Columbia, South Carolina, whose department issues dozens of \$100 citations every weekend to bar-goers who refuse to wear masks or keep their distance. "But we still have to be real cautious."

Associated Press writers Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee, Florida; Anila Yoganathan in Tucker, Georgia; Emily Wagster Pettus in Jackson, Mississippi; John Flesher in Traverse City, Michigan; Heather Hollingsworth in Mission, Kansas; Rebecca Boone in Boise, Idaho; Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar in Washington; Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Janie Har in San Francisco; and David Eggert in Lansing, Michigan, contributed to this story.

Biden urges Senate Dems to rally behind \$1.9T virus bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden urged Senate Democrats on Tuesday to rally behind a \$1.9 trillion COVID-relief bill and stood by his proposed \$1,400 payments to individuals, even as some party moderates sought to dial back parts of the package.

"He said we need to pass this bill and pass it soon. That's what the American people sent us here to do, and we have to get America the help it needs," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told reporters, describing a 20-minute conference call Biden had with Democratic senators.

The president's cry for unity came as Democrats, with no votes to spare in a 50-50 Senate, sorted through lingering divisions over the emerging bill. Those included moderates' efforts to focus spending more narrowly on those hardest hit by the deadly pandemic and resulting economic contraction.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 63 of 96

Biden took to Twitter to signal he wouldn't budge from his demand that lawmakers add a fresh \$1,400 payment to the \$600 that millions of individuals received from a December relief measure. That new installment comprises nearly a quarter of the overall bill's cost.

"The fact is that \$600 is not enough. The Senate needs to pass the American Rescue Plan and finish the job of delivering \$2,000 in direct relief," Biden wrote in one of his infrequent uses of a medium his predecessor, Donald Trump, at times used over 100 times daily.

The huge relief package is a too-big-to-fail moment for the fledging president, who would be politically staggered if Congress — controlled narrowly by Democrats but controlled nonetheless — failed to deliver. Conquering the virus that's killed half a million Americans and flung the economy and countless lives into tailspins is Biden's top initial priority.

So far, Republicans are following the template they set during Barack Obama's presidency. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said he hoped GOP senators would oppose the bill unanimously, as their House counterparts did early Saturday when that chamber approved its version of the measure.

McConnell accused Democrats of ignoring signs that the economy and the deadly virus' rampage were beginning to turn around and shunning Republicans. Biden met with 10 GOP senators last month who presented a \$600 billion plan one-third the size of his own, but efforts to find middle ground went nowhere.

"The new administration made a conscious effort to jam us," McConnell told reporters. "We'll be fighting this in every way that we can."

Democrats are using special rules that will let them avoid GOP filibusters that would require them to garner an impossible 60 votes to approve the legislation.

The Senate bill was expected to largely mirror the House-approved package, with the most glaring divergence the Senate's dropping of language boosting the federal minimum wage to \$15 hourly.

Schumer said Senate debate would commence as soon as Wednesday and predicted, "We'll have the votes we need to pass the bill." Democrats want to send a final package to Biden by March 14, when an earlier round of emergency jobless benefits expires.

The bill has hundreds of billions of dollars for schools and colleges, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, mass transit systems, renters and small businesses. It also has money for child care, tax breaks for families with children and assistance for states willing to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income residents.

Two people said Biden told Democrats they must sometimes accept provisions in a large measure that they don't like. And it was clear there were still moving parts.

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the Senate's most conservative Democrat, said he wanted to pare the bill's \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefit to \$300. That's the same amount Congress approved last December — on top of regular state benefits — and Manchin said the higher figure would discourage people from returning to work.

"It would be awful for the doors to open up and there's no one working," Manchin said of businesses reopening. Top Democrats and progressives oppose trimming those benefits, but Schumer suggested a final decision awaited, saying, "They're discussing it."

Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, said he wants the bill's \$350 billion for state and local governments to specify minimum amounts for municipal governments and has called for \$50 billion to improve broadband coverage.

Despite every Democrats' huge leverage because all their votes are needed, none have so far threatened to sink the legislation if they don't get their way. All are aware of how that would rattle Biden's presidency and Democrats' ability to be productive during this Congress.

"We want to get the biggest, strongest bill that can pass, and that's what we're going to do," Schumer said.

There were indications loose ends were falling into place. In one sign, 11 Democratic senators wrote Biden urging him to use a huge, upcoming infrastructure bill to create regularly paid relief and jobless benefits that would be automatically triggered by economic conditions.

Some progressives had wanted those payments included in the COVID-19 bill. Democrats' push to include it in later legislation suggested an effort to satisfy progressives while avoiding jeopardizing the current

package.

Progressives, though, were still smarting over the virtual certainty that the Senate bill will lack the minimum wage boost, up from \$7.25 hourly locked in since 2009.

The chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian said last week that including that increase violated Senate budget rules. Opposition by moderates including Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., has left Democrats without the votes needed to salvage it.

A fundraising email by Our Revolution, a progressive political committee that was started by backers of Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., underscored the left's anger. Sanders is chief Senate sponsor of the wage increase.

"The politician standing in the way of change is Vice President Kamala Harris," said the email, citing the possibility — already rejected by the White House — of her casting a tie-breaking Senate vote to overrule the parliamentarian. It said the organization will "hold her accountable if she decides to turn her back on essential workers."

Senate drafters of the legislation also stripped out a small provision that would have provided \$1.5 million for maintaining and operating a bridge in upstate New York connecting the U.S. and Canada. The funding was removed after some Republican lawmakers had criticized it as an example of a wasteful spending item that should not be part of the COVID relief bill.

AP congressional correspondent Lisa Mascaro and writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

US sanctions Russian officials over nerve-agent attack

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

The Biden administration sanctioned seven mid-level and senior Russian officials on Tuesday, along with more than a dozen government entities, over a nearly fatal nerve-agent attack on opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his subsequent jailing.

The measures, emphasizing the use of the Russian nerve agent as a banned chemical weapon, marked the Biden administration's first sanctions against associates of President Vladimir Putin. The Russian leader was a favorite of former President Donald Trump even during covert Russian hacking and social media campaigns aimed at destabilizing the U.S.

The government officials included at least four whom Navalny's supporters had directly asked the West to penalize, saying they were most involved in targeting him and other dissidents and journalists. However, the U.S. list did not include any of Russia's most powerful businesspeople and bankers, oligarchs whom Navalny has long said the West would have to sanction to get the attention of Putin.

Tuesday's step "was not meant to be a silver bullet or an end date to what has been a difficult relationship with Russia," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. "We expect the relationship to continue to be a challenge. We're prepared for that."

The Biden administration also announced sanctions under the U.S. Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act for Russian entities, including those the U.S. said worked to research, develop and test chemical weapons.

The U.S. intelligence community concluded with high confidence that Russia's Federal Security Service used the Russian nerve agent Novichok on Navalny last August, a senior administration official said. Russia says it had no role in any attack on the dissident.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Tuesday denounced the new U.S. sanctions as part of its "meddling in our internal affairs."

"We aren't going to tolerate that," Zakharova said in a statement, adding that "we will respond in kind."

"Attempts to put pressure on Russia with sanctions or other tools have failed in the past and will fail again," she said.

The Biden administration has pledged to confront Putin over alleged attacks on Russian opposition figures and alleged malign actions abroad, including the hacking of U.S. government agencies and U.S.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 65 of 96

businesses. Trump spoke admiringly of Putin and resisted criticism of Putin's government. That included dismissing U.S. intelligence findings that Russia had backed Trump in its covert campaign to interfere with the 2016 presidential election.

The administration coordinated the sanctions with the European Union, which added to its own sanctions Tuesday over the attack on Navalny.

The U.S. and European Union shared concerns about "Russia's deepening authoritarianism," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"The U.S. government has exercised its authorities to send a clear signal that Russia's use of chemical weapons and abuse of human rights have severe consequences," Blinken said in a statement.

The individuals sanctioned by the U.S. included the head of Russia's Federal Security Service, the head of prisons, Kremlin and defense figures, and Russia's prosecutor general.

The Biden administration had forecast for weeks that it would take action against Russia. Besides the Navalny sanctions, officials have said the administration plans to respond soon to the massive Russian hack of federal government agencies and private corporations that laid bare vulnerabilities in the cyber supply chain and exposed potentially sensitive secrets to elite Kremlin spies.

Navalny, 44, was sickened by the Russian nerve agent in an attack that the United States and others linked to Putin's security services. After months of recuperation in Germany, Navalny flew home to Moscow in January and was arrested on arrival for an alleged parole violation.

His detention sparked street protests across Russia. Police arrested thousands of demonstrators. Authorities have transferred the opposition leader to a penal colony to begin serving a sentence, after what rights groups said was a show trial.

Long a target in Russian government attempts to shut down dissent, Navalny has repeatedly appealed to the West to start targeting the most powerful business and financial oligarchs of his country, saying only then would Russian leaders take international sanctions seriously.

Russia critic Bill Browder, a London-based investor, tweeted that he feared the new U.S. sanctions would be "way too little and not touch Putin's billionaire cronies."

Rep. Adam Schiff, a California Democrat and chair of the House Intelligence Committee, called the U.S. move overdue.

Working with U.S. allies, "we must use an array of tools, including sanctions, to meaningfully deter, repel, and punish Moscow's transgressions," Schiff said in a statement.

The U.S. government has previously censured behavior by Russia that American officials saw as having violated international norms.

In 2016, for instance, the Obama administration responded to interference by the Kremlin in the presidential election by expelling dozens of Russian diplomats who officials said were actually spies and by shuttering two Russian compounds in Maryland and New York.

Trump's administration also took a handful of actions adverse to Moscow, including the closure of Russian consulates on the West Coast and the suspension of a nuclear arms treaty.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker in Washington, Aamer Madhani in Chicago, Lorne Cook in Brussels and Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow contributed to this report.

FBI chief warns violent 'domestic terrorism' growing in US

By ERIC TUCKER and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — FBI Director Christopher Wray bluntly labeled the January riot at the U.S. Capitol as "domestic terrorism" Tuesday and warned of a rapidly growing threat of homegrown violent extremism that law enforcement is scrambling to confront through thousands of investigations.

Wray also defended to lawmakers his own agency's handling of an intelligence report that warned of the prospect for violence on Jan. 6. And he firmly rejected false claims advanced by some Republicans that anti-Trump groups had organized the deadly riot that began when a violent mob stormed the building as

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 66 of 96

Congress was gathering to certify results of the presidential election.

Wray's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, his first before Congress since the insurrection, was one in a series of hearings centered on the law enforcement response to the Capitol insurrection. Lawmakers pressed him not only about possible intelligence and communication failures ahead of the riot but also about the threat of violence from white supremacists, militias and other extremists that the FBI says it is prioritizing with the same urgency as the menace of international terrorism organizations.

"Jan. 6 was not an isolated event. The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and it's not going away anytime soon," Wray told lawmakers. "At the FBI, we've been sounding the alarm on it for a number of years now."

The violence at the Capitol made clear that a law enforcement agency that remade itself after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to deal with international terrorism is now laboring to address homegrown violence by white Americans. President Joe Biden's administration has tasked his national intelligence director to work with the FBI and Department of Homeland Security to assess the threat. And in applying the domestic terrorism label to conduct inside the Capitol, Wray sought to make clear to senators that he was clear-eyed about the scope and urgency of the problem.

In quantifying the scale of the FBI's work, Wray said the number of domestic terrorism investigations has increased from around 1,000 when he became director in 2017 to roughly 1,400 at the end of last year to about 2,000 now. The number of arrests of white supremacists and other racially motivated extremists has almost tripled, he said.

Many of the senators' questions Tuesday centered on the FBI's handling of a Jan. 5 report from its Norfolk, Virginia, field office that warned of online posts foreshadowing a "war" in Washington the following day. Capitol Police leaders have said they were unaware of the report at the time, and the former chief of the department has said he received no intelligence from the FBI that would have led him to anticipate the sort of violence that besieged them on the 6th.

Five people died that day, including a Capitol Police officer and a woman who was shot as she tried to climb through a smashed window into the House chamber with lawmakers still inside.

Wray said the report was disseminated through the FBI's joint terrorism task force, discussed at a command post in Washington and posted on an internet portal available to other law enforcement agencies.

Though the information was raw, unverified and appeared aspirational in nature, Wray said, it was specific and concerning enough that "the smartest thing to do, the most prudent thing to do, was just push it to the people who needed to get it."

"We did communicate that information in a timely fashion to the Capitol Police and (Metropolitan Police Department) in not one, not two, but three different ways," Wray said, though he added that since the violence that ensued was "not an acceptable result," the FBI was looking into what it could have done differently.

He said he was "reluctant to armchair quarterback anyone else in their jobs," but the FBI was determined to prevent a repeat of Jan. 6.

"We find it personally infuriating any time we are not able, as I said, to bat 1,000. And we're going to keep working to get better," he said.

The sprawling Justice Department investigation into the riot has already produced hundreds of charges, including against members of militia groups and far-right organizations. The crowd in Washington that day ranged from protesters who did not break any laws to a smaller group that arrived determined to commit violence against police and disrupt Congress from its duties, Wray said.

"Some of those people clearly came to Washington, we now know, with the plans and intentions to engage in the worst kind of violence we would consider domestic terrorism," he said.

Asked whether there was evidence that the attack was planned or carried out by antifa — an umbrella term for leftist militants — or by Trump opponents posing as his loyalists, Wray said that there was not. Some on the right have made such false contentions.

Even as the FBI prioritizes its efforts to counter domestic violent extremism, there are challenges con-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 67 of 96

fronting law enforcement, including in separating mere chatter from actual threats and in First Amendment protections that give ample leeway to espouse racist or otherwise abhorrent viewpoints.

"The amount of angry, hateful, unspeakable, combative, violent even, rhetoric on social media exceeds what anybody in their worst imagination (thinks) is out there," Wray said.

Wray has kept a notably low profile since the Capitol attack. Though he has briefed lawmakers privately and shared information with local law enforcement, Tuesday's oversight hearing marked his first public appearance before Congress since before November's presidential election.

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

Cuomo avoids public amid outcry over harassment allegations

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has avoided public appearances for days as some members of his own party call for him to resign over sexual harassment allegations.

The governor hasn't taken questions from reporters since a Feb. 19 briefing, an unusually long gap for a Democrat whose daily, televised updates on the coronavirus pandemic were must-see TV last spring.

He was last before video cameras Thursday, when he introduced President Joe Biden at a virtual meeting of the National Governor's Association, which he chairs. He also participated Tuesday in the group's conference call, which was off-limits to reporters.

The public absence was more glaring after legislative leaders announced Tuesday they were limiting the governor's broad powers to unilaterally set state policy during the pandemic.

The governor is also facing criticism for withholding, for months, a full accounting of the number of nursing home residents who died of COVID-19.

Under the bill, Cuomo would still have the power to keep alive his existing COVID-19 rules or tweak them. But he'll no longer be allowed to make decisions without any input from the Legislature. He'll have to notify legislative committees and local governments and respond to their questions in certain circumstances.

Neither Cuomo nor his spokespeople have commented on the latest allegation made against him Monday night. A woman told The New York Times that Cuomo touched her lower back, then grabbed her cheeks and asked to kiss her at a September 2019 wedding.

Most leading Democrats have signaled they want to wait for the results of an investigation by New York Attorney General Letitia James into claims that Cuomo sexually harassed at least two women in his administration.

State Democratic Party chair Jay Jacobs, a close Cuomo ally, said it's "premature" to opine before the investigation concludes.

Several members of the National Governors Association said they support the investigation, but didn't say whether they think he should resign as chair. Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, the association's vice chair, called the allegations against Cuomo "very serious" but said it's up to Democratic governors to decide who will chair the NGA.

"I'm glad there's an independent investigation that's ongoing, and I think we should all wait until the results of that independent investigation and see where that conclusion leads everyone," the Republican governor told reporters.

That inquiry has yet to begin. James said her office is working to hire an outside law firm to conduct it.

U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries said New York's congressional delegation in Washington has not met on the issue but "everyone is monitoring the situation closely."

"Well these are very serious allegations and they require a very serious investigation," Jeffries told reporters Tuesday. "I'm confident that Attorney General Tish James will get to the bottom of everything, release a report that's fully transparent and then we can decide the best way to proceed thereafter."

As of midday Tuesday, at least one Democratic Congress member from Long Island — U.S. Rep. Kathleen Rice — four state senators, several left-leaning Assembly members and the leaders of the progressive

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 68 of 96

Working Families Party said they have already heard enough and that Cuomo should resign. Some suggested he be impeached.

The leaders of the state Assembly and Senate, both controlled by Democrats, hope to vote as early as Friday on the deal to tweak Cuomo's executive powers, which lawmakers granted him last spring.

"I think everyone understands where we were back in March and where we are now," Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins said, describing the deal as creating "a system with increased input."

Republicans who have long tried to remove Cuomo's powers called the proposed legislation a "bogus backroom deal" that lacks teeth. Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt said the nursing home revelations call the governor's leadership into question.

Both the legislature's top leaders, Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, have said they support the attorney general's investigation of Cuomo's workplace conduct.

One former aide, Charlotte Bennett, 25, said Cuomo quizzed her about her sex life and asked whether she would be open to a relationship with an older man. Bennett rejected Cuomo's attempted apology, in which he said he'd been trying to be "playful" and that his jokes had been misinterpreted as flirting.

Another former aide, Lindsey Boylan, said Cuomo commented on her appearance inappropriately, kissed her without her consent at the end of a meeting, and once suggested they play strip poker while aboard his state-owned jet. Cuomo has denied Boylan's allegations.

The woman who spoke to The New York Times about Cuomo's conduct at the wedding, Anna Ruch, hasn't responded to request for comment from The Associated Press.

Ruch told the newspaper that when she removed Cuomo's hand from her back, he called her "aggressive," placed his hands on her cheeks and asked if he could kiss her. Cuomo then planted a kiss on her cheek as she turned away.

A photograph taken by a friend captured a look of discomfort on Ruch's face as the governor held her face.

"I felt so uncomfortable and embarrassed when really he is the one who should have been embarrassed," Ruch told newspaper.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who has had a contentious relationship with Cuomo for years, said Tuesday that if all the allegations against Cuomo are true, "he cannot govern."

"He would not be able to govern, it's as simple as that," the Democrat said.

Asked by a reporter whether Cuomo should resume holding in-person events, de Blasio said, "I think all leaders have to answer tough questions from the media, regardless of whether it's convenient."

AP writers Andrew DeMillo in Little Rock, Arkansas, David Eggert in Lansing, Michigan, and Susan Montoya Bryan in Albuquerque, New Mexico contributed reporting.

Pentagon report cites threat of extremism in military

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Domestic extremist groups pose a serious threat to the military by seeking to recruit service members into their ranks and, in some cases, joining the military to acquire combat experience, according to a Pentagon report released Tuesday.

The report, prepared last year at the request of Congress, did not assess whether the problem of extremism in the military is growing, but it cited a number of examples of service members with extremist affiliations. It said the number of current and former military members who ascribe to white supremacist ideology is unknown.

"Military members are highly prized by these groups as they bring legitimacy to their causes and enhance their ability to carry out attacks," the report said. "In addition to potential violence, white supremacy and white nationalism pose a threat to the good order and discipline within the military."

For example, the report noted that a Marine was discharged in 2018 for having ties to a neo-Nazi group called Atomwaffen Division, and it said the group's co-founder served in the Army National Guard in Florida.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 69 of 96

Another Marine was determined to be the founder of a different white supremacist group, called AIM, which stands for American Identity Movement. The group spread propaganda through an operation it called "Project Siege" and as of March 2019 had about 500 members. The group's founder was a former Marine sergeant and a former leader was an Army veteran. Several other members of the military and the Reserves were identified as being associated with the group, and the report noted that some were either demoted or discharged.

The report described a social media post, reported by a service member, who claimed to "see plenty of our kind" in combat arms. The message recommended ways to identify fellow group members, saying "simply wear a shirt with some obscure fascist logo."

The military has long been aware of small numbers of white supremacists and other extremists in its ranks, but the problem burst into public awareness after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, where an outsized number of military veterans and some current military members were present. It quickly fell to a new Pentagon chief, Lloyd Austin, to determine the scale of the problem and try to fix it.

On Feb. 5, Austin directed all commanders and supervisors at every level of the military to conduct a one-day "stand down" — a pause in normal business — by early April to discuss extremism in the ranks.

At his first Pentagon news conference two weeks later, Austin said extremism is a threat to the bonds of trust between service members, who count on cohesion to make them effective on the battlefield.

"I really and truly believe that 99.9 percent of our service men and women believe in" the oath they swear when entering the military, Austin said, adding that the actual number of extremists in the military is unknown.

"I expect for the numbers to be small, but quite frankly, they'll probably be a little bit larger than most of us would guess," he said. "But I would just say that, you know, small numbers in this case can have an outsized impact."

Austin often mentions that he has personally witnessed the damage that racism and extremism can inflict. In 1995, when then-Lt. Col. Austin was serving with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, three white soldiers described as self-styled skinheads were arrested in the murder of a Black couple who were walking down the street. Investigators concluded the two were targeted because of their race. The killing triggered an internal investigation, and all told, 22 soldiers were linked to skinhead and other similar groups or found to hold extremist views.

33 years later, Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall return to Zamunda

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When Eddie Murphy made the original "Coming to America," he was, almost indisputably, the funniest man in America.

Murphy was at the very height of his fame, coming off "Beverly Hills Cop II" and the stand-up special "Raw." They were heady times. Arsenio Hall, Murphy's longtime friend and co-star in "Coming to America," remembers them sneaking out during the shoot to a Hollywood nightclub while still dressed as Prince Akeem and his loyal aide Semmi. "We were insane," says Hall.

The '80s, Murphy says, are "all a blur."

"I was so young, all this stuff was happening. You take everything for granted when you're young, how successful I was," Murphy says, speaking by Zoom with a shelf of award statuettes behind him. "Now I take nothing for granted and appreciate everything."

Thirty-three years after "Coming to America," Murphy and Hall have returned to Zamunda. The sequel, originally planned to hit theaters last year, was sold due of the pandemic by Paramount Pictures to Amazon, where it will begin streaming Friday.

It's an unlikely coda to a blockbuster comedy, one that belongs so completely to the late '80s that even the sequel tries to keep some of that era's spirit. (A few notable R&B and hip-hop groups make cameos.) "Coming 2 America," directed by Craig Brewer, reverses the fish-out-water plot to bring Queens to Zamunda after Akeem learns he fathered a son (Jermaine Fowler) on his first visit to New York.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 70 of 96

Some elements have been updated. There's a plot of female empowerment; KiKi Layne plays Akeem's daughter. At the barbershop, where Murphy and Hall also reprise their characters, the conversation bounces from Teslas to transgender people.

"We had a draft where they had on MAGA hats and they were Republicans," says Murphy. "It was funny but it was like, eh, let's not even go there."

Instead, Murphy and his collaborators — including writers Barry W. Blaustein, David Sheffield and Kenya Barris — felt the core appeal of "Coming to America" lies in its fairy tale premise.

"This is the only movie I've ever done that had a cult following," says Murphy. "We had totally forgot about 'Coming to America.' Then this movie took on this life in the culture. It became like a cult movie. Lines from the movie became catchphrases. People do the mic drop now. The very first mic drop is Randy Watson from 'Coming to America.'"

"Coming to America" has indeed played a unique role in culture since 1988. Real-life McDowell's fast-food restaurants — the McDonald's knockoff from the movie — have briefly popped up in Los Angeles and Chicago. Beyoncé and Jay-Z once dressed up as characters from the film for Halloween.

But the John Landis-directed movie was also a massive success on release. It was the second-highest grossing film domestically in 1988 with \$128.2 million in tickets sold — nearly double what "Die Hard" made that year. Globally, it grossed \$288.8 million, or more than \$630 million adjusted for inflation.

To Murphy, that's the movie's legacy.

"'Coming to America' is the first movie in the history of the movies that had an all-Black cast that traveled all around the world," says Murphy. "They don't give a s--- about Selma and Martin Luther King and civil injustice, whatever our story is in America. They don't give a s--- about that around the world."

"It's not about being Black. It's about love and family and tradition and doing the right thing," Murphy adds. "If 'Black Panther' was about the hood, people wouldn't have seen 'Black Panther' all around the world."

The connections between "Coming to America" and "Black Panther" — both rare depictions of Black royalty and a mythic Africa — are many. Before making "Black Panther," Murphy has said Ryan Coogler approached him about a "Coming to America" sequel. During production on "Black Panther," Lupita Nyong'o (once not a fan of "Coming to America" for its cliched depiction of Africans) and other cast members threw a "Coming to America" birthday party. Ruth E. Carter designed the costumes of both "Black Panther" and "Coming 2 America." Both were shot in Atlanta.

"I've had people say, 'Now Zamunda isn't a real place, right?'" says Brewer. "And I say, 'No, it's definitely a real place. I believe it's just northeast of Wakanda.'"

The script for "Coming 2 America" was worked on for four years but shooting started quickly. Murphy first suggested Brewer direct "Coming 2 America" during a dinner with John Singleton after a test screening of "My Name Is Dolemite," the Rudy Ray Moore biopic that helped spur a revival for the 59-year-old Murphy.

"'Coming to America' was one of my favorite movies as a teenager," says Brewer, speaking from his home in Memphis, Tenn. "I couldn't help but just say 'Yes!' immediately. Then it became clear to me that this is going to go, like, now."

"Coming 2 America" also rekindles the great comedic chemistry between Murphy and Hall. Murphy estimates the close friends have seen each other two or three times a week for 40 years. But they went decades before talking about a sequel.

"All of a sudden I'm reading this script that I love and I realize this movie that we thought we never were going to do a sequel to, we're about to head to Atlanta — which is America's Africa," says Hall.

The shoot took place on the Tyler Perry Studio sound stages, with Rick Ross' nearby mansion serving as the Zamunda palace. The movie reunites most of the original cast — including James Earl Jones, John Amos and Shari Headley — and brings in many others, too, including Wesley Snipes, Leslie Jones and Tracy Morgan. Hall, who had been doing stand-up with Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle, sensed everyone wanted in.

"One day in the dressing room, Dave is like, 'I heard ya'll are doing 'Coming to America 2.' I said, 'Yeah, man.' He said, 'I want to be in that,'" recalls Hall. (A scheduling conflict interfered and the versatile Hall,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 71 of 96

who has four roles in the movie, ended up playing the witch doctor part Chappelle might have.)

Some things have changed with time. This "Coming to America" is rated PG-13. Murphy was just 27 when he made "Coming to America." Now, he has 10 children and a grandchild. His daughter, Bella, has a small role in the film.

"He joked about it on 'Saturday Night Live,' about him versus Cosby and who's America's favorite dad now. But there's something to that," says Brewer. "If you're ever around Eddie and his kids — and now his grandchild — you see that he's truly a man who loves his family and does not need the public's constant validation and appreciation to know who he is."

Family life figures prominently in Murphy's newer stand-up material. A long-awaited return to performing in 2020 had been his intention before the pandemic hit. Those plans haven't been canceled; when live performance returns, Murphy says, "then we'll do stand-up." Until then, Murphy, a proud homebody, has found himself back where he started.

"I had gotten off the couch to go to work. I said, 'OK, let me get off this couch I've been on for eight years. Let me go do some work,'" Murphy says. "And we were rolling. We did everything we set out to do. The big thing was going back to 'Saturday Night Live.' We was on a high. 'Coming 2 America' was in the can. Then the whole world fell apart."

"I was all ready to go," Murphy says, grinning, "and then I had to go sit back on the couch."

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

'Vaccine, vaccine': Dolly sings 'Jolene' rewrite before shot

By KRISTIN M. HALL AP Entertainment Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Dolly Parton has written hundreds of songs over her decades-long career and it turns out her tune "Jolene" is the just right one for getting her COVID-19 vaccine.

"I even changed one of my songs to fit the occasion. It goes, 'Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, I'm begging of you please don't hesitate,'" the actor, singer and humanitarian sang in a social media post on Tuesday, just before receiving her shot.

The Grammy-winning legend turned 75 this year. In 2020, she donated \$1 million to Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee, for coronavirus research.

Parton had earlier told The Associated Press that she was going to wait until it became more widely available because she didn't want to look like she was jumping the line.

Parton wore a purple shirt with shoulder cutouts just for the occasion and a matching purple mask. She put on a typical show, laughing, cracking jokes with the doctor and making sure her hair was looking good.

"That didn't hurt. Just stung a little bit," she said afterward. Then she smiled at the camera saying, "I did it! I did it!"

As virus-era attacks on Asians rise, past victims look back

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

Nearly a year after they were almost stabbed to death inside a Midland, Texas, Sam's Club, Bawi Cung and his two sons all have visible scars.

It's the unseen ones though that are harder to get over. Cung can't walk through any store without constantly looking in all directions. His 6-year-old son, who now can't move one eyebrow, is afraid to sleep alone.

On a Saturday evening in March, when COVID-19 panic shopping gripped the nation, Cung was in search of rice at a cheaper price. The family was in the Sam's Club meat section when Cung suddenly felt a punch to the back of his head. A man he didn't know then slashed his face with a knife. The assailant left but soon returned to stab the boys. He wounded the 3-year-old in the back and slashed the 6-year-old from his right eye to a couple of inches past his right ear.

The grisly encounter brought home the dangerous climate Asian Americans have faced since the coro-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 72 of 96

navirus entered the U.S., with racially motivated harassment and assaults occurring from coast to coast.

Now, just over a year and thousands of incidents later, some of the early victims find moving forward has been difficult or, at best, bittersweet. A recent wave of attacks on elderly Asian Americans — including the death of an 84-year-old San Francisco man — has fueled worries that hostilities have only worsened.

In Cung's case, the man responsible for the attack believed the Myanmar man and his children were Chinese and spreading the virus, according to the FBI.

Cung said he's not sure what would have happened had a Sam's Club employee, Zach Owen, not intervened.

"Maybe I might kill him. Maybe he might kill all of my family. I don't know," Cung said. "God protected my family, God sent Zach to protect my family right there at the right time."

Owen, who was stabbed in the leg and deeply cut in his right palm, and an off-duty Border Patrol agent detained the suspect, Jose Gomez, 19.

Verbal attacks have also made a lasting mark.

In April, a confrontation in a Richmond, California, park left an irrevocable impact not just on Kelly Yang, 36, but her children. She was forced to discuss anti-Asian racism with her son, 10, and daughter, 7 — a talk she didn't think would happen for a few more years. An elderly white couple, upset over her unleashed dog, called Yang, who is Chinese American, an "Oriental" and said the words many Asian Americans dread: "Go back where you came from."

Her children thought the couple meant for them to go home. Torn, Yang eventually explained they meant "for us to go back to Asia."

"It means that we're not welcome here."

Her son burst into tears.

Yang believes the couple felt emboldened by then-President Donald Trump's use of racially charged terms like "Chinese virus." She applauded President Joe Biden's recent executive order condemning anti-Asian xenophobia as a good start. But Yang is afraid a lot of non-Asians have already shrugged off the issue as though it ceased when Trump's presidency did.

"I don't know what can be done," said Yang, who writes young adult novels and plans to weave her experience into her next book. "But I do know talking about it, acknowledging it, remembering — that's what we do with wars — we have to remember what happened."

Douglas Kim, 42, chef and owner of Jeju Noodle Bar in New York City, is certain COVID-19-fueled racism was behind the April vandalizing of his Michelin-starred, Korean restaurant. Someone used a Sharpie to scrawl on the winter vestibule "Stop eating dogs," referring to a stereotype about Asian cuisines. Ultimately, Kim decided not to report it.

"At the time it pissed me off, but I have more important things to worry about," Kim said. "Maintaining a business is more important."

He shared a picture of the graffiti on Instagram to call attention to hate crimes. There was a groundswell of support, but he feels like much of it has faded.

Yet, Kim is hopeful fewer people are stereotyping Asian Americans as foreigners who don't belong in the U.S.

"I think it's all about education," Kim said. "If you raise your children that way, they're gonna learn that way. I think things are changing but it's not 100% yet. That's why somebody obviously wrote that on our door."

More than 3,000 incidents have been reported to Stop AAPI Hate, a California-based reporting center for Asian American Pacific Islanders, and its partner advocacy groups, since mid-March 2020. What's frustrating is that the encounters don't often rise to the legal definition of a hate crime. Still, police in several major cities saw a sharp uptick in Asian-targeted hate crimes between 2019 and 2020, according to data collected by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, California State University, San Bernardino. New York City went from three incidents to 27, Los Angeles from seven to 15, and Denver had three incidents in 2020 — the first reported there in six years.

A rash of crimes victimizing elderly Asian Americans in the past two months has renewed outcry for

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 73 of 96

more attention from politicians and the media. On Wednesday, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed off on legislation allocating \$1.4 million to Stop AAPI Hate and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. The funding will go toward community resources and further tracking of anti-Asian hate incidents.

Local officials and citizens have also taken notice. Initiatives like increased police presence, volunteer patrols and special crime hotlines are coming to fruition. Big-name brands like the Golden State Warriors and Apple, based in the Bay Area, have promised to donate to the cause.

Cynthia Choi, of Stop AAPI Hate, wishes news cycles would focus not just on the latest crimes but the solutions being discussed. Policing and prosecution aren't necessarily the answers, she said. COVID-19 vitriol is rooted in more than a century of anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant attitudes. She and other advocates think more investment in education and community resources could help get at those root causes. Anti-Asian xenophobia should be part of the ongoing conversations on racial reckoning, Choi added.

"Our work to address anti-Asian racism is inextricably tied to fighting anti-Black racism," Choi said. "That's gonna take all of us, it's gonna take public education efforts, it's gonna take racial solidarity efforts that really bring our communities together."

Before immigrating to the U.S. six years ago, Cung, the Texas hate crime survivor, had never encountered racism. Now, it's difficult for him to hear stories about anti-Asian American violence. Initially after the attack, Cung wrestled with how Gomez tried to kill him simply because of how he looked. Now, he prays for his attacker.

As for what should happen to Gomez, who remains jailed on three counts of attempted capital murder, Cung said that's up to the courts.

"I can forgive him, but we cannot accept racism or that kind of terrorist attack," said Cung, who received more than \$20,000 in online donations.

One thing he is looking ahead to — life as a newly naturalized U.S. citizen in a country where "they respect people." Cung remains unbothered that he may not fit some people's idea of what America looks like.

"Maybe personally they have racism," Cung said. "I don't care. I'm proud of being Asian and Asian American."

Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>

Abortion concerns prompt archdiocese warning on vaccine

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Roman Catholic leaders in St. Louis and New Orleans are advising Catholics that the COVID-19 vaccine from Johnson & Johnson, newly approved for use in the U.S., is "morally compromised" because it is produced using a cell line derived from an aborted fetus.

The New Orleans archdiocese says the decision to receive a vaccine is one of individual conscience. In its statement late last week, it stopped short of advising Catholics not to take the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, but adds that Catholics should choose coronavirus vaccines made by Moderna or Pfizer — if they are available.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis on Tuesday encouraged Catholics to seek out the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines and avoid the Johnson & Johnson version if possible. Like the New Orleans archdiocese statement, the St. Louis statement called the Johnson & Johnson vaccine "morally compromised." However, the St. Louis statement stressed that Catholics can get that vaccine "in good conscience if no other alternative is available."

Later Tuesday, a statement issued by chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees on doctrine and abortion issues issued a statement reiterating the moral concerns. It said the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are preferable "if one has the ability to choose a vaccine."

While not disputing the church officials' contention that an abortion-derived cell line is used in the production, Johnson & Johnson issued a statement Tuesday stressing that there is no fetal tissue in its vaccine.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 74 of 96

Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine is made using a harmless cold virus, called an adenovirus, the same technology it used to produce a successful Ebola vaccine. The adenovirus is grown using what's called an immortalized cell line, and the virus then is pulled out and purified.

Several types of cell lines created decades ago using fetal tissue exist and are widely used in medical manufacturing but the cells in them today are clones of the early cells, not the original tissue.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a January statement that "abortion-derived" cell lines were used to test the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines but not in their development or production.

The Archdiocese statements renewed religious discussions about the vaccine and the use of abortion-derived cells. In December, the Vatican said that "it is morally acceptable to receive COVID-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses" in the research and production process when "ethically irreproachable" vaccines aren't available to the public.

Pope Francis has frequently spoken about the need to ensure that vaccines are widely available, especially to the poor and marginalized. And, last month, a decree signed by the governor of the Vatican city-state said that Vatican employees who opt out of vaccination without a proven medical reason could be subject to sanctions, including being fired.

The Archdiocese of New Orleans posted its statement Friday, the day before the Food and Drug Administration cleared the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for use in the U.S.

Asked Tuesday about the New Orleans Archdiocese statement, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards — a rare anti-abortion Democrat — stressed the need for people to use any of the approved vaccines available in order to stop the spread of the virus.

Edwards said he spoke Sunday with Archbishop Gregory Aymond about the statement. "I don't read his statement as completely telling people who are Catholic or otherwise not to avail themselves of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine," said Edwards.

"I'm encouraging everyone out there to take the first vaccine that is available to them."

He noted a statement issued Monday by Bishop Michael Duca of Baton Rouge.

Duca acknowledged "moral concerns" about the newly approved vaccine. But, he added "if for any reasonable circumstance you are only able to receive the vaccine from Johnson & Johnson, you should feel free to do so for your safety and for the common good."

That is similar to guidance the U.S. bishops' conference issued in January. "Given that the COVID-19 virus can involve serious health risks, it can be morally acceptable to receive a vaccine that uses abortion-derived cell lines if no other available vaccines comparable in safety and efficacy with no connection to abortion," the January guidance said.

Associated Press reporters Luis Henao in New York, Jim Salter in St. Louis, Luran Neergaard in Alexandria, Virginia, and Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, contributed to this story.

Pandemic Golden Globes ratings plunge 64% to 6.9M viewers

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The pandemic-era Golden Globes sunk to 6.9 million viewers, down a whopping 64% from 2020 and only barely beating the year when a writer's strike forced NBC to show a news conference announcing the winners.

Last year's show, in the pre-lockdown era, reached 18.4 million viewers, the Nielsen company said.

Big winners in Sunday's ceremony were the films "Nomadland" and "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" and the television programs "The Crown" and "The Queen's Gambit."

The writer's strike curtailed the Globes in 2008 and only 6 million people watched the news conference. Otherwise, this year's show had by far the smallest audience since NBC began telecasting the awards in 1996.

NBC anticipated a ratings bloodbath, the only question was how much. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler co-hosted, but on separate coasts: Poehler in the show's traditional home of the Beverly Hilton and Fey in

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 75 of 96

New York's Rainbow Room.

For a country sick of Zoom meetings, most of the nominees appeared remotely and there was no red carpet. Some stars dressed for the occasion, others didn't bother. "Ted Lasso" star Jason Sudeikis wore a sweatshirt for his acceptance speech.

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which runs the Golden Globes, was reeling from an investigation by The Los Angeles Times that revealed ethical lapses and the news that the organization had no Black members who voted on winners.

Nominated films also suffered from a severe lack of buzz, in large part because theaters were largely closed. Since film buffs had to navigate a soup of streaming services to keep up with what was going on, there was no runaway success to entice viewers.

The shuddering sound you hear at the ratings news is coming from ABC and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which puts on the Oscars. The Academy Awards in 2020 reached a record low 23.6 million viewers, and that was also pre-lockdown.

The Oscars will be held on April 25, giving organizers hope that with more people vaccinated against COVID, it might have more in-person elements.

CBS was the most-watched network in prime time last week, averaging 4.5 million viewers. ABC had 3.9 million, NBC had 3.4 million, Fox had 2.3 million, Univision had 1.4 million, Ion Television had 1.2 million and Telemundo had 1 million.

Fox News Channel topped the cable networks, averaging 2.46 million viewers in prime time. MSNBC had 1.9 million, CNN had 1.28 million, HGTV had 1.11 million and ESPN had 1.07 million.

By far the most-watched cable program last week was Fox News' coverage of former President Donald Trump's speech at CPAC, with 5.74 million viewers.

Other cable news networks had superlatives: MSNBC came in first in all-day ratings for the first time in its history in February, and CNN had its best February ratings ever.

ABC's "World News Tonight" won the evening news ratings race, averaging 9.5 million viewers last week. NBC's "Nightly News" had 7.6 million and the "CBS Evening News" had 5.8 million.

For the week of Feb. 22-28, the top 20 prime time programs, their networks and viewerships:

1. "60 Minutes," CBS, 8.13 million.
2. "Young Sheldon," CBS, 7.87 million.
3. "The Equalizer," CBS, 7.78 million.
4. "Golden Globe Awards," NBC, 6.91 million.
5. "911," Fox, 6.74 million.
6. "American Idol," ABC, 6.61 million.
7. "Celebrity Wheel of Fortune," ABC, 5.933 million.
8. "The Neighborhood," CBS, 5.928 million.
9. "America's Funniest Home Videos, 5.84 million.
10. "NCIS: Los Angeles, 5.83 million.
11. "Bob Hearts Abishola, CBS, 5.56 million.
12. "NCIS," CBS, 5.47 million.
13. "The Bachelor," ABC, 5.45 million.
14. "911: Lone Star," Fox, 5.37 million.
15. "B Positive," CBS, 5.19 million.
16. "Mom," CBS, 5.18 million.
17. "Bull," CBS, 5.112 million.
18. "This is Us," NBC, 5.11 million.
19. "FBI," CBS, 5.04 million.
20. "NCIS: New Orleans," CBS, 5.03 million.

Critics: Cuomo apology 'tone-deaf,' ignores power imbalance

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 76 of 96

By MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

When Yuh-Line Niou first arrived in Albany to work as a legislative aide in 2013, lawmakers grabbed her buttocks, suggested she and her boss were "a hot duo" who should have sex, and peered into her office to check her out for a "hot or not" list.

Niou, then a chief of staff in her late 20s, never reported it. She feared it would unfairly drag down her boss. But the experiences stayed with her.

She bristled Monday at the response from Gov. Andrew Cuomo to allegations he sexually harassed two young women in state government, remarks some on social media called a "faux-pology" that blames victims for misinterpreting his "good-natured" jokes.

"When is it a joke to say 'Do you have sex with older men?'" said Niou, now 37, who became a member of the New York Assembly herself in 2017 and represents lower Manhattan. "I felt like it was very much gaslighting instead of an apology, and I think a lot of women read it that way."

Cuomo, a fellow Democrat, has not been seen in public since new details of the sexual harassment complaints became public last week.

One former administration employee, Lindsey Boylan, said Cuomo kissed her on the lips, commented on her appearance and summoned her to an unnecessary private meeting in his office after a holiday party.

Another former employee, 25-year-old Charlotte Bennett, said Cuomo questioned her about her sex life, talked about being lonely and asked if she would be open to a sexual relationship with an older man.

And late Monday, a third woman, Anna Ruch, said in New York Times story that Cuomo touched her back and face without consent and asked to kiss her in the middle of a 2019 wedding reception, moments after they met.

Bennett criticized Cuomo's statement in one of her own Monday, saying the 63-year-old governor has "refused to acknowledge or take responsibility for his predatory behavior."

Cuomo's office did not respond to a request for comment Monday. He denied Boylan's allegations in his statement and said that in Bennett's case, he had intended to act like a mentor.

"I have teased people about their personal lives, their relationships, about getting married or not getting married. I mean no offense and only attempt to add some levity and banter to what is a very serious business," the three-term governor said in the statement issued Sunday.

"I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended. I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation," he continued. "To the extent anyone felt that way, I am truly sorry."

Northwestern University law professor Deborah Tuerkheimer, who teaches law and gender issues, said Cuomo in his statement ignored the crucial power imbalance at play.

"The notion that his behavior was simply unwanted 'flirtation' that may have caused 'offense' entirely ignores a workplace hierarchy in which he — the governor of the state — was positioned at the very top," Tuerkheimer said.

"It's about the environment. The allegations described an environment that made both of these women feel degraded ... as objects, rather than the competent workers they were," she said.

The allegations against Cuomo emerged almost exactly a year after the high-profile sexual assault trial in New York of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein ended in a conviction, and more than three years after the #MeToo movement took hold.

And it follows sex scandals that helped derail the careers of his two predecessors. Eliot Spitzer resigned in 2008 after patronizing a prostitution service, and David Paterson ended his reelection bid in 2010 after acknowledging extramarital affairs.

Bennett complained to her bosses and to Cuomo's legal counsel last spring about what she deemed the governor's sexual advances and was transferred to a new position before leaving public employment in November.

By Monday, she had retained employment discrimination lawyer Debra Katz, who represented Christine

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 77 of 96

Blasey Ford in her sexual assault accusation against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Katz called Cuomo "tone-deaf" and questioned whether a governor who asks "invasive, inappropriate questions about a subordinate employee, almost 40 years his junior," is fit for office.

"If he says 'Yeah, this is how I talk to people,' then other women were subjected to this," she said.

Niou believes that sexual harassment in state government remains pervasive, but said it's at least being discussed more openly as more women take office. She took part in a statehouse hearing on the issue in 2017 that led to reforms, but she said the new laws are not yet comprehensive enough.

"That's why these stories were so striking and could be so relatable, because how many times have women had to have complete career changes, had their entire lives altered," she said, pausing for a heavy sigh, "when a man has exercised power in that way?"

"It happens to so many women."

— This story has been updated to correct the age of Yuh-Line Niou. She is 37, not 38.

— Maryclaire Dale reported from Philadelphia. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Maryclairedale>

CMA Fest canceled for 2nd year in a row due to COVID-19

NASHVILLE, Tennessee (AP) — Country music festival CMA Fest in Nashville, Tennessee, will be canceled for a second year in a row because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Country Music Association announced on Tuesday the decision to cancel the June event, which is one of the oldest country music festivals after starting in 1972 as Fan Fair. It was also canceled last year.

"While we are optimistic with the pace at which COVID-19 vaccines are becoming more widely available, we still face several challenges that prevent us from bringing our many artists, crew members and fans together safely for the full CMA Fest experience we know everyone has come to expect," CMA CEO Sarah Trahern said in a statement.

Trahern explained that the festival takes place at several Nashville venues and couldn't be rescheduled for later in the year. Venues would also have capacity restrictions that would limit attendance. Further, the festival draws many out-of-state and international visitors that would be impacted by travel restrictions.

People who purchased passes for last year and held onto them to use for this year's festival can either retain them for 2022 or opt for a refund at CMAFest.com.

VIRUS TODAY: Merck to produce J&J shot, Dems set to debate

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Tuesday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY:

— Drugmaker Merck & Co. will help produce rival Johnson & Johnson's newly approved coronavirus vaccine to try to expand supply more quickly.

— Democrats are sorting through lingering disagreements over emergency jobless benefits and other issues and preparing to commence Senate debate on a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan.

— A leader of the U.N.-backed project to deploy COVID-19 vaccines to the needy in both rich and poor countries acknowledges the rollout has gone slower than expected in some places because of issues with shipping and approval, but says "ultimately" all doses will be made available.

THE NUMBERS:

CASES: According to data through March 1 from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. dropped from 85,813.9 on Feb. 15 to 67,760.3 on Monday.

DEATHS: According to data through March 1 from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. went from 2,361.9 on Feb. 15 to 2,046.1 on Monday.

POSITIVITY RATE: According to data through March 1 from the COVID Tracking Project, the seven-day

rolling positivity rate for testing in the U.S. went from 5.6 on Feb. 15 to 4.4 on Monday.

VACCINES: 51.7 million people, or 15.6% of the U.S. population, have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, according to the CDC, while 26.1 million people have completed their vaccination, or 7.9% of the population.

QUOTABLE: "It was allowing them to feel like it was OK to admit our sadness in this moment." — Artist Kristina Libby, who started the Floral Heart Project to give the survivors of COVID-19 victims places to mourn.

ON THE HORIZON: The Caribbean is hunting for visitors and vaccines as it seeks to jump-start the stalled economy of one of the world's most tourism-dependent regions. Clear waters and warm sand had attracted a record 31.5 million tourists to the region in 2019. But visits plummeted by an estimated 60% to 80% last year. Local governments are turning to India and China for vaccines to make it safe to welcome back tourists without prompting a spike in COVID-19 cases that could overwhelm their fragile health care systems.

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Conservative group pushes proposals to tighten voting laws

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

As Donald Trump made false allegations about voting fraud and tried to overturn the will of the people in last year's election, one of his chief allies was conspicuously silent. The Honest Elections Project, a leading advocate for more restrictive voting laws, stayed away from Trump's doomed effort.

But now the group founded by conservative activist and informal Trump adviser Leonard Leo, is re-joining the debate with a new set of recommendations likely to guide GOP lawmakers as they overhaul voting systems. The suggestions range from ones that are likely to be embraced by Democrats and voting rights groups — allowing election offices to start processing mail ballots weeks before Election Day — to ones likely to spark fierce opposition, such as mandatory voter identification for both mail and in-person voting, and creation of a secure system that would link an absentee ballot to its voter.

The proposals come as the GOP remains divided by Trump's false claims. Republicans are wrestling with how far to go in overhauling voting laws without embracing Trump's conspiracy theories or damaging Republicans' political prospects. Honest Elections' push is essentially an establishment Republican answer to some of those questions.

"There is much more to the election reform push than what happened after the November election," said Jason Snead, the group's executive director.

Snead argued that the proposals are critical to restore what he says is a sliding confidence in the country's voting system.

"A lot of voters on both sides are primed to view the credibility of elections through a partisan lens. They tend to view the validity of an election through its outcomes," Snead said. "We've learned a lot of lessons and we should be doing what we can to tighten up the process."

But Snead made a point to separate his group from the post-election efforts — launched by Trump but embraced by many GOP groups and lawmakers — to reverse the outcome of the presidential vote.

The Honest Elections Project was created in early 2020 to advocate for greater controls on elections. The group has drawn scrutiny in part because of Leo's influence in conservative legal circles. As co-chairman of the Federalist Society, Leo helped spearhead the effort to appoint conservative judges to the federal courts.

The group does not disclose its donors and there will be no public reporting of how it spends its money until later this year, at the earliest.

Last year, Honest Elections was part of the GOP legal strategy to fight voting changes, many of which were aimed at making voting easier during the pandemic. It sued Michigan, forcing the state to clean up its list of registered voters, and blocked a settlement easing absentee voting rules in Minnesota.

But the group, along with some other GOP legal and election policy experts, stayed away from Trump's insistence the election had been stolen from him. Repeated audits and reviews turned up no significant-scale fraud in the election and Trump and his allies lost more than 50 court cases trying to prove it.

"We looked very carefully at all the allegations that were coming out after the election," Snead said. "We concluded, as did a lot of other folks, that there was no evidence of widespread fraud."

The false claim of fraud drove Trump's supporters' assault on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. It's still an animating force for the conservative movement, as shown by last week's Conservative Political Action Conference in Florida, where Trump falsely claimed that illegal immigrants and dead people voted and the crowd chanted "You won!"

It's also driven Republican-controlled states to increase barriers to voting. In Iowa, the legislature has voted to cut absentee and in-person early voting and prevent local elections officials from setting up additional locations to make early voting easier. In Georgia, the House on Monday voted for a law to require identification to vote by mail and allow counties to cancel early in-person voting on Sundays, when many Black voters cast ballots after church.

Snead says his group hasn't weighed in on these proposals because it was busy researching its own recommendations. Among them are ones that would likely find bipartisan support, such as extending the time when election offices can perform the time-consuming work of opening and sorting mail ballots to ready them for election night counting. The failure of key swing states to permit this led to prolonged vote counts that Trump used to falsely claim fraud was occurring.

Other recommendations will find resistance, such as requiring a photo identification to vote by mail or pausing voter registration 30 days before Election Day. Perhaps the most significant recommendation is to create a system enabling election offices to tie a mail ballot back to the envelope in which it was submitted. Trump demanded that election officials do that, but they were unable to do so because it would have violated the secrecy of the ballot.

Snead said that to preserve the principle of a secret ballot, election offices should use data randomization to keep voters' identities anonymous during ballot counting.

Honest Elections is only one of several conservative groups unveiling election recommendations. The Republican State Leadership Committee and Heritage Foundation have also issued suggestions for voting changes. Democrats, meanwhile, are pushing HR1, a congressional bill that would make sweeping changes to the entire electoral system, requiring state to allow mail-in voting, letting people without identification vote if they sign a sworn statement, and permitting citizens to register to vote right up until Election Day.

6 Dr. Seuss books won't be published for racist images

By MARK PRATT Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Six Dr. Seuss books — including "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street" and "If I Ran the Zoo" — will stop being published because of racist and insensitive imagery, the business that preserves and protects the author's legacy said Tuesday.

"These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong," Dr. Seuss Enterprises told The Associated Press in a statement that coincided with the late author and illustrator's birthday.

"Ceasing sales of these books is only part of our commitment and our broader plan to ensure Dr. Seuss Enterprises' catalog represents and supports all communities and families," it said.

The other books affected are "McElligot's Pool," "On Beyond Zebra!," "Scrambled Eggs Super!," and "The Cat's Quizzer."

The decision to cease publication and sales of the books was made last year after months of discussion, the company, which was founded by Seuss' family, told AP.

"Dr. Seuss Enterprises listened and took feedback from our audiences including teachers, academics and specialists in the field as part of our review process. We then worked with a panel of experts, including educators, to review our catalog of titles," it said.

In "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street," an Asian person is portrayed wearing a conical hat,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 80 of 96

holding chopsticks, and eating from a bowl. "If I Ran the Zoo" includes a drawing of two bare-footed African men wearing what appear to be grass skirts with their hair tied above their heads.

Books by Dr. Seuss — born Theodor Seuss Geisel in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 2, 1904 — have been translated into dozens of languages as well as in braille and are sold in more than 100 countries. He died in 1991.

He remains popular, earning an estimated \$33 million before taxes in 2020, up from just \$9.5 million five years ago, the company said. Forbes listed him No. 2 on its highest-paid dead celebrities of 2020, behind only the late pop star Michael Jackson. Within hours of Tuesday's announcement, Dr. Seuss books filled more than half of the top 20 slots on Amazon.com's bestseller list. "Mulberry Street" and "If I Ran the Zoo" were on the list, along with "Oh, the Places You'll Go!", "Green Eggs and Ham" and others still being published.

Random House Children Books, Dr. Seuss' publisher, issued a brief statement Tuesday: "We respect the decision of Dr. Seuss Enterprises (DSE) and the work of the panel that reviewed this content last year, and their recommendation."

Dr. Seuss is adored by millions around the world for the positive values in many of his works, including environmentalism and tolerance, but criticism has grown in recent years over the way Blacks, Asians and others are drawn in some of his most beloved children's books, as well as in his earlier advertising and propaganda illustrations.

The National Education Association, which founded Read Across America Day in 1998 and deliberately aligned it with Geisel's birthday, has for several years deemphasized Seuss and encouraged a more diverse reading list for children.

School districts across the country have also moved away from Dr. Seuss, prompting Loudoun County, Virginia, schools just outside Washington, D.C., to douse rumors last month that they were banning the books entirely.

"Research in recent years has revealed strong racial undertones in many books written/illustrated by Dr. Seuss," the school district said in a statement.

For the country's libraries, what to do with the Seuss books being withdrawn continues a longstanding conflict between the values of free expression and acknowledging that some content may be hurtful. Libraries rarely pull a book even when some find it racist or otherwise offensive, says Deborah Caldwell Stone, who heads the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom. They are more likely to place it in a less prominent location, or otherwise choose not to promote it.

"Shelf space is precious and librarians do periodically cull the book collections and remove some titles. But they usually do so because no one is asking for that book anymore," she said.

In 2018, a Dr. Seuss museum in his hometown of Springfield removed a mural that included an Asian stereotype.

"The Cat in the Hat," one of Seuss' most popular books, has received criticism, too, but will continue to be published for now.

Dr. Seuss Enterprises, however, said it is "committed to listening and learning and will continue to review our entire portfolio."

The move to cease publication of the books drew immediate reaction on social media from those who called it another example of "cancel culture."

"We've now got foundations book burning the authors to whom they are dedicated. Well done, everyone," conservative commentator and author Ben Shapiro tweeted.

Others approved of the decision.

"The books we share with our children matter. Books shape their world view and tell them how to relate to the people, places, and ideas around them. As grown-ups, we have to examine the worldview we are creating for our children, including carefully re-examining our favorites," Rebekah Fitzsimmons, an assistant teaching professor at Carnegie Mellon University, tweeted.

Numerous other popular children's series have been criticized in recent years for alleged racism.

In the 2007 book, "Should We Burn Babar?," the author and educator Herbert R. Kohl contended that the "Babar the Elephant" books were celebrations of colonialism because of how the title character leaves the jungle and later returns to "civilize" his fellow animals.

One of the books, "Babar's Travels," was removed from the shelves of a British library in 2012 because of its alleged stereotypes of Africans. Critics also have faulted the "Curious George" books for their premise of a white man bringing home a monkey from Africa.

And Laura Ingalls Wilder's portrayals of Native Americans in her "Little House On the Prairie" novels have been faulted so often that the American Library Association removed her name in 2018 from a lifetime achievement award it gives out each year. The association still gives out the Geisel Award for "the most distinguished American book for beginning readers published in English in the United States during the preceding year."

AP National Writer Hillel Italie contributed from New York.

75 ex-top prosecutors endorse Biden's pick for associate AG

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 75 former U.S. attorneys are throwing their support behind President Joe Biden's nominee for associate attorney general and urging congressional leaders to quickly confirm her to the post.

Vanita Gupta has been nominated for the No. 3 position in the Justice Department, a position in which she would be responsible for overseeing the department's civil, antitrust and civil rights litigation, but also for helping to implement policy decisions on a host of nationwide issues. She was in charge of the Justice Department's civil rights division in the Obama administration.

The Senate has scheduled the confirmation hearing for Gupta and Lisa Monaco, Biden's nominee for deputy attorney general, for March 9. The Senate Judiciary Committee held a two-day hearing last week and then voted Monday to advance the nomination of Merrick Garland to be attorney general.

"Many of us observed firsthand Ms. Gupta's independence, integrity, and excellent judgment when she served as the head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division," read the letter, signed by a bipartisan group of former top prosecutors. "In that position, she worked hand-in-hand with U.S. Attorney's Offices to protect vulnerable members of our communities by prosecuting those who committed hate crimes, human trafficking, and other violations of our civil rights laws."

The letter further emphasizes the support Gupta has received from law enforcement organizations and prosecutors as the administration seeks to move the Justice Department forward after a tumultuous four years under Donald Trump.

Her nomination has been endorsed by some of the most prominent law enforcement organizations in the nation, including the National Fraternal Order of Police, whose president said she has always been able "to find common ground even when that seemed impossible."

"Although in some instances our disagreements remain, her open and candid approach has created a working relationship that is grounded in mutual respect and understanding," the organization's national president, Patrick Yoes, said in a letter to the leaders of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Last month, a conservative advocacy group, the Judicial Crisis Network, launched an ad campaign against Gupta's nomination, arguing that she was "dangerous" and trying to cast her as soft on crime. Other conservative groups have sought to push a narrative that she is "anti-police" and on Monday, five Republican attorneys general sent a letter to Biden asking him to withdraw her nomination because of what they said were "recent public, adverse statements toward police."

Before her nomination, Gupta was in charge of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition of civil rights organizations.

In the letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and the leaders of the Judiciary Committee -- Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill. and Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, the former prosecu-

tors said they understand how critical it is for the Justice Department's leaders to "have an unshakable commitment to its independence and its integrity."

"We know Ms. Gupta to be a lawyer and public servant who shares those values: she has devoted her professional and personal life to supporting and defending the Constitution and those it protects," the letter said. "The country can count on her to lead with passion, conviction, humility, and without political influence."

Kayleigh McEnany signs on as Fox News contributor

NEW YORK (AP) — As widely anticipated, Fox News said Tuesday that it had signed former White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany as a contributor to offer commentary on various network programs.

McEnany, former President Donald Trump's final press secretary, didn't speak about her new role during an interview with Fox's Harris Faulkner that aired Tuesday.

It was reported in January that McEnany had disclosed to the U.S. Office of Government Ethics while still in office that she would work for Fox after leaving the White House. Fox said at the time that it had been in discussions with McEnany but had paused them.

Before working for Trump, McEnany was a commentator at CNN.

While at the White House, McEnany frequently appeared on Fox News programs for interviews.

She said Tuesday that her biggest regret at the White House was not being able to hold a briefing outlining all the accomplishments of the Trump administration.

"But after Jan. 6, it just was not tenable," she said.

She said that "everyone in the administration was horrified" by the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, led by a mob of Trump supporters, but she insisted that it did not represent the former president's backers.

Asked if she believed Trump bore any responsibility for the riot, she said, "No, I don't."

Trump was impeached by the House on a charge of incitement of insurrection over the insurrection but acquitted by the House. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell voted to acquit Trump, citing the fact that the former president was out of office by the time the Senate trial began, but McConnell said Trump was "practically and morally responsible for provoking" the riot.

Chinese vaccines sweep much of the world, despite concerns

By HUIZHONG WU and KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — The plane laden with vaccines had just rolled to a stop at Santiago's airport in late January, and Chile's president, Sebastián Piñera, was beaming. "Today," he said, "is a day of joy, emotion and hope."

The source of that hope: China — a country that Chile and dozens of other nations are depending on to help rescue them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has been a surprising success: It has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to more than 45 countries, according to a country-by-country tally by The Associated Press. With just four of China's many vaccine makers claiming they are able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year, a large part of the world's population will end up inoculated not with the fancy Western vaccines boasting headline-grabbing efficacy rates, but with China's humble, traditionally made shots.

Amid a dearth of public data on China's vaccines, hesitations over their efficacy and safety are still pervasive in the countries depending on them, along with concerns about what China might want in return for deliveries. Nonetheless, inoculations with Chinese vaccines already have begun in more than 25 countries, and the Chinese shots have been delivered to another 11, according to the AP tally, based on independent reporting in those countries along with government and company announcements.

It's a potential face-saving coup for China, which has been determined to transform itself from an object of mistrust over its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak to a savior. Like India and Russia, China is trying to build goodwill, and has pledged roughly 10 times more vaccines abroad than it has distributed

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 83 of 96

at home.

"We're seeing certainly real-time vaccine diplomacy start to play out, with China in the lead in terms of being able to manufacture vaccines within China and make them available to others," said Krishna Udayakumar, founding director of the Duke Global Health Innovation Center at Duke University. "Some of them donated, some of them sold, and some of them sold with debt financing associated with it."

China has said it is supplying "vaccine aid" to 53 countries and exports to 27, but it rejected a request by the AP for the list. Beijing has also denied vaccine diplomacy, and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said China considered the vaccine a "global public good." Chinese experts reject any connection between the export of its vaccines and the revamping of its image.

"I don't see any linkage there," said Wang Huiyao, president of the Centre for China and Globalization, a Beijing think tank. "China should do more to help other countries, because it's doing well."

China has targeted the low- and middle-income countries largely left behind as rich nations scooped up most of the pricey vaccines produced by the likes of Pfizer and Moderna. And despite a few delays of its own in Brazil and Turkey, China has largely capitalized on slower-than-hoped-for deliveries by U.S. and European vaccine makers.

Like many other countries, Chile received far fewer doses of the Pfizer vaccine than first promised. In the month after its vaccination program began in late December, only around 150,000 of the 10 million Pfizer doses the South American country ordered arrived.

It wasn't until Chinese company Sinovac Biotech Ltd. swooped in with 4 million doses in late January that Chile began inoculating its population of 19 million with impressive speed. The country now has the fifth highest vaccination rate per capita in the world, according to Oxford University.

Chilean Vilma Ortiz got her Sinovac shot at a school in Santiago's Nunoa neighborhood, along with about 60 other people. Although she considers herself "kind of a skeptical person," she said she researched the Chinese vaccines on the Internet and was satisfied.

"I have a lot of faith and confidence in the vaccine," she said.

In Jakarta, the sports stadium was abuzz as masked healthcare workers filed in to receive their Sinovac shot. Wandering the rows of vaccination stations was Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the first person in the Southeast Asian country to get the Chinese shot, 140 million doses of which he has ordered for his people.

Among those at the stadium was Susi Monica, an intern doctor receiving her second dose. Despite questions over its efficacy, getting the shot was worth it to her, particularly because she didn't have any adverse reactions to the first dose.

Besides, she said, "Do I have another choice right now?"

The choices are limited for Indonesia and many other low- and middle-income countries clobbered by COVID. Vaccine deployment globally has been dominated by wealthier countries, which have snapped up 5.8 billion of the 8.2 billion doses purchased worldwide, according to Duke University.

China's vaccines, which can be stored in standard refrigerators, are attractive to countries like Indonesia, a sweltering nation that straddles the equator and could struggle to accommodate the ultracold storage needs of vaccines like Pfizer's.

The bulk of Chinese shots are from Sinovac and Sinopharm, which both rely on a traditional technology called an inactivated virus vaccine, based on cultivating batches of the virus and then killing it. Some countries view it as safer than the newer, less-proven technology used by some Western competitors that targets the coronavirus' spike protein, despite publicly available safety data for the Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines and none for China's.

"The choice was made for this vaccine because it is developed on a traditional and safe inactivated platform," said Teymur Musayev, an official with the Ministry of Health in Azerbaijan, which has ordered 4 million Sinovac doses.

In Europe, China is providing the vaccine to countries such as Serbia and Hungary -- a significant geopolitical victory in Central Europe and the Balkans, where the West, China and Russia are competing for

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 84 of 96

political and economic influence. This stretch of Europe has offered fertile ground for China to strengthen bilateral ties with Serbia and Hungary's populist leaders, who often criticize the EU.

Serbia became the first country in Europe to start inoculating its population with China's vaccines in January. The country has so far purchased 1.5 million doses of Sinopharm's vaccine, which makes up the majority of the country's supply, and smaller amounts of Russia's Sputnik V and Pfizer's vaccines.

Donning heavy coats against the winter chill, masked-up Serbians have been waiting in long lines for their turn to get the vaccine.

"They have been vaccinating their own people for (a) long period, I assume they have more experience," Natasa Stermenski, a Belgrade resident, said of her choice to get the Chinese shot at a vaccination center in February.

Neighboring Hungary, impatient over delays in the European Union, soon became the first country in the EU to approve the same Chinese vaccine. On Sunday, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban got the Sinopharm shot, after recently saying he trusted the Chinese vaccine the most.

Many leaders have publicly supported the Chinese shots to allay concerns. Early on, "people had all these microchip theories in their heads, genetic modification, sterilization, running around on social media platforms," said Sanjeev Pugazhendi, a medical officer in the Indian Ocean island nation of the Seychelles, whose president recently received a Sinopharm shot on camera. "But the moment we started giving out the vaccines to leaders, religious leaders and health workers, that started to subside."

Beijing's vaccine diplomacy efforts are good for both China and the developing world, experts say.

"Because of the competition for influence, the poor countries can get earlier access for vaccines," said Yun Jiang, managing editor of the China Story Blog at the Australian National University. "Of course, that's assuming that all the vaccines are safe and delivered in the right way."

China's vaccine diplomacy will only be as good as the vaccines it is offering, and it still faces hurdles.

Ahmed Hamdan Zayed, a nurse in Egypt, was reluctant to receive a vaccine, especially a Chinese one. The frontline health worker would be among the first in the country to get Sinopharm's shot as part of a mass vaccination campaign. Over 9 million Sinopharm shots have been given outside China.

"We had concerns about vaccines in general," the 27-year-old father of two said in a phone interview from the Abu Khalifa hospital in the northeastern part of the country. "The Chinese vaccine, in particular, there was insufficient data available compared to other vaccines."

But Zayed ultimately decided to get the shot after conducting more research. A doctor at his hospital called colleagues in the United Arab Emirates, which had approved the same shot, and they met with Egyptian health officials.

Sinopharm, which said its vaccine was 79% effective based on interim data from clinical trials, did not respond to requests for an interview. Sinopharm's chairman has said they have not had a single severe adverse event in response to their vaccine.

Chinese vaccine companies have been "slow and spotty" in releasing their trial data, compared to companies like Pfizer and Moderna, said Yanzhong Huang, a global health expert at the U.S. think tank Council for Foreign Relations. None of China's three vaccine candidates used globally have publicly released their late-stage clinical trial data. CanSino, another Chinese company with a one-shot vaccine that it says is 65% effective, declined to be interviewed.

China's pharmaceutical business practices also have raised concerns. In 2018, it emerged that one of China's biggest vaccine companies falsified data to sell its rabies vaccines. That same year, news broke that a Sinopharm subsidiary, which is behind one of the COVID-19 vaccines now, had made substandard diphtheria vaccines used in mandatory immunizations.

With Chinese vaccines, "for a lot of people, the first thing you think about is 'Made in China,' and that doesn't give you much assurance," said Joy Zhang, a professor at the University of Kent in the UK who studies the ethics of emerging science.

Russia and India have faced similar skepticism, partly because people have less trust in products made outside the Western world, said Sayedur Rahman, head of the pharmacology department at Bangabandhu

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 85 of 96

Sheikh Mujib Medical University in Bangladesh.

"China, India, Russia, Cuba, whenever they develop a vaccine or conduct research, their data is questioned, and people say their process is not transparent," he said.

A December YouGov poll of 19,000 people in 17 countries and regions on how they felt about different vaccines found that China's received the second-lowest score, tied with India's. In the Philippines, which has ordered 25 million Sinovac doses, less than 20% of those surveyed by a research group expressed confidence in China's vaccines.

Those concerns have been exacerbated by confusion around the efficacy of Sinovac's shot. In Turkey, where Sinovac conducted part of its efficacy trials, officials have said the vaccine was 91% effective. However, in Brazil, officials revised the efficacy rate in late-stage clinical trials from 78% to just over 50% after including mild infections.

A senior Chinese official said Brazil's numbers were lower because its volunteers were healthcare workers who faced a higher risk of infection. But other medical experts have said exposure would not affect a vaccine's effectiveness.

Sinovac's trials were conducted separately in Turkey and Brazil, and the differences in efficacy rates arise from differences in the populations, a spokesman for the company said in a previous interview with the AP. The company declined to be interviewed for this article. An expert panel in Hong Kong assessed the efficacy of the vaccine at about 51%, and the city approved its use in mid-February.

Globally, public health officials have said any vaccine that is at least 50% effective is useful. International scientists are anxious to see results from final-stage testing published in a peer-reviewed science journal for all three Chinese companies.

It's also unclear how the Chinese shots work against new strains of the virus that are emerging, especially a variant first identified in South Africa. For example, Sinopharm has pledged 800,000 shots to South Africa's neighbor, Zimbabwe.

There are concerns among receiving countries that China's vaccine diplomacy may come at a cost, which China has denied. In the Philippines, where Beijing is donating 600,000 vaccines, a senior diplomat said China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, gave a subtle message to tone down public criticism of growing Chinese assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea.

The senior diplomat said Wang did not ask for anything in exchange for vaccines, but it was clear he wanted "friendly exchanges in public, like control your megaphone diplomacy a little." The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the issue publicly.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte publicly said in a news conference on Sunday that China did not ask for anything, as the donations were flown in.

Meanwhile, opposition legislators in Turkey are accusing Ankara's leaders of secretly selling out Uyghurs to China in exchange for vaccines after a recent shipment delay. The legislators and the Uyghur diaspora community fear Beijing is trying to win passage of an extradition treaty that could see more Uyghurs deported to China.

Despite all the worries, the pandemic's urgency has largely superseded hesitations over China's vaccines. "Vaccines, particularly those made in the West, are reserved for rich countries," said one Egyptian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter. "We had to guarantee a vaccine. Any vaccine."

Gelineau reported from Sydney.

Associated Press researcher Chen Si in Shanghai, and AP reporters Patricia Luna in Santiago, Chile; Sam Magdy in Cairo; Jim Gomez in Manila, Philippines; Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia; Aida Sultanova in London; Justin Spike in Budapest, Hungary; Dusan Stojanovic in Belgrade, Serbia; Cara Anna in Nairobi, Kenya; Allen G. Breed in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Diane Jeantet in Rio de Janeiro contributed to this report.

With much respect, Cynthia Erivo takes on Queen of Soul

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 86 of 96

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Tony Awards could bring Cynthia Erivo another Emmy.

Days after the British performer belted Aretha Franklin's "Ain't No Way" during a red carpet interview at the 2019 Tonys — explaining that it's her guilty pleasure song — she got a call from the producers of the National Geographic series "Genius: Aretha."

"I was like, 'I beg your pardon,'" she continued. "In my head I'm like, 'There is another film happening and I'm excited to see that, so what is this?'"

NatGeo had already completed series on Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso, and wanted to focus on the life of Franklin, who died 2018 and was arguably the greatest singer of all time.

When Erivo went to meet with the producers, she had a bit of an epiphany.

"Nothing else was playing in the hotel, it was just mood music," she said. "All of a sudden 'Day Dreaming' comes on as I go to sit down. I'm like, 'Am I the only one that noticed that?'"

Laughing with a huge smile on her face, she continued: "I was like, 'Either you planned that or someone's trying to tell me something.'"

Fast forward two years and Erivo is playing the Queen of Soul in the eight-episode series debuting March 21. "Respect," a film about Franklin starring Jennifer Hudson, will be released in August.

Erivo's exceptional performance in Broadway's revival of "The Color Purple" won her a Tony, Emmy and Grammy, and she was a double Oscar nominee last year for "Harriet." In an interview with The Associated Press, edited for clarity and brevity, the 34-year-old talked about meeting Franklin, playing icons on-screen and more.

AP: What does Aretha mean to you?

ERIVO: She means the world to me. As a singer, I truly believe that my job is to communicate and tell the stories that sometimes are difficult for people to tell for themselves ... Aretha did that with her eyes closed. She had a wonderful way of communicating the things that she had been through, through song.

AP: She has this thing by which she can take someone else's song and make it her own.

ERIVO: Totally and it's such a special thing. Not only does she take the song and make it her own, she takes the song and you forget it was someone else's. That to me, it's a really special thing that she was able to do. I don't know that people realize that "Respect" wasn't her song first.

She finds messaging in songs, in music that you didn't realize were there in the first place. I don't know how, but she always managed to find a way into a song that you didn't know existed. I know that this might not be a popular opinion but when she did her version of (Adele's) "Rolling in the Deep," I was like, "Huh, never heard this song like this before. Didn't think about this song like this before." At that point because she was an older woman singing this song, you're like, all the experience that this person must have gone through to get to this point, I didn't hear this before. Now I'm hearing it with her voice. She was one of a kind, truly.

AP: Did you get a chance to meet her?

ERIVO: I met her the first time when she'd come to a performance of "The Color Purple." I didn't know she was there. When I saw her, I felt like an idiot because I was just in shock. There is Miss Aretha Franklin standing in front of me and I've just finished singing a show in her presence, oh my goodness. How do I do this? She was funny and lovely. She sang the last line of "I'm Here" back to me. That was a moment I had to put my heart back together. I was like, "This is happening for real." She was wonderful. When you meet someone like that, you don't think they'll remember your face. I met her again at the Kennedy Center Honors. I was singing the very first time I did it. She remembered me. She said, "You're the girl who was in that play. You can sing. You can sing." I was like, "Yes that's me. Thank you very much." I remember she was wearing red. My favorite thing about that day was when I saw the recording of it, when it finally aired, during my performance they pan to Aretha and she's singing along with her eyes closed.

AP: Were you hesitant to play her?

ERIVO: It's about wanting to make sure you do her justice (and) put as much truth in it as you possibly can. There is only one Aretha Franklin so no one can be Aretha Franklin, but you can put as much grace

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 87 of 96

and truth into the re-enacting of her, the realization of her so you can tell the story in the right way. I guess if I wasn't nervous, I wouldn't care.

AP: How do you feel about the people who say, "Cynthia doesn't really look like Aretha?"

ERIVO: No, in the same way that Diana Ross didn't really look like Billie Holiday, but she did an incredible, incredible job when she did "Lady Sings the Blues." ... I don't think anyone does look like Aretha. If you found someone who looks like Aretha who couldn't do the work, who can't sing the songs, then that's where you have a problem. I'd rather someone that doesn't look like her but can give me the essence.

AP: Are you excited to see the Jennifer Hudson version?

ERIVO: I am. I know that they were close, and I know that they had a conversation. This is something she had been dreaming of doing. I am excited to see it.

AP: How's it been playing real-life icons on-screen?

ERIVO: It's a huge honor and it's part of what I want for my lifetime — to be able to tell these stories of women whose stories wouldn't get the chance to be told, whose stories deserve to be told. The more I can do that whether it be Harriet, Aretha or a woman you don't know about who I've done the research to find out about, I want to keep bringing these stories to the forefront because they deserve to be told.

AP: The roles you've played reminds me of Chadwick Boseman, who portrayed James Brown, Jackie Robinson and Thurgood Marshall on-screen.

ERIVO: When (he died) I really did have that thought. I thought to myself, "What a wonderful legacy to leave behind. To be the person we could look to who was telling the stories of these incredible men who wouldn't have had their stories told if he didn't exist." I guess it was like a wakeup call. This is the job at hand. Maybe this is part of your calling — to be able to tell these stories when others are finding it hard to let them come to the forefront. Maybe it's my job to be me in it or me creating it, making sure someone is in it. That's also the task at hand for me.

AP: There's been so much conversation about Black British actors taking roles away from Black American actors. What are your thoughts on that?

ERIVO: I hope we get to a place where we understand that my telling a story doesn't mean the story can't be told again. I think the way I tell a story is one version and this just should serve as the introduction to someone else going, "Oh I'm going to tell the story again." We have many stories, many versions of the Marilyn Monroe story ... we have many versions of Abe Lincoln. There are so many versions of these stories, but our stories aren't told over and over again. We don't have that. I hope that this only serves as fire. We've had it told once, let's tell that again. Let's tell this part of the story.

Harriet's story isn't done yet. She lived until she was 91. I think my story ended when she was 40-something, 45. We have another 45 years of life to tell because she did keep going. I haven't seen that story yet. I hope someone tells that story. I hope someone goes back and tells just the specific story about the war. I hope someone goes back and tells the specific story about her suffrage life. There's so much scope. She was a spy. We don't know that yet. I think our story on Aretha goes to the late 80's, early '90s. We have another 20 years of story left to tell.

As a British actress, before I am that I'm a Black woman. My job is just to tell the story just as truthfully as I possibly can. That doesn't have to be the only story that gets told. My version shouldn't be the only version to get told. I hope many versions get told. I think we always think this is the only and the last and it shouldn't be. Hopefully outside of being the actress I can create a space where the stories that we want to be told again get told again.

A year in, coronavirus rages in vaccine-needy West Bank

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Israel's spring of hope is unfolding alongside the Palestinians' winter of despair.

More than half of Israel's population of 9.3 million have been vaccinated and the lines for shots have dwindled. There's enough of a surplus that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants to send thousands

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 88 of 96

of doses to friendly countries. Hotels and restaurants are set to reopen next week.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the COVID-19 wards are overstretched, testing centers are as busy as ever and new lockdown measures have been announced. The Palestinian Authority has acquired only a few thousand doses — not even enough for front-line health workers — and reported nearly 2,000 new cases on Tuesday alone.

It's a stark illustration of the disparity at the heart of the Middle East conflict — one of the few aspects of life here that haven't changed over the past year.

Israel cites past agreements that say the PA is responsible for health care in areas it administers. Human rights groups say Israel is shirking its obligations as an occupying power. The PA, perhaps out of concern for its own image, insists it has secured its own supplies.

In the meantime, West Bank hospitals are filling up. A woman who identified herself as Umm Bashar brought her mother to the main hospital in Ramallah two days ago after her oxygen levels dropped. She's still waiting in the emergency unit for a bed in a newly expanded COVID-19 ward.

"They told us that because of the coronavirus, all the beds are full," she said. "Everything has become very hard."

An emergency room medic, who was not authorized to talk to reporters and so spoke on condition of anonymity, said 14 suspected COVID-19 patients arrived Tuesday morning, a day after 24 were transferred to a ward for treating the disease.

At a testing center across town, scores of people gathered in an auditorium waiting to be swabbed. Many showed symptoms, and several said members of their households had tested positive.

"The outbreak is very bad, and the cases themselves are very bad, worse than in the beginning," said Tayeb Zeineddin, who has been working at the test center since the pandemic began. He said more than 1,000 people show up daily for tests.

The Palestinian Authority has reported more than 130,000 cases in the West Bank since the outbreak began, including at least 1,819 cases Tuesday. At least 1,510 have died, and dozens are in intensive care. In Gaza, which is ruled by the militant Hamas group and under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade, authorities have reported over 55,000 cases and at least 553 deaths.

The effects go far beyond the disease itself.

The World Bank estimates the Palestinian economy shrank by 11.5% in 2020, with tourism and restaurant sectors hit particularly hard. Unemployment in the West Bank spiked to 15% this year, and about 1.4 million Palestinians are living in poverty, it said last month.

Israel launched one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns in December after Netanyahu secured millions of doses from drug giants Pfizer and Moderna. Demand has leveled off after nearly 5 million people received at least one dose, so Israel is now using a mix of incentives and threats to try to get the free shots to holdouts.

In recent days, Netanyahu has come under fire for reportedly planning to share tens of thousands of surplus vaccines with allies in Africa, Europe and Latin America while providing little to the Palestinians. Israeli media have said Netanyahu sought to reward countries that support Israel's claim to contested Jerusalem and those with budding ties to Israel. Israel's attorney general froze the program, determining Netanyahu had improperly acted alone.

While vaccinating its own Arab population, Israel has provided only 2,000 Moderna doses to the Palestinian Authority, and it recently approved plans to vaccinate the over 100,000 Palestinians from the West Bank who work in Israel and Jewish settlements.

Israeli public health officials have urged the government to go even further and vaccinate the entire West Bank population, given the large degree of interaction between the sides.

"There is no public health justification or moral argument for not providing vaccines to Palestinians," two leading public health experts wrote in an op-ed in Israel's Haaretz newspaper. "A joint public health response between Israel, Gaza and the West Bank remains critical."

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 war, territories the Palestinians want

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 89 of 96

for their future state. Under interim peace agreements, the PA is responsible for health care in Gaza and the areas it administers in the West Bank, but both sides are supposed to cooperate to combat epidemics.

"We are living under occupation, so they bear a huge part of the responsibility," said Ibrahim Abu Safiya, who brought his mother to the ER overnight Tuesday and also was waiting for a COVID-19 bed to open up.

The PA says it has secured tens of thousands of vaccine doses through a World Health Organization program for poor countries and private agreements with drug makers, but has only managed to import 10,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. Along with the Israeli vaccines, that's enough to inoculate 6,000 people out of a population of nearly 5 million.

There are some indications that — in the absence of vaccines — the Palestinians are developing some degree of protection on their own.

A recent study supported by the WHO showed that about 40% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have contracted COVID-19 since the pandemic began, indicating a large number of asymptomatic cases.

The study, carried out by the Palestinian Health Ministry and other official bodies, is based on samples taken from 6,000 people and tested for markers expected to be present in the blood of those who have had COVID-19.

"Most likely, 40% of the population has already undergone infection and has also acquired antibodies and therefore has some level of protection at the moment," said Dr. Gerald Rockenschaub, who was head of the WHO for the Palestinian territories at the time of the study.

More study is needed to explain why the fatality rate would be so low, but Rockenschaub it was likely connected to the large percentage of young people, who tend to have lighter symptoms, in the overall population.

"Quite a substantial proportion of those who showed the antibodies didn't even know that they had the infection," he said.

—
Associated Press reporter Nasser Nasser contributed.

Sun, sand, shots: Caribbean seeks vaccines to revive economy

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — The Caribbean is hunting for visitors and vaccines to jump-start the stalled economy in one of the world's most tourism-dependent regions.

Clear waters and warm sand attracted a record 31.5 million tourists to the Caribbean in 2019, but visits plummeted by an estimated 60% to 80% as the pandemic hit last year. That's devastating for a region whose countries depend heavily on visitors for income.

"Many countries prefer hurricanes compared to what has happened with the pandemic," said Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, a former Bahamian tourism minister who also led the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

Tens of thousands of tourism-related jobs were lost, including those held by Nadia Kidd and her mother in Jamaica. Kidd, 31, was a waitress at a resort and her mother worked at a guest house. Kidd, like many other workers, has yet to receive her severance pay and now runs a tiny grocery store out of her home to support her mother and daughter.

"Everything is all on me," said Kidd, who worked at the Meliá Braco Village resort in Trelawny. "I have loans to pay, light bill and internet (that I) have to pay because my daughter has to go to school online."

Desperate to create safe conditions for tourism, the Caribbean is turning to India and China for vaccines at a time when global supplies are strained and richer nations are ahead of them in line for shots from other sources. A few have been fortunate to get quick shipments, while others could wait weeks, if not months.

The Caribbean saw COVID-19 levels rising in November, along with variants feared to be more contagious. More than 522,000 cases and more than 7,500 deaths have been reported in 35 of the region's countries and territories.

"The rate of increase has been alarming," said Dr. Joy St. John, executive director of the Trinidad-based

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 90 of 96

Caribbean Public Health Agency.

The small nations adopted a variety of anti-virus measures, nearly all requiring visitors at a minimum to show recent negative tests upon arrival.

Cuba — the largest Caribbean nation and the only one working on its own vaccines — choked off arrivals after seeing infections surge. It requires visitors to stay in designated hotels and to take new tests upon landing.

International travelers to St. Kitts and Nevis must stay at certain hotels, and St. Eustatius requires visitors to register their reason for traveling before giving approval.

Many islands ask visitors to isolate, though how long and under what conditions can vary: Those arriving in the Cayman Islands or Barbados must stay inside a hotel for at least a week or face jail. Others, like Puerto Rico, don't require quarantine if a negative test is presented upon arrival, and tourists can roam the U.S. territory's beaches and forests.

Aruba, Anguilla, Curacao and Montserrat and others have promoted themselves as havens for those who can work by internet from a room by the sea, although officials can be harsh on visitors who flout virus restrictions.

At least 13 countries in the region have signed up for the World Health Organization's COVAX program, created to ensure access to COVID-19 shots for low- and middle-income countries.

Among those is Jamaica, which had pursued an aggressive reopening to tourism despite not receiving a single shipment of vaccines. On Sunday, however, it announced it was closing public beaches and rivers until March 22.

Its government says it expects to receive 50,000 vaccines from India this week and 14,400 AstraZeneca vaccines next week via the COVAX program. It also anticipates receiving 1.8 million vaccine doses by April via the African Medical Supply Platform, a nonprofit initiative by the African Union.

Despite those pending vaccines, Alica Brown said she would not return to the tourism industry. The 34-year-old has not found a job since she was laid off last year as a supervisor at a resort, forcing her to move in with her family and dip into her savings.

"The pandemic has opened my eyes so much," said Brown, who is considering a venture into farming. "It's made me realize that no job is safe, especially tourism jobs because when something like this happens, and tourists cannot travel, how will we survive?"

Others, like Cranston Calnick, said he is waiting for the resort where he worked as a waiter to reopen next month. The 29-year-old said that in the meantime, he has been picking fruit and selling it on the street: "This is how I have been surviving."

Unlike Jamaica, other islands have been luckier, having received AstraZeneca doses under India's "Vaccine Friendship" program. That vaccine's protocol requires two shots per person.

Dominica, an eastern Caribbean island of 74,500 people that is still struggling to recover from Hurricane Maria in 2017, got 70,000 doses last month and has begun vaccinations.

"I did not fancy my chances of getting such a swift, positive response to my request," said Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit. The country has shared some of the doses with other nations, including Grenada and St. Kitts and Nevis.

Dominica also is due to receive doses from China and the COVAX program.

Barbados, with some 300,000 people, received 100,000 doses from India, and the prime minister thanked New Delhi for its "quick, decisive and magnanimous action." Barbados donated 2,000 doses to Trinidad and Tobago. That twin-island nation of 1.2 million remains under strict virus restrictions and has requested 250,000 doses from India.

India also has helped the Dominican Republic and Antigua and Barbuda, but the region remains far short of what is needed to achieve herd immunity for the over 18 million people in the Caribbean Community trade bloc.

"We knew from past history and from human behavior that it could have been possible ... that the strong ones would eat first and the weaker ones would starve to death," said Keith Rowley, Caricom chairman and prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Meanwhile, China sent 768,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to the Dominican Republic, a country of 10.6 million people, which is also starting to get shipments of AstraZeneca and Pfizer shots.

Beijing also has pledged to ship 20,000 doses by March to Guyana.

Meanwhile, the islands are seeing more tourists, as well as complaints about them flouting pandemic restrictions.

Barbados recently fined a former U.K. beauty queen \$6,000 for violating virus protocols and imprisoned a Jamaican tourist who was unable to pay a fine after being accused of breaking quarantine.

St. John, director of the Caribbean's public health body, said her agency has trained more than 8,000 hotel workers in measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

"It is a skill to find the right balance of lives and livelihoods," she said.

Neil Walters, acting secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization, said experts estimate the Caribbean could reach its pre-pandemic tourism levels by 2022 or 2023.

Visits to the region increased in November but fell in January, in part because the U.K., the European Union and Canada restricted travel, said Frank Comito of the Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Association. The record 30 million cruise ship visitors the region attracted before the pandemic also are gone.

But he said the U.S. Virgin Islands actually saw at least a temporary surge in flights to greater than pre-pandemic levels as airlines switched their schedules from Europe and Asia to the Caribbean.

Associated Press writer Sharlene Hendricks in Kingston, Jamaica, contributed.

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Myanmar police fire tear gas, rubber bullets at protesters

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Police in Myanmar repeatedly used tear gas and rubber bullets Tuesday against crowds protesting last month's coup, but the demonstrators regrouped after each volley and tried to defend themselves with barricades as standoffs between protesters and security forces intensified.

Authorities have escalated their crackdown on the protests in recent days. The United Nations said it believed at least 18 people were killed on Sunday when security forces fired into crowds, while a rights group said more than 1,000 people were detained over the weekend, including an Associated Press journalist. A lawyer for the journalist said he has been charged with an offense that could see him imprisoned for up to three years.

Despite the increasingly brutal crackdown, demonstrators have continued to flood the streets — and are beginning to more rigorously resist attempts to disperse them. Hundreds, many wearing construction helmets and carrying makeshift shields, gathered in Myanmar's largest city of Yangon, where a day earlier police had fired repeated rounds of tear gas. They dragged bamboo poles and debris to form barricades, chanted slogans and sang songs at the police lines. They even threw banana skins onto the road in front of them in a bid to slow any police rush.

The mainly young demonstrators fled in panic each time tear gas canisters were fired but soon returned to their barricades. Videos posted on social media showed similar chaotic scenes in the Insein neighborhood of northern Yangon.

Protesters also took up their flags and banners to march through the streets of Dawei, a small city in southeastern Myanmar that has seen almost daily large demonstrations against the coup. One group of demonstrators was targeted by the security forces as it entered a narrow street on its way to pay respects at the house of a man killed in Sunday's crackdown. Another was attacked on the main street in the city's center.

Police also dispersed protests in Mandalay, the country's second-largest city, on Tuesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 92 of 96

Yangon, Dawei and Mandalay were among the cities where security forces reportedly fired live ammunition into crowds Sunday, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office. There were reports that they also fired live rounds Tuesday, but they could not immediately be confirmed.

Some fear the junta's escalating use of force is meant to provoke a violent backlash by the demonstrators — who have largely remained nonviolent — in order to discredit them and justify an even harsher crackdown. Videos from recent days show a greater number of protesters trying to stand their ground and throw objects at the police.

"I beg the people in Myanmar not to fall in this trap, so to stay peaceful," U.N. Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said in interview with CNN, acknowledging that it was easier for her, safely away from the violence, to urge peaceful protesting. She also accused the authorities of spreading rumors about the conditions of people in detention to stir up even more anger on the streets.

The Feb. 1 coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar after five decades of military rule. It came the day a newly elected Parliament was supposed to take office. Ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party would have been installed for a second five-year term, but instead she was detained along with President Win Myint and other senior officials.

The military government has charged Suu Kyi, 75, with several offenses that critics say are trumped up merely to keep her jailed and potentially prevent her from participating in the election promised in a year's time by the military. Her party says it does not know where Suu Kyi — who has a long history of campaigning for democracy in Myanmar — is being held.

The weekend crackdown drew international condemnation. In addition to the use of force, authorities also detained more than 1,000 people, according to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

That included at least eight journalists, among them Thein Zaw of the AP, who was detained while covering the protests. His lawyer said Tuesday that he and five other Myanmar journalists have been charged with violating a public order law. The AP has decried his detention as arbitrary and called for his immediate release.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called the use of force and arbitrary arrests "unacceptable," according to his spokesperson. The U.S., British and other governments issued similar statements of concern.

But the military has showed no sign of backing down.

The protesters and their supporters have appealed for help from abroad, but there are few prospects for major intervention. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional group of 10 nations, has a policy of seeking a consensus among its members, making it unlikely to take strong action. A virtual meeting Tuesday of the group's foreign ministers ended with only a statement — issued by the group's chair, rather than a joint declaration — calling for an end to violence and for talks to try to reach a peaceful settlement.

The U.N.'s independent expert on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, has proposed that countries could institute a global embargo on the sale of arms to Myanmar and "tough, targeted and coordinated sanctions" against those responsible for the coup, the crackdown and other rights abuses.

But any kind of coordinated action at the United Nations would be difficult since two permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, China and Russia, would almost certainly veto it. Some countries have imposed or are considering imposing their own sanctions.

Associated Press writers Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Eileen Ng in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, contributed to this report.

Analysis: Biden retreats from vow to make pariah of Saudis

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden promised to make a pariah out of Saudi Arabia over the 2018

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 93 of 96

killing of dissident Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi. But when it came time to actually punish Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Biden's perception of America's strategic interests prevailed.

The Biden administration made clear Friday it would forgo sanctions or any other major penalty against Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Khashoggi killing, even after a U.S. intelligence report concluded the prince ordered it.

The decision highlights how the real-time decisions of diplomacy often collide with the righteousness of the moral high ground. And nowhere is this conundrum more stark than in the United States' complicated relationship with Saudi Arabia — the world's oil giant, a U.S. arms customer and a counterbalance to Iran in the Middle East.

"It is undeniable that Saudi Arabia is a hugely influential country in the Arab world," State Department spokesman Ned Price said Monday when asked about Biden's retreat from his promise to isolate the Saudis over the killing.

Ultimately, Biden administration officials said, U.S. interests in maintaining relations with Saudi Arabia forbid making a pariah of a young prince who may go on to rule the kingdom for decades. That stands in stark contrast to Biden's campaign promise to make the kingdom "pay the price" for human rights abuses and "make them in fact the pariah that they are."

"We've talked about this in terms of a recalibration. It's not a rupture," Price said of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

But what the Biden administration is calling a "recalibration" of former President Donald Trump's warm relationship with Saudi royals looks a lot like the normal U.S. stand before Trump: chiding on human rights abuses in the kingdom, but not allowing those concerns to interfere with relations with Saudi Arabia.

In recent days, Biden officials have responded to intense criticism of the administration's failure to sanction the prince by pointing to U.S. measures targeting his lower-ranking associates.

Those include steps against the prince's "Tiger squad," which allegedly has sought out dissidents abroad, and sanctions and visa restrictions upon Saudi officials who directly participated in Khashoggi's slaying and dismemberment.

The language itself has softened, with Biden officials referring to Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner rather than pariah.

Watching it all, Trump suggested over the weekend that Biden's stand on Saudi Arabia's prince wasn't so different from his after all. Khashoggi's killing by Mohammed bin Salman's security and intelligence officials was bad, Trump told Fox News, "but we have to look at it as an overall" situation. Biden seems to be "viewing it maybe in a similar fashion, very interesting, actually."

Mohammed bin Salman, 35, has consolidated power in Saudi Arabia since his father, Salman, now 85 and ailing, became king in 2015. The prince soon after launched a war in neighboring Yemen that has deepened hunger and poverty in that country; opened an economic blockade of Qatar that only recently ended; and invited the leader of another Arab country, Lebanon, for a visit and without warning detained him.

The prince has silenced civil society at home, imprisoning writers, clerics, businesspeople and women's rights advocates, detaining and allegedly torturing fellow royals, and allegedly forming a squad charged with abducting or luring exiles back to the kingdom to face further punishment.

Khashoggi had fled Saudi Arabia and was deepening his criticism of the prince in columns written for The Washington Post. When Khashoggi scheduled an Oct. 2, 2018, appointment at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to pick up paperwork needed for his wedding, Saudi security and intelligence officials were waiting for him there. So was Saudi security's forensics chief, known for his techniques for rapid dissections. Khashoggi's remains have never been found.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat, told The Associated Press on Monday that he was open to more sanctions. But Warner, too, stressed that the United States needs to maintain the relationship with Saudi Arabia.

"This is a dangerous neighborhood. And the Saudis are critical in terms of keeping pressure on Iran," Warner said.

Rights groups and the few Saudi dissidents in exile who still dare to speak say the United States is making a mistake. They say Prince Mohammed's actions in his first five years in power show he's not bound by international norms or diplomatic persuasion. Waiving penalties on Mohammed bin Salman now also sends a signal to Saudis on the succession, when Salman dies, they say.

Forgoing punishment in such a brutal killing, of an internationally known journalist, sends a message of impunity for future slayings, not just for the prince but for all authoritarian governments, said Sarah Leah Whitson, leader of Democracy for the Arab World Now, a rights group Khashoggi founded not long before his death.

The Biden administration "basically sent the message that if you're at the top you're safe, and business will continue as usual, as long as we agree on some low-level officials to throw under the bus," Whitson said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Ellen Knickmeyer, who reported in Saudi Arabia from 2011-14, covers foreign policy and national security for The Associated Press. She reported from Oklahoma City.

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington contributed to this report.

Nigerian governor says 279 kidnapped schoolgirls are freed

By LEKAN OYEKANMI and SAM OLUKOYA Associated Press

GUSAU, Nigeria (AP) — Hundreds of Nigerian girls abducted last week from a boarding school in the country's northwest have been released, a state governor said Tuesday, as the West African nation faces a spate of school kidnappings.

The girls, ages 10 and up, dressed in light blue hijabs and barefoot, packed into Zamfara state's Government House conference room. They appeared calm, chatting to one another as they sat in long rows while journalists photographed them. They will receive a medical checkup before being returned to their parents.

Zamfara Gov. Bello Matawalle said that 279 girls had been freed after being abducted from the Government Girls Junior Secondary School in Jangebe town on Friday. The government last week said 317 had been kidnapped. It was not clear if the higher number was an error or if some girls were still missing.

"Alhamdulillah! (God be praised!) It gladdens my heart to announce the release of the abducted students," Matawalle said in a post on Twitter early Tuesday. "I enjoy all well-meaning Nigerians to rejoice with us as our daughters are now safe."

Officials said "bandits" were behind the abduction, referring to the groups of armed men who operate in Zamfara state and kidnap for money or to push for the release of their members from jail.

At the time of the attack, one resident told The Associated Press that the gunmen also attacked a nearby military camp and checkpoint, preventing soldiers from responding to the school.

One of the girls recounted the night of their abduction to the AP.

"We were sleeping at night when suddenly we started hearing gunshots. They were shooting endlessly. We got out of our beds and people said we should run, that they are thieves," she said. Officials ended the interview before the girl could give her name.

The attackers eventually found her and some classmates and held guns to their heads, she said.

"I was really afraid of being shot," she said, adding that they asked for directions to the staff quarters and the principal. "We said we don't know who she is."

Nigeria has seen several such attacks and kidnappings in recent years, the most notorious in 2014, when 276 girls were abducted by the jihadist rebels of Boko Haram from the secondary school in Chibok in Borno state. More than 100 of those girls are still missing.

Boko Haram is opposed to western education and its fighters often target schools. But most attacks in the northwest are perpetrated by armed criminal groups with no such ideology.

Police and the military have been trying to rescue the girls from the Zamfara abduction, which caused international outrage. Officials did not say if a ransom had been paid for their release.

"We have been in discussion since Friday with the abductors and reached agreement on Monday," the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 95 of 96

governor said, adding that he would ensure additional security at all schools in the state.

President Muhammadu Buhari expressed "overwhelming joy" over the release of the girls.

"I join the families and people of Zamfara state in welcoming and celebrating the release of these traumatized female students," he said in a statement. "Being held in captivity is an agonizing experience not only for the victims, but also their families and all of us."

The president called for greater vigilance to prevent bandits from carrying out such attacks — but warned that paying money for the release of victims would only result in more assaults.

Ernest Ereke, of the University of Abuja, agreed that ransoms are allowing criminal groups to buy more arms and expand their power.

And the Nigerian state increasingly looks too weak to respond, he said.

"It is a lucrative venture in a country where a lot of young people are impoverished, jobless and hungry," he said. "The state, which should confront these criminals, is enabling them by always pandering to their dictates. It should be the other way round, that is, the criminals should be scared of the state, but, in this case, it is the state that is scared of criminals."

"If the state is not able to crush them," he added, "it means something is wrong with the Nigerian state."

On Saturday, 24 students, six staff and eight relatives were released after being abducted on February 17 from the Government Science College Kagara in Niger state. In December, more than 300 schoolboys from a secondary school in Kankara, in northwestern Nigeria, were taken and later released. The government has said no ransom was paid for the students' release.

Olukoya reported from Lagos, Nigeria. AP writer Carley Petesch in Dakar, Senegal contributed

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 3, the 62nd day of 2021. There are 303 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 3, 1931, "The Star-Spangled Banner" became the national anthem of the United States as President Herbert Hoover signed a congressional resolution.

On this date:

In 1791, Congress passed a measure taxing distilled spirits; it was the first internal revenue act in U.S. history.

In 1845, Florida became the 27th state.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed a measure creating the National Academy of Sciences.

In 1887, Anne Sullivan arrived at the Tuscomb, Alabama, home of Captain and Mrs. Arthur H. Keller to become the teacher for their deaf-blind 6-year-old daughter, Helen.

In 1943, in London's East End, 173 people died in a crush of bodies at the Bethnal Green tube station, which was being used as a wartime air raid shelter.

In 1945, the Allies fully secured the Philippine capital of Manila from Japanese forces during World War II.

In 1960, Lucille Ball filed for divorce from her husband, Desi Arnaz, a day after they had finished filming the last episode of "The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show."

In 1974, a Turkish Airlines DC-10 crashed shortly after takeoff from Orly Airport in Paris, killing all 346 people on board.

In 1991, motorist Rodney King was severely beaten by Los Angeles police officers in a scene captured on amateur video. Twenty-five people were killed when a United Airlines Boeing 737-200 crashed while approaching the Colorado Springs airport.

In 1996, Israel declared "total war" against the militant group Hamas after a bus bomb in Jerusalem killed 19 people, including the bomber, the third such suicide attack in eight days.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 03, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 240 ~ 96 of 96

In 2001, a plane carrying members of a National Guard engineering crew crashed in heavy rain near Macon, Ga., killing all 21 people on board.

In 2019, a tornado roared into the small community of Beauregard, Alabama, killing 23 people; it was the nation's deadliest tornado in nearly six years.

Ten years ago: Seeking to repair damaged relations, President Barack Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderon agreed during a White House meeting to deepen their cooperation in combating drug violence and declared a breakthrough in efforts to end a long-standing dispute over cross-border trucking. Soldiers backing Ivory Coast's defiant leader, Laurent Gbagbo (loh-RAHN' BAHG'-boh), mowed down women protesting his refusal to leave power in a hail of gunfire, killing seven.

Five years ago: Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz leveled withering criticism at Donald Trump's "flexible" policy positions and personal ethics during a Republican presidential debate in Detroit. President Barack Obama visited Milwaukee to highlight how his signature health insurance overhaul had helped millions of Americans gain coverage. North Korea fired six short-range projectiles into the sea hours after the U.N. Security Council approved the toughest sanctions on Pyongyang in two decades.

One year ago: In a surprise move, the Federal Reserve cut its benchmark interest rate by a half-point, its largest cut in more than a decade, to support the economy in the face of the spreading coronavirus. Stocks rallied briefly on the news, then went into another steep slide. The known virus death toll in the United States climbed to nine; most victims were residents of a Seattle-area nursing home. The number of virus patients who had died in Italy rose to 79, the most of any nation outside of China. The head of the World Health Organization asked people to stop hoarding masks, saying they were needed by health care workers. A series of tornadoes struck middle Tennessee, including one that carved a 60-mile path in and around Nashville; the storms left 24 people dead. Joe Biden scored wins in states across the Democrats' Super Tuesday presidential primary map.

Today's Birthdays: Singer-musician Mike Pender (The Searchers) is 80. Movie producer-director George Miller is 76. Actor Hattie Winston is 76. Singer Jennifer Warnes is 74. Actor-director Tim Kazurinsky is 71. Singer-musician Robyn Hitchcock is 68. Actor Robert Gossett is 67. Rock musician John Lilley is 67. Actor Miranda Richardson is 63. Rock musician John Bigham is 62. Radio personality Ira Glass is 62. Actor Mary Page Keller is 60. Olympic track and field gold medalist Jackie Joyner-Kersey is 59. Former NFL player and College Football Hall of Famer Herschel Walker is 59. Actor Laura Harring is 57. Contemporary Christian musician Duncan Phillips (Newsboys) is 57. Rapper-actor Tone Loc (lohk) is 55. Actor Julie Bowen is 51. Country singer Brett Warren (The Warren Brothers) is 50. Actor David Faustino is 47. Gospel singer Jason Crabb is 44. Singer Ronan Keating (Boyzone) is 44. Rapper Lil' Flip is 40. Actor Jessica Biel is 39. Rock musician Blower (AKA Joe Garvey) (Hinder) is 37. Musician Brett Hite (Frenship) is 35. Pop singer Camila Cabello is 24. Actor Thomas Barbusca (TV: "The Mick") is 18. Actor Reyllynn Caster is 18.