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BOYS

**Region 1A at Groton Area
Milbank Bulldogs
Friday, March 5, 2021, 7 p.m.**



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Finishing touches just went up on the Locke-Karst Field dugouts! Check out the new rail pads. (Photo from Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation Facebook Page)

Activities association weathers legislative session

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — Four bills in the current legislative session impacted the South Dakota High School Activities Association.

"We might be all done for the year on legislation," said executive director Dan Swartos during a SDHSAA board meeting on Wednesday. "It's been an interesting year."

The association ended up neutral on SB177, Gov. Kristi Noem's legislation that overhauls the rules governing home-schooling. One aspect of the legislation, approved by both the House and Senate, will allow home-schooled students to take part in extracurricular activities. SDHSAA oversees many of those activities.

"That bill's been an adventure," Swartos said.

Originally an opponent of the bill, the association became neutral on the subject when an amendment was added that made home-schooled students subject to the association's eligibility rules and local training regulations.

Wednesday morning, prior to and during the board meeting, Swartos was in the Capitol testifying on two bills.

SB128 sought to clarify the state law that doesn't allow the assignment of broadcast rights for high school athletic events. SDHSAA has an agreement with the National Federation of High School Associations that allows the NFHS to put broadcast equipment in schools. At times there was some confusion about who held the broadcast rights to athletic events broadcast by the NFHS.

Swartos said the bill, which has been approved earlier by the Senate and Wednesday morning by the House Education Committee, "reflects, accurately, what we're doing with our broadcasting."

Wednesday Swartos also testified on HB1217, a bill that would override the association's rules regarding how transgender students qualify to play sports. After being approved by the House, that bill was killed in the Senate Education Committee on a vote of 6-3.

Another bill, SB170, required parental consent for nonemergency physical exams in schools. That bill died in committee.

All-State Chorus canceled due to COVID

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — Heeding the advice of its music advisory committee and its COVID task force, on Wednesday the South Dakota High School Activities Association Board of Directors voted to cancel this year's All-State Chorus concert. All-State Orchestra will take place with safety protocols in place.

SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Brooks Bowman explained to the board that the music advisory board looked at six different options that ranged from having both events with varying degrees of safety protocols to canceling both of them.

"We have medical experts agreeing with our music experts," Bowman said. "This risk is just too great."

The risk of spreading the virus through singing was spelled out for the association in an aerosol study by the National Federation of High School Associations that found an increased chance of spreading the virus through singing.

Board member Tom Culver of Avon resisted the idea of canceling the event.

"We've taken enough things taken away from our kids," Culver said. "If schools don't want to come, they don't have to come."

Board member Randy Soma of Brookings noted that two groups—music teachers and a task force of educators and doctors—"said we should not have the choir."

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said he didn't know of any states in the region that we having large-scale singing events. About 1,200 students take part in All-State Chorus.

Any plan to hold the chorus event would have included no audience and chorus members spread

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throughout the Premier Center in Sioux Falls. Bowman said singers would face a half second delay as the sound from one side of the building reached the other side.

"There are major concerns about how those kids will be able to stay together," Bowman said. "That messes with a musician's mind."

Board member Jerry Rasmussen of Dakota Valley said it was difficult to accept canceling the singing event when the association was just coming off a successful state wrestling tournament.

"Kids can wrestle but we can't sing," Rasmussen said. "It's not an apples to apples comparison."

Swartos said the NFHS aerosol study was specific to the dangers posed by singing. "We don't have that for when two teams play basketball," Swartos said.

A motion by Culver to hold both events failed by a vote of 3-5. A vote to cancel All-State Chorus but hold All-State Orchestra was approved 8-0.

At All-State Orchestra, all musicians will wear masks and wind instruments will have bell covers. Musicians will be spaced three feet apart.

Swartos said there would be some attendance allowed with student musicians receiving tickets they can give to family members.



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.



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2021-22 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

Last updated – February 26, 2021

** denotes cooperative*

BOYS & GIRLS BASKETBALL

CLASS AA

Aberdeen Central	Huron	RC Stevens	Spearfish
Brandon Valley	Mitchell	SF Jefferson	Sturgis Brown
Brookings	O’Gorman	SF Lincoln	Watertown
Douglas	Pierre T.F. Riggs	SF Roosevelt	Yankton
Harrisburg	RC Central	SF Washington	

CLASS A

Region 1

*Clark/Willow Lake (from 2 to 1)

*Florence/Henry (from 2 to 1)

Groton Area
Milbank
Redfield
Sisseton
Tiospa Zina
Webster Area

Region 3

Baltic
Dell Rapids
Garretson
Madison(from 5 to 3)
*McCook Central/Montrose (5-3)
SF Christian
Tri-Valley
West Central

Region 5

*Andes Central/Dakota Christian
Bon Homme (B to A)
Hanson (B to A)
*Mt. Vernon/Plankinton
Parkston
*Sanborn Central/Woonsocket
Wagner

Region 7

Bennett County
Lakota Tech
Little Wound
Pine Ridge
Red Cloud
St. Francis Indian
Todd County

Region 2

Deubrook Area (B to A)
Deuel
Elkton-Lake Benton (B to A)
Flandreau
Flandreau Indian
Great Plains Lutheran (B to A)
Hamlin
Sioux Valley

Region 4

Beresford
Canton
Dakota Valley
Elk Point-Jefferson
Lennox
Parker (from 5 to 4)
Tea Area
Vermillion

Region 6

Chamberlain
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte
Crow Creek
Dupree (B to A)
McLaughlin
Mobridge-Pollock
Stanley County
Winner

Region 8

Belle Fourche
*Custer
Hill City
Hot Springs
Lead-Deadwood
RC Christian
St. Thomas More

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

CLASS B

Region 1

Aberdeen Christian
Aberdeen Roncalli (A to B)
Britton-Hecla
Langford Area
*Leola/Frederick Area
Northwestern
Warner
*Waubay/Summit
Wilmot

Region 3

Arlington
Castlewood
De Smet
*Estelline/Hendricks
Hitchcock-Tulare
*Iroquois/Doland
James Valley Christian
Lake Preston
Waverly-South Shore (1 to 3)
Wolsey-Wessington

Region 5

Alcester-Hudson
Centerville
Freeman
*Freeman Academy/Marion
Gayville-Volin
Irene-Wakonda
Menno
Scotland
Viborg-Hurley

Region 7

Crazy Horse
Edgemont
Jones County
Kadoka Area
Lyman
New Underwood
Oelrichs
Philip
Wall
White River

Region 2

Faulkton Area
*Herreid/Selby Area
Highmore-Harrold
Ipswich
Lower Brule
Miller (A to B)
*North Central
*Potter County
Sully Buttes
Sunshine Bible Academy

Region 4

Bridgewater-Emery (5 to 4)
Canistota (5 to 4)
Chester Area
Colman-Egan
Dell Rapids St. Mary
Ethan
Howard
Mitchell Christian
*Oldham-Ramona/Rutland
Sioux Falls Lutheran

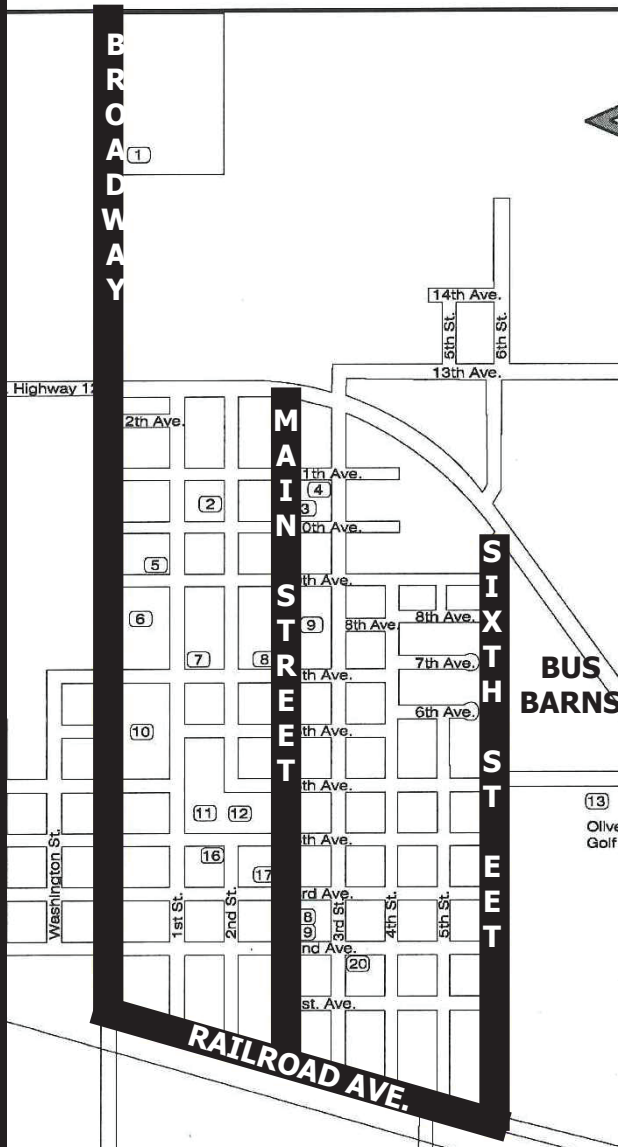
Region 6

Avon
Burke
Colome
Corsica-Stickney
Gregory
*Kimball/White Lake
Marty
Platte-Geddes
*Tripp-Delmont/Armour
*Wessington Springs (3 to 6)

Region 8

Bison
Faith
Harding County
Lemmon
McIntosh
Newell
Takini
Timber Lake
Tiospaye Topa
Wakpala

Notice of Garbage Pickup Effective March 9th



Groton residents are asked to bring their garbage to the following locations until further notice:

Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street & Broadway (Highway 37)

Residents of the Broadway Mobile Home Park need to take their garbage to Hwy 37.

Residents north of 13th Avenue (Olson and Jacobson Developments) need to bring their garbage to the bus barns.

Please bring your garbage bags and cans to these streets for Tuesday pickup.

Governor Noem Signs Bills into Law

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

[HB 1029](#) requires a permit to conduct mining operation for certain ore milling facilities.

[HB 1053](#) establishes an annual fee for certain electric motor vehicles.

[HB 1067](#) modifies identification requirements for a marriage license and provides certain provisions for a name change.

[HB 1069](#) modifies the expenditures that are recoverable as disbursements by a prevailing party in a civil action or a special proceeding.

[HB 1073](#) authorizes dentists to void certain contract terms with insurers.

[HB 1079](#) limits certain actions that may be taken by the executive branch relative to nonprofit corporations or charitable trusts.

[HB 1090](#) modifies certain requirements for domestic not-for-profit corporations.

[HB 1132](#) adds dental hygienists to the list of mandatory reporters of child abuse or neglect.

[HB 1195](#) authorizes the participation of certified registered nurse anesthetists in the recruitment assistance program.

[HB 1196](#) provides free tuition and fees to visually impaired residents for courses not subsidized by the state general fund.

[HB 1234](#) makes certain revisions to the seller's property condition disclosure statement.

[HB 1262](#) regulates kratom for those under the age of twenty-one.

Governor Noem has signed 104 bills into law this legislative session.

Governor Noem Signs Bill to Defend Privacy Rights of Charitable Donors

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed [HB 1079](#), which protects the privacy rights of donors to charitable organizations, into law.

"South Dakotans should be free to give to charity without having their personal information released against their will," continued Governor Noem. "This bill protects the privacy rights of all South Dakotans, especially those who generously give of their own treasures to support charitable organizations."

This legislation comes in the wake of attacks on the privacy rights of charitable donors in states like California. Contrary to media reporting, HB 1079 will have no impact on campaign finance laws.

#373 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We're short tonight—not that much news, which I guess could be viewed as a good thing these days. We have 28,800,900 total cases in the US, 0.2% more than we had yesterday. There were 66,700 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations have declined again to 46,388. And there were just 1609 deaths reported today. That brings us to 51789 total deaths in the US, 0.3% more than yesterday.

One year ago today, we had 115 reported cases of Covid-19 in the US. I wrote, "There are almost certainly many more, but we're still not rolling out the testing we need." Apparently, even this early, some of the problems which were going to plague us for months had appeared. There was a large number of cases in the Seattle area and another cluster of cases in northern California. There were cases reported in 15 states, including Nebraska where the cases at this point appear to have all been people flown in for treatment. We were up to nine deaths, all of them in King County, Washington. By this time, we had discussed here reproduction number (R0) and how it is used to assess the epidemic potential of a pathogen. We had also talked about transmission and extensively about precautions. We were still cautioning people that face masks should be reserved for the use of health care workers and we weren't yet talking about airborne spread, but the other recommended precautions would look quite familiar to us now.

For the first time, our seven-day average of vaccinations administered is over two million. This is real progress. About 16 percent of us have received at least one dose, and more than eight percent are fully vaccinated. We are making progress. This is not really enough yet to have much impact on transmission, but we're moving in the right direction. I hope we can keep up the pace in coming weeks; it's going to become more and more important as this next surge hits.

Whenever a new vaccine is authorized for use, we begin the process of monitoring how close real-world effectiveness comes to the efficacy rates seen in controlled clinical trials; since the real world can be quite a bit messier than the controlled world of a study, there can be surprises along the way. So far, the vaccines we've authorized seem to be ignoring the messiness of the world and producing some pretty solid results. For example, a look at health care workers in Los Angeles County shows that new cases reported from this group has dwindled to a fraction of what they'd been running. We will want to remember here that Los Angeles County was the hardest-hit place in the country just a few short weeks ago and that health care workers were the first to be vaccinated. What we've seen since the end of November when those first vaccines went out, even though not all health care workers consented to vaccination, is a 94 percent reduction in cases among them, according to public health officials. While some health care workers have been reluctant to accept vaccine and some have completely refused, even the less-than-ideal rates of vaccination seen have had a significant impact on case rates. For example, the week of November 29, there were 434 new cases in nursing-home workers; the week of February 14, there were 10. For all health care workers, the decline was from 1800 to 69. The county public health department statement made it clear: "High rates of vaccination are correlated with the lowest rates of cases and deaths among health care workers at nursing homes." While cases were decreased across the county, even among populations who had not been vaccinated, the declines among health care workers far outpaced the general declines. These vaccines really do work.

The CDC's ensemble forecast for deaths is out for the week. You may recall that last week was the first time in the pandemic when this forecast was lower in a week than it had been in the previous week even though each subsequent forecast includes an additional week, a reflection of then-falling new-case rates. I am sorry to report that those days are gone, at least for now. We're higher again this week. Last week's high-end projection was for 548,000 deaths by March 20, and we're now looking at a high-end projection of 564,000 by March 27, not disastrously higher, but higher; and that's a worry, especially with the reductions in restrictions we're seeing across the country. This is a terrible time for that, as we've discussed several times just lately. Lowering restrictions just in time for new, highly-transmissible variants to sweep across the country is a recipe for disaster. We're all going to have to redouble our individual efforts, since collective effort doesn't seem to be forthcoming. And protect yourselves if you can't trust your neighbors

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to protect you—I'm very afraid that, in most places, you can't.

Libraries have been gathering places for communities across the nation for generations. In recent years, they've become almost social service centers as they've provided warming spots for the homeless, places for those with no Internet access to apply for jobs and connect with the world, opportunities for elderly to congregate, and so much more. They're not just places with books; they offer career counseling, ESL classes, sites for learning, access to the world. But in the age of Covid-19, people can't gather so much anymore and libraries have effectively emptied out in many cities.

And libraries have adapted, moving much of what they do online. You can reserve a book online and then just run by to pick it up. You can read periodicals online too using the library's subscription. Movies are available for streaming. And those classes—ESL, career, etc.—are now virtual. Story time for children has moved online too. The Brooklyn Public Library has been offering bilingual story times in several languages.

One that's been attracting quite a lot of attention is Tenzin Kalsang's story time conducted in both Tibetan and English. She told NPR she was really nervous beforehand: She was used to reading in person, but this was something entirely new. She put potted plants and kids' books all around in one corner of her apartment so it would look like the story corner at the library, and then she began livestreaming on Facebook. The idea is that she reads in English and then the same thing again in Tibetan before turning each page. And she's getting viewers—some 20,000 at times. The NPR report said, "That's like selling out Madison Square Garden. For a library story time, that's fall off your chair success." I guess so.

Turns out there are tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees all around the world, some of them displaced for upwards of 70 years, and they're trying to preserve their language and their culture in the diaspora. One mother of a story time devotee said, "Without language, culture cannot survive. I'm worried she will lose our culture." She mentions she can't even find a book in Tibetan at the library; there are so few places to go for this sort of thing. Her daughter reports that story time helps her to feel closer to her culture. And that was the goal, after all.

And so participants in Kalsang's story time are not just residents of the US, but people found in many countries because, of course, the Internet respects no boundaries. She points out that this is a way that libraries can celebrate diversity. That seems to be working. And the service thing seems to be hale and hearty too. Libraries are just remarkable places that have adapted—to cultural change that saw most families with mothers working outside the home, then to digital information technologies, and now to a worldwide pandemic—while still fulfilling their basic mission. There's a lot to like here.

Be well. I'll be back tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	454	432	864	15	Minimal	4.2%
Beadle	2752	2614	5829	39	Substantial	24.4%
Bennett	382	370	1176	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1505	1477	2055	25	Minimal	9.3%
Brookings	3599	3503	11861	37	Moderate	1.8%
Brown	5147	4989	12617	89	Moderate	10.3%
Brule	692	677	1870	9	Minimal	9.7%
Buffalo	420	406	897	13	None	0.0%
Butte	980	947	3207	20	Moderate	6.5%
Campbell	129	125	257	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1305	1215	3898	21	Substantial	8.2%
Clark	374	357	944	5	Moderate	23.1%
Clay	1801	1760	5183	15	Moderate	8.2%
Codington	4007	3825	9608	77	Substantial	21.5%
Corson	470	453	996	12	Minimal	9.7%
Custer	754	730	2689	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2957	2870	6492	62	Moderate	7.0%
Day	665	621	1764	28	Substantial	5.9%
Deuel	474	461	1126	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1412	1373	3806	26	Substantial	7.6%
Douglas	434	414	905	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	482	461	1034	12	Minimal	4.0%
Fall River	530	502	2607	15	Moderate	9.2%
Faulk	361	340	691	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	979	912	2213	38	Substantial	13.4%
Gregory	542	498	1267	29	Moderate	8.3%
Haakon	253	237	530	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	717	654	1764	38	Substantial	26.4%
Hand	338	322	809	6	Moderate	11.1%
Hanson	363	350	712	4	Moderate	28.0%
Harding	91	90	181	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2305	2228	6537	36	Substantial	6.0%
Hutchinson	790	749	2358	25	Moderate	7.5%

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Hyde	138	135	405	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	279	263	909	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	272	250	549	16	Minimal	10.0%
Jones	85	84	219	0	Minimal	12.5%
Kingsbury	639	611	1664	14	Moderate	3.9%
Lake	1198	1147	3284	17	Substantial	7.6%
Lawrence	2831	2754	8485	45	Moderate	5.9%
Lincoln	7784	7555	20086	77	Substantial	10.1%
Lyman	601	586	1866	10	Minimal	2.8%
Marshall	323	297	1180	5	Substantial	15.4%
McCook	745	709	1611	24	Moderate	4.0%
McPherson	239	231	551	4	Minimal	12.5%
Meade	2600	2518	7619	31	Substantial	11.4%
Mellette	252	242	726	2	Minimal	33.3%
Miner	271	253	572	9	Minimal	7.1%
Minnehaha	28131	27321	77632	333	Substantial	7.6%
Moody	619	591	1748	16	Moderate	5.9%
Oglala Lakota	2061	1992	6619	49	Moderate	7.2%
Pennington	12938	12546	39034	189	Substantial	10.9%
Perkins	348	329	806	14	Minimal	8.0%
Potter	373	362	826	4	Moderate	14.3%
Roberts	1198	1124	4103	36	Substantial	15.7%
Sanborn	331	323	684	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	798	766	2111	25	Minimal	3.0%
Stanley	332	323	921	2	Moderate	0.0%
Sully	137	132	310	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1219	1189	4098	28	Minimal	8.0%
Tripp	703	668	1474	16	Substantial	21.2%
Turner	1068	1003	2713	53	Moderate	7.1%
Union	1989	1914	6205	39	Substantial	6.7%
Walworth	726	697	1816	15	Moderate	7.0%
Yankton	2804	2743	9272	28	Moderate	6.1%
Ziebach	337	327	862	9	Minimal	7.1%
Unassigned	0	0	1805	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4543	0
10-19 years	12695	0
20-29 years	20038	7
30-39 years	18561	18
40-49 years	16106	35
50-59 years	15917	113
60-69 years	12937	250
70-79 years	6910	432
80+ years	5126	1038

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	58783	892
Male	54050	1001

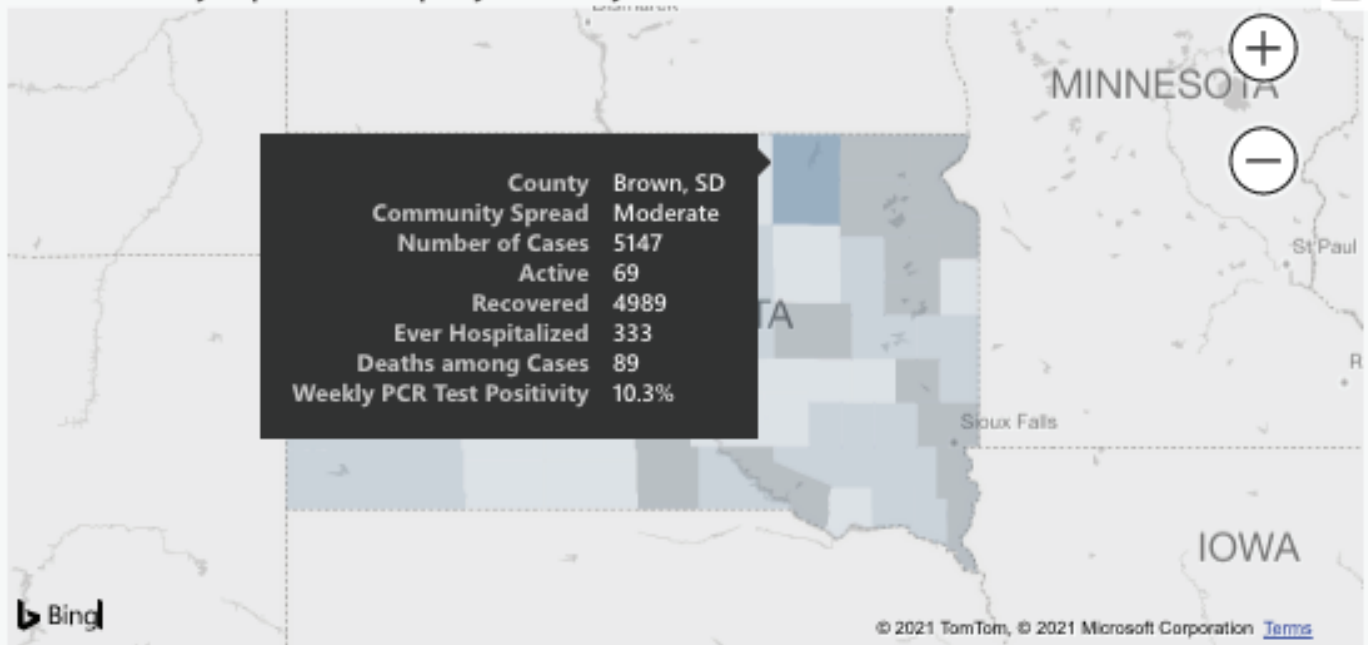
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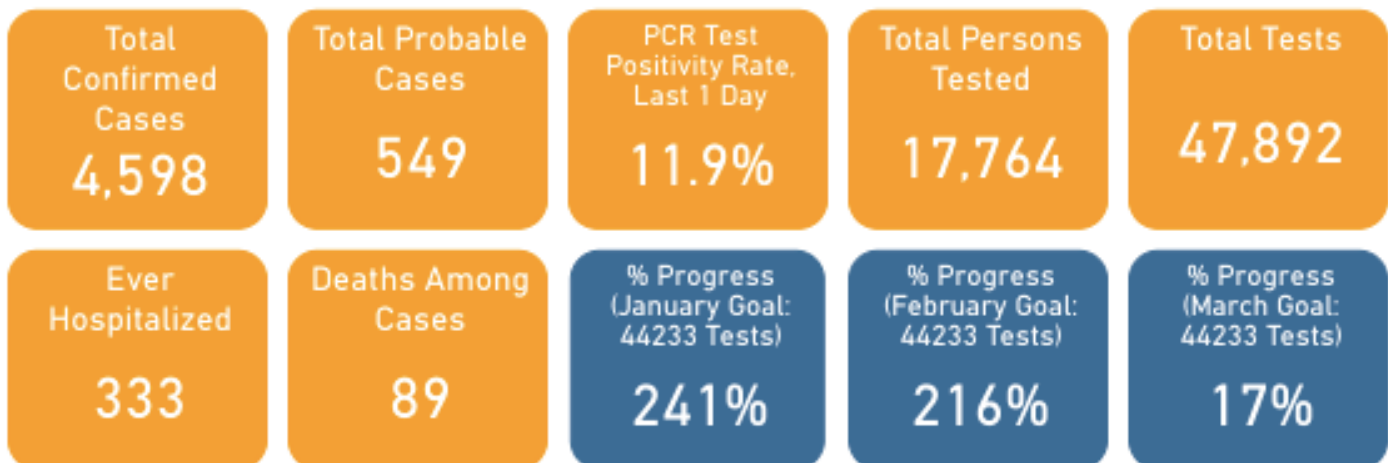
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



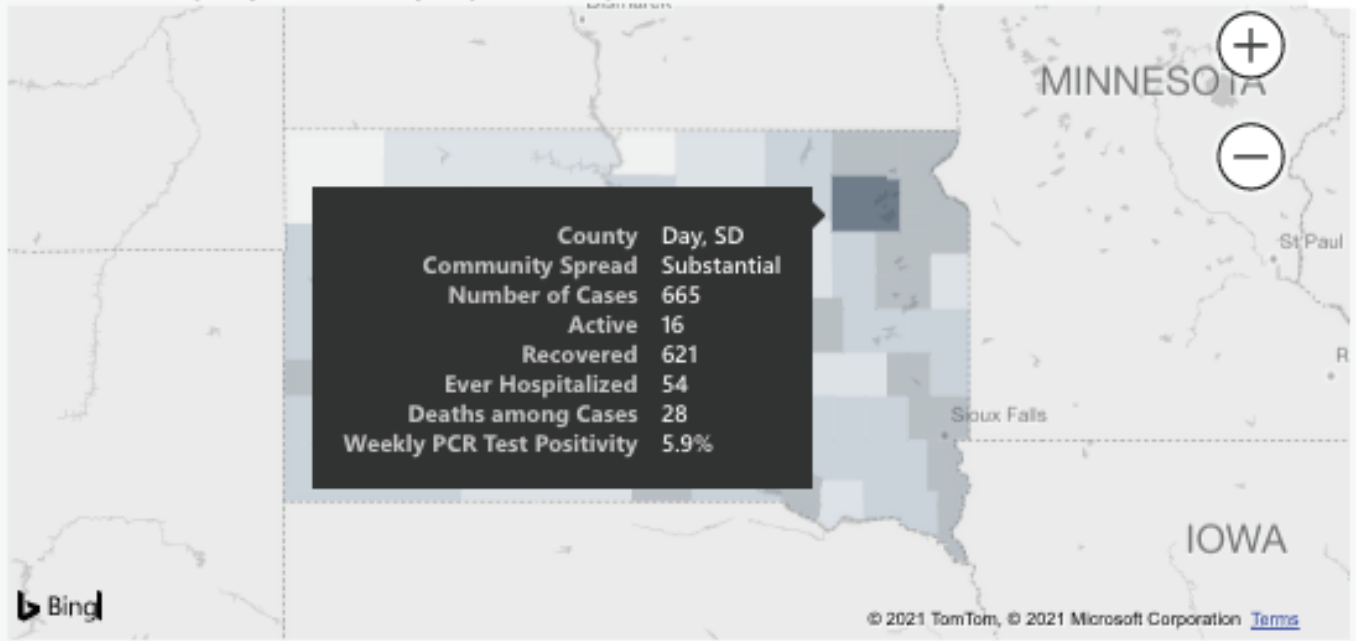
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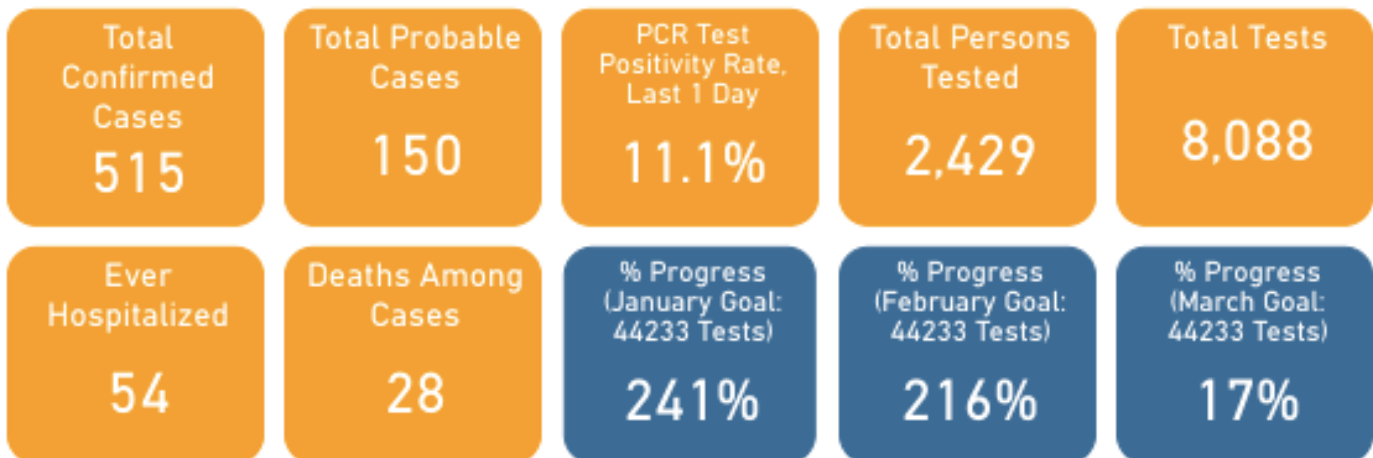
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

229,762

State Allocation

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

150,076

State Allocation

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

26%

State & Federal Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	0
Moderna	116,294
Pfizer	113,468

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	38,162
Moderna - Series Complete	39,066
Pfizer - 1 dose	32,228
Pfizer - Series Complete	40,620

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	26.48%
Series Complete	13.93%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	587	199	194	393
Beadle	4650	1,822	1,414	3,236
Bennett*	383	105	139	244
Bon Homme*	2454	1,120	667	1,787
Brookings	6621	2,929	1,846	4,775
Brown	10040	2,946	3,547	6,493
Brule*	1410	410	500	910
Buffalo*	114	74	20	94
Butte	1580	682	449	1,131
Campbell	794	282	256	538
Charles Mix*	2281	965	658	1,623
Clark	833	337	248	585
Clay	3556	1,072	1,242	2,314
Codington*	7147	2,475	2,336	4,811
Corson*	200	76	62	138
Custer*	2022	804	609	1,413
Davison	5601	1,537	2,032	3,569
Day*	1802	630	586	1,216
Deuel	1029	345	342	687
Dewey*	324	74	125	199
Douglas*	835	251	292	543
Edmunds	912	338	287	625
Fall River*	1949	681	634	1,315
Faulk	722	270	226	496
Grant*	1681	725	478	1,203
Gregory*	1172	464	354	818
Haakon*	416	146	135	281

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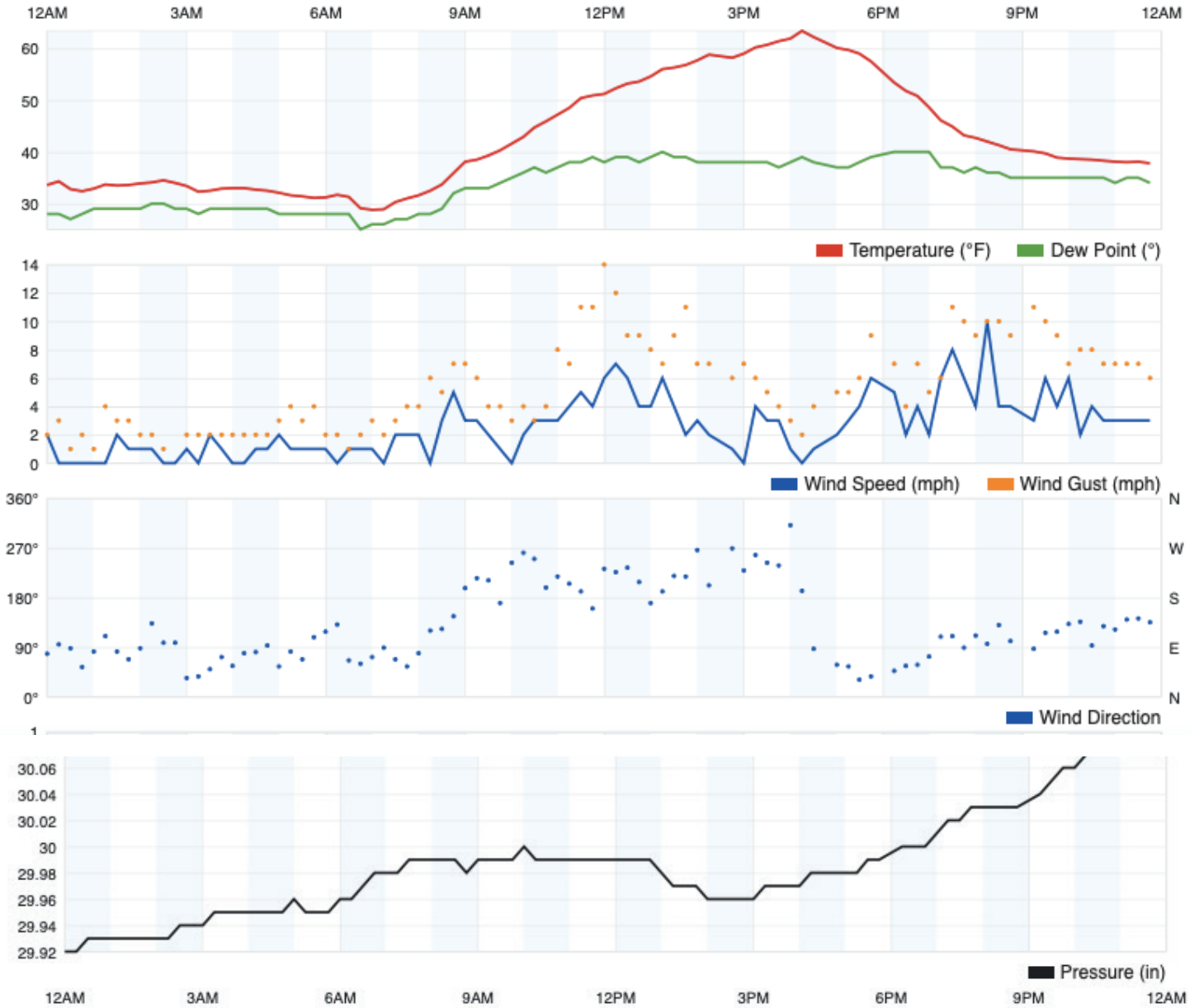
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Hamlin	1245	495	375	870
Hand	1029	391	319	710
Hanson	346	128	109	237
Harding	57	35	11	46
Hughes*	5639	1,821	1,909	3,730
Hutchinson*	2466	888	789	1,677
Hyde*	400	168	116	284
Jackson*	306	106	100	206
Jerauld	551	279	136	415
Jones*	475	147	164	311
Kingsbury	1630	782	424	1,206
Lake	2729	1,003	863	1,866
Lawrence	5866	2,186	1,840	4,026
Lincoln	19607	4,505	7,551	12,056
Lyman*	556	180	188	368
Marshall*	1094	432	331	763
McCook	1666	516	575	1,091
McPherson	165	67	49	116
Meade*	4465	1,687	1,389	3,076
Mellette*	35	17	9	26
Miner	646	194	226	420
Minnehaha*	60554	15,642	22,456	38,098
Moody*	1200	504	348	852
Oglala Lakota*	135	57	39	96
Pennington*	27606	7,656	9,975	17,631
Perkins*	393	149	122	271
Potter	564	272	146	418
Roberts*	3255	1,327	964	2,291
Sanborn	738	236	251	487
Spink	2084	732	676	1,408
Stanley*	858	302	278	580
Sully	249	95	77	172
Todd*	137	49	44	93
Tripp*	1552	560	496	1,056
Turner	2617	695	961	1,656
Union	2049	995	527	1,522
Walworth*	1509	473	518	991
Yankton	7413	1,731	2,841	4,572
Ziebach*	47	13	17	30
Other	4714	1,116	1,799	2,915

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs











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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Fog then Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Fog	Areas Fog then Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Sunny
High: 61 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 55 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 66 °F

May-Like Temperatures Continue

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Today Mar 4, 2021	Friday Mar 5, 2021	Saturday Mar 6, 2021	Sunday Mar 7, 2021	Monday Mar 8, 2021	Tuesday Mar 9, 2021
					
50s & 60s	50s & 60s	60s & 70s?	60s & 70s?	50s & 60s	50s & 60s
AM fog possible	AM fog possible. If cloud cover sticks around all day, high temps would be a bit less mild.	Record highs? Aberdeen: 69 in 2000 Pierre: 73 in 2016 Mobridge: 76 in 2016	Record highs? Aberdeen: 70 in 2016 Sisseton: 69 in 2000 Mobridge: 64 in 1968	Warmth continues	Low pressure brings potential for precipitation. Details fuzzy at this time.
		 FIRE DANGER	 FIRE DANGER		

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Today in Weather History

March 4, 1994: Two to five inches of snow fell across northeast and part of central South Dakota from the 3rd into the 4th. This new snowfall, combined with the already deep and expansive snowpack and winds of 20 to 40 mph, brought widespread blowing and drifting snow. Visibilities were reduced to near zero at times, making travel treacherous. Snowdrifts blocked many roads. Many schools, as well as several highways, were closed. Several vehicles became stuck and had to be pulled out. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Clear Lake, Britton, Waubay, and Wilmot; and 5 inches at Onida, Blunt, Highmore, Miller, and Milbank.

1873: The second inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant remains Washington, DC's, record cold March day. The low was 4 degrees, and by noon with the sunshine, the temperature was 16 degrees. Wind chills were around 30 degrees below zero. The 40 mph winds made his inaugural address inaudible to most on the platform with him.

1899: Cyclone Mahina, aka "The Bathurst Bay Hurricane" in Australia, was credited with having produced the highest storm surge on record in the world. The cyclone, with an estimated central pressure of 911 millibars or 26.90 inches of mercury, caused a 42.6-foot surge when it came ashore on the coast of northern Australia. The storm killed as many as 400 people and is currently Australia's deadliest cyclone.

1983: Brownsville, Texas recorded a high of 100 degrees, the earliest the city has ever hit the century mark.

1909 - Though fair weather was forecast, President Taft was inaugurated amidst a furious storm. About ten inches of wet snow disrupted travel and communications. The storm drew much criticism against the U.S. Weather Bureau. (David Ludlum)

1953 - Snow was reported on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. (The Weather Channel)

1966 - A severe blizzard raged across Minnesota and North Dakota. The blizzard lasted four days producing up to 35 inches of snow, and wind gusting to 100 mph produced snow drifts 30 to 40 feet high. Bismarck ND reported zero visibility for 11 hours. Traffic was paralyzed for three days. (2nd-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Rain and high winds prevailed in the northwestern U.S. A wind gust to 69 mph at Klamath Falls OR was their highest in 25 years, and winds at the Ashland Ranger Station in the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California reached 85 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow and freezing rain made travel hazardous in Ohio and Indiana. A six car pile-up resulted near Columbus OH, with seven injuries reported. Up to two inches of ice glazed central Indiana. Up to ten inches of snow blanketed northern Ohio. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the Lower Mississippi Valley. A strong (F-3) tornado injured five persons near Brownsville MS, and killed seven cows and two hogs in one pasture. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 90 mph at Canton MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A Pacific cold front working its way across the western U.S. produced heavy snow over parts of Idaho, Nevada and Utah. Up to eleven inches of snow blanketed the valleys of northwest Utah, while 12 to 25 inches fell across the mountains of northern Utah. Up to six inches of snow blanketed the valleys of east central Nevada, while more than a foot of snow was reported in the high elevations. In Idaho, 6 to 8 inches of snow was reported around Aberdeen and American Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - An F0 tornado 2 miles north of Muldrow breaks a record stretch of days without a reported tornado, 292 days.

2008 - Only two days after reaching 78 degrees, St. Louis receives nearly a foot of snow in seven hours, the biggest snowstorm in 15 years.

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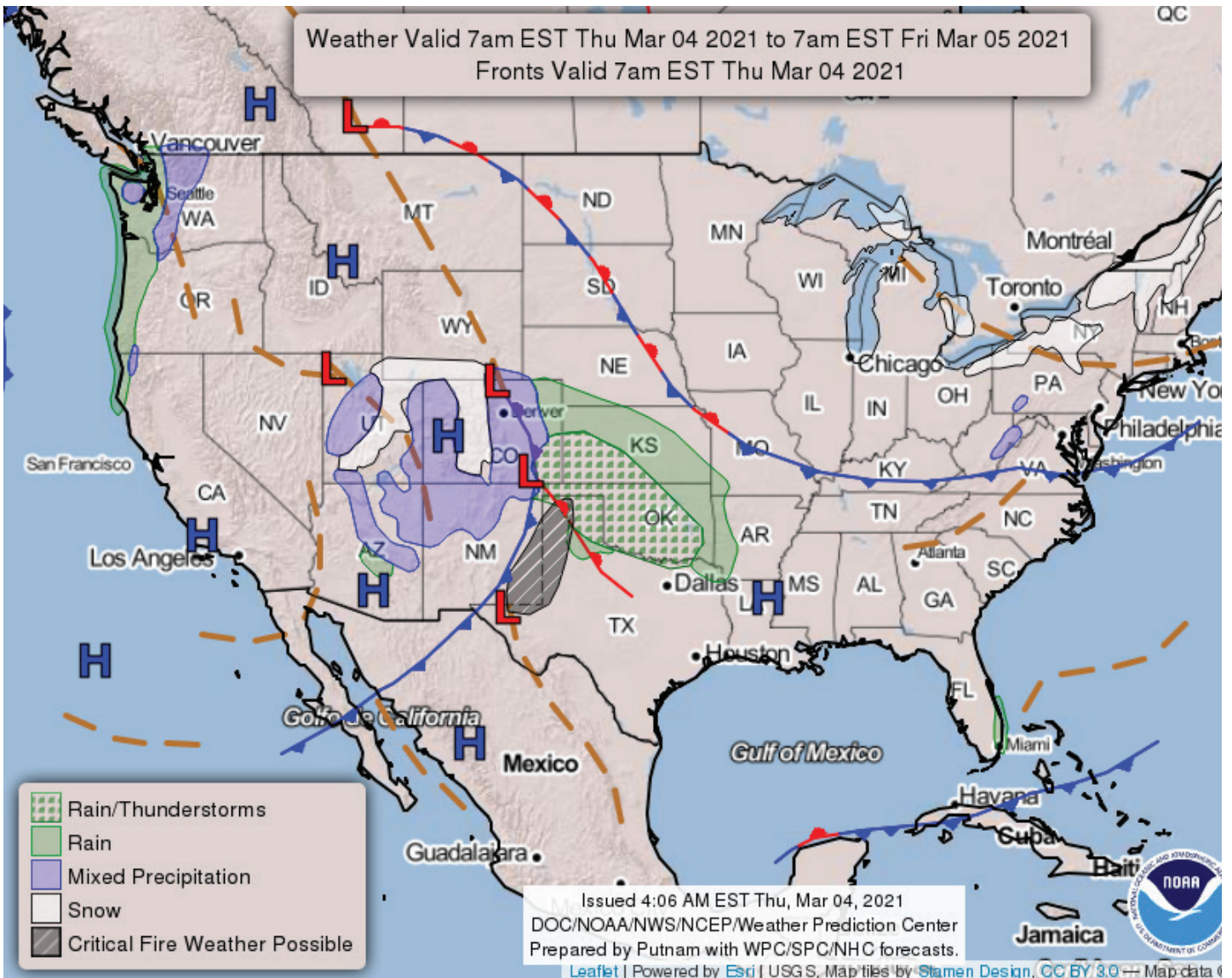
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 64 °F at 4:19 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 6:51 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 11:56 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 73° in 1905
Record Low: -23° in 1917
Average High: 34°F
Average Low: 15°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.09
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.11
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:25 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:04 a.m.



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OUR SOURCE OF SECURITY

Life is unpredictable. Rarely does a day pass without someone or something interrupting our best-laid plans. We look forward to days without worry and nights that are peaceful. Then, suddenly and without our permission, we are jolted into the realm of the unknown and the valley of the unexpected. We strive to be safe and secure but we have no assurance that tragedy will not strike us without warning.

Psalm 23 is no doubt the world's most loved psalm. The helpless image of sheep who want to stray from the flock and their need for protection by an ever-present and always watchful shepherd gives us comfort and calmness. We all need and want that kind of Shepherd. It gives hope and assurance that we will never be left alone during the dark hours of life and that we will never have to face dangerous valleys or dimly lit pathways by ourselves.

In this psalm, David presents a picture of God that reveals His love, His loyalty, and His presence. As long as we live we can say He is "my" shepherd – not "a" shepherd or "someone else's shepherd" but "my" very own shepherd who watches over me and every step we take.

And finally, when we are face to face with the certainty of death after the uncertainties of life, we know that He is – not might be – but is with us as we "pass through" the dark valley of death and enter into eternity where He will greet us, and we will enjoy His presence forever!

Prayer: We are grateful to You, Lord, for giving us Your peace, presence, and protection, today and every day and that You, our Creator, are also our Shepherd. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:1

FINAL EXPENSES

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

14-28-29-30-34

(fourteen, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$52,000

Lotto America

16-18-19-28-45, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 3

(sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty-eight, forty-five; Star Ball: six; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.25 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$55 million

Powerball

21-40-44-50-55, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 3

(twenty-one, forty, forty-four, fifty, fifty-five; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$123 million

Businesses tied to Noem family got \$600,000 in virus grants

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Family members of South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem received more than \$600,000 in funds from a state grant program pushed by the governor that directed federal coronavirus relief funds to small businesses.

A ranch belonging to Noem's family, Racota Valley Ranch Partnership, received one payment of \$500,000, and a business operated by her brothers, Rock and Robb Arnold, received payments of just over \$100,000, according to records on the grant program.

The Legislature approved the grant plan in October, but the family businesses benefitted from adjustments the Republican governor made. The plan initially capped grants at \$100,000, but later in the month, with plentiful federal funds at their disposal, Noem's administration adjusted the grant cap to \$500,000. The governor also later opened up a second round of grant applications to businesses hurt by the pandemic from September to November.

A total of 126 businesses across the state — less than 4% of grant applicants — received grants of \$500,000. Some received even more because they applied in both rounds of applications. There is no indication that Noem played a part in the allocation of funds.

Noem — who is becoming a rising force in the GOP as the party tries to identify 2024 presidential candidates — once maintained part-ownership of the ranch, but her office said she no longer does.

"The Governor has no financial interest in Racota Valley and hasn't for years," said her spokesman Ian Fury, but he acknowledged the ranch had paid rent for 22 acres of farmland Noem owns. Fury said Noem had rented out the land for \$2,200 annually but ended the lease agreement on Jan. 1.

Robb Arnold declined to comment on the grants or share the financial statements cited on the applications. The Bureau of Finance and Management did not immediately respond to a request for more information on their applications.

Fury said grant eligibility was set by the Legislature and was administered by Guidehouse, an independent consultant based in Virginia.

The business grant program was a cornerstone of Noem's plan to spend \$1.25 billion in federal coronavirus money. It made grants of up to \$500,000 available for businesses that could show a 15% drop

in cash flow from the previous year. So far, it has paid out \$288 million to businesses that showed they were hurt by the pandemic.

As the program was formed, Noem also asked the state Supreme Court to weigh in on whether lawmakers could benefit, either directly or indirectly, from the program as lawmakers inquired whether they could apply for the grants. Noem's lawyers acknowledged that the windfall of funds was "unprecedented" and that there was a potential conflict of interest in administering the funds.

The Supreme Court ruled that lawmakers were ineligible for the funds, citing a 2001 ruling that found the state constitution kept legislators from financially benefitting, directly or indirectly, from legislation they passed. This wouldn't apply to the governor, though.

Some business owners also expressed frustration at the pace of the application process last year as an initial deadline passed with fewer than 20% of applicants receiving any money. A list of grant recipients from the Bureau of Finance and Management did not disclose when the businesses tied to Noem's family filed their applications.

Racota Valley Ranch Partnership received the grant on Feb. 19, while the business operated by Noem's brothers, Arnold Bros. Water Management Inc., received payments on Jan. 6 and Jan. 20.

Senate revives Noem's bill to limit conservation officers

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Wednesday revived a piece of legislation pushed by Gov. Kristi Noem that would keep conservation officers from entering private property without permission.

Senators who favored the bill used a rarely-used legislative maneuver, whereby one-third of senators revive the bill in a process called a "smoke out."

The bill was unanimously defeated by a committee on Tuesday. But the Republican governor has pressed senators to pass her proposal, saying it would protect property rights. Conservation officers could still enter private lands under reasonable suspicion of crime occurring.

The Senate Judiciary Committee had 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.

The debate in the Senate pitted two top Republican lawmakers — the Senate pro tem and the Republican majority leader — against each other. Gary Cammack, the Senate Republican leader, initiated the move to revive it, while Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, the Senate pro tem, had disparaged the bill in Tuesday's committee.

While 17 senators supported the smoke out, proponents of the bill in the 35-member chamber will need a majority to place it on the debate calendar,

Senators dismiss ban on transgender girls from girls' sports

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota Senate committee on Wednesday dismissed a proposal to bar transgender women and girls from participating in women's sports leagues.

The bill had passed the House, with some Republican lawmakers casting the ban as a way to protect equal opportunities for women in sports. But there are currently no transgender athletes participating in female high school sports, according to the high school activities association. A Senate committee agreed with the high school activities association's argument that its current policy of evaluating applications from transgender athletes on a case-by-case basis is working, and that the legal and financial consequences of passing such a ban were unnecessary.

Opponents argued that passage of the bill would bring up a broad range of problems for the state — from the NCAA potentially shying away from hosting tournaments, to legal challenges for discrimination and the administrative burden of collecting proof of every high school athlete's sex at birth.

"This is a bad piece of legislation," said Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, one of the most powerful Republicans in the senate. "At least for a conservative that believes in less government, helping families with jobs and

less paperwork.”

Legislators in more than 20 states have introduced similar bills this year. Yet in almost every case, sponsors cannot cite a single instance in their own state or region where such participation has caused problems. Rep. Rhonda Milstead, the Republican who introduced the bill in South Dakota, asserted that she had heard from parents saying that transgender girls are currently competing in girls’ sports leagues. The high school activities association has said that is simply not the case.

Dan Swartos, the executive director of the activities association, said one transgender girl, who has now graduated, participated in girls’ sports leagues without causing problems for other athletes.

But Milstead argued the bill would have far-reaching consequences, hearkening back to women’s fight for equal opportunities in school sports.

“There’s not anyone in this room that can deny males have a competitive advantage over females,” she said.

There’s no authoritative count of how many trans athletes have competed recently in high school or college sports. Transgender adults make up a small portion of the U.S. population, about 1.3 million as of 2016, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank at the UCLA School of Law that specializes in research on LGBTQ issues.

But the two dozen bills making their way through state legislatures this year could be devastating for transgender teens who usually get little attention as they compete.

The South Dakota Legislature has perennially taken up bills decried as discriminatory of transgender people. While those bills have found traction in the House, the Senate has become adept at dismissing them.

“Our trans community needs our support instead of seeing attacks every year,” said Senate Democratic leader Troy Heinert.

The bill to ban transgender girls from girls’ sports could be revived in the Senate by a legislative maneuver supported by one-third of senators.

Sioux Falls police solve crimes at higher-than-national rate

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Like many other cities across the U.S., Sioux Falls saw a spike in crime last year, specifically in homicide rates.

According to police, there was an increase in violent crimes and a slight increase in property crimes in Sioux Falls. Despite the increase, crimes in the city were solved at a rate that beats the national average.

Authorities say record, or near record, amounts of methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl were seized last year.

“Sioux Falls remains a safe city and has a police department dedicated to keeping it that way. COVID-19 likely contributed to some of the crime increase, but the correlation between crime and drug abuse cannot be overlooked,” said Police Chief Matt Burns. “The new public safety training center will provide a state-of-the-art facility where officers will be trained on how to tackle crime and keep the city a safe place to live.”

Sioux Falls police have solved every homicide case over the last 20 years.

South Dakota House lawmakers leave AG impeachment in doubt

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House on Wednesday left the impeachment of the state’s attorney general in doubt as lawmakers moved to delay evaluating whether he should be impeached until the conclusion of the criminal case against him for hitting and killing a man with his car.

The House State Affairs Committee amended a resolution to impeach Republican Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, striking the articles of impeachment and replacing them with language that said he could potentially be impeached. The resolution, which will next head to the full House, holds no requirement that lawmakers take up the issue once the criminal case has concluded.

The lawmakers’ move was a step back from impeaching the state’s top law enforcement agent. Just a week ago, Republican Gov. Kristi Noem and some lawmakers had pressured him from every conceivable

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angle to resign. But Ravensborg defied those calls, even as the articles of impeachment were filed.

Ravnsborg is facing three misdemeanor charges for striking and killing Joseph Boever, 55, who was walking on the shoulder of a highway late on Sept. 12. Dates have not been set in Ravensborg's criminal case.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican, had argued that a delay was necessary after a judge last week ordered Noem and government officials to stop releasing evidence in the investigation. He said that a "fair and transparent" hearing on impeachment was not possible while lawmakers are under a gag order.

Rep. Will Mortenson, the Republican who filed the articles of impeachment, continued to push for Ravensborg's removal from office, saying he had lost the trust needed for the job. But he conceded that a delay was necessary.

However, Nick Nemec, Boever's cousin who has been outspoken against the attorney general since shortly after the crash, confronted lawmakers with his frustrations. He brought a jade plant that Boever had propagated, setting it beside him as he told lawmakers how he felt Ravensborg should have faced more serious charges.

"I've spent a lot of sleepless nights driving that section of highway, trying to wrap my head around what happened to my cousin," Nemec said.

He also said his family has dealt with attacks from "internet trolls who have been busy blaming Joe with false accusations."

After Nemec's statement, the House committee unanimously passed the resolution without discussion.

Gosch has asserted it would require a special session of the Legislature to reconvene for impeachment, which would need support from two-thirds of both chambers. That creates a higher vote threshold to move forward with impeachment than if the House were to take up the matter during this year's legislative session.

If the Legislature reconvenes, the House would need a simple majority to advance the impeachment charges to the Senate. There, it would require two-thirds of senators to convict and remove the attorney general from office.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 1, 2021.

Editorial: South Dakota Slows Down On Medical Marijuana

When South Dakota voters approved the legalization of both medical and recreational marijuana last November, proponents of one or both of those measures celebrated what truly seemed to many people to be an unlikely development as well as a surprising step forward for the state.

Since then, however, it feels like both November's triumphs and the future they opened up seem further away than ever.

Constitutional Amendment A, which legalized recreational marijuana (among others things), was challenged in court and shot down. That decision is now being appealed to the state Supreme Court, so its future remains uncertain.

And then there is medical marijuana as approved in Initiated Measure 26 (IM 26), which passed with a resounding 70% support. The measure called for the state to draw up rules by July 1 of this year for implementation of medicinal marijuana. Recently, Gov. Kristi Noem, who had opposed both marijuana measures, announced she wanted to delay the implementation of IM 26 for one year.

Last week, a South Dakota House approved a compromise, offered by the groups New Approach South Dakota and South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws, offered in House Bill 1100 that would delay implementation of medical marijuana but cut the one year delay down to about six months. Among other issues, it would also create some legal remedies in the interim for those residents who need medicinal marijuana to deal with health issues. Even with the reduced delay, those eligible for medical marijuana could get it no later than May 2022.

However, as lawmakers at the District 18 cracker barrel in Yankton noted Saturday, the proposed de-

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lay seems unnecessary. As Rep. Ryan Cwach noted, other states have been able to prepare for such a change in a much shorter period of time. Also, Rep. Mike Stevens, who admitted he didn't support IM 26 last November, said the sweeping support for the measure means an overwhelming majority of voters demanded action in a timely action, i.e., as stated in the measure's language.

The problem in delaying the implementation of IM 26 is that it falls too neatly into a perception that the state is dragging its feet in order to undercut the measure. Seeing what's happened with Constitutional Amendment A — which in effect finds parties prompted by certain state players to sue the state and force the state to defend a law that, it appears, the state itself is trying to dismantle — does not offer much encouragement that what's happening (or not happening) with medicinal marijuana is on the level. At least, that's the perception, fairly or unfairly, even though advocacy groups were the ones who proposed this compromise.

It seems sometimes that the will of the people is paramount, except when it isn't. What we've seen since last November is that the public decisions on both recreational and medicinal marijuana are facing frustrating headwinds emanating from those who are charged with overseeing these legal changes. The election numbers are supposed to speak for themselves and guide state officials. That should remain the case, no matter how much extra work is involved.

END

Brutal crackdown widely filmed but Myanmar protests carry on

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Footage of Myanmar security forces chasing down demonstrators protesting a coup, shooting a civilian at point-blank range and savagely beating others have revealed the extent of a brutal crackdown that saw 38 people shot and killed in a single day.

Despite the shocking violence the day before, protesters returned to the streets Thursday to denounce the military's Feb. 1 takeover, as many hoped that the increasing death toll would force the international community to take stronger action than it has so far. The U.N. Security Council is scheduled to meet Friday.

U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, described Wednesday as "the bloodiest day" since the takeover, when the military ousted the elected government of leader Aung San Suu Kyi. More than 50 civilians, mostly peaceful protesters, are confirmed to have been killed by police and soldiers since then, including the 38 she said were killed Wednesday.

While details of deaths have been hard to confirm, social media has been flooded with images of security forces targeting protesters and other civilians.

"I saw today very disturbing video clips," said Schraner Burgener, speaking to reporters at the U.N. in New York via video link from Switzerland. "One was police beating a volunteer medical crew. They were not armed. Another video clip showed a protester was taken away by police and they shot him from very near, maybe only one meter. He didn't resist to his arrest, and it seems that he died on the street."

She appeared to be referring to a video shared on social media that begins with a group of security forces following a civilian, who they seem to have just pulled out of a building. A shot rings out, and the person falls. After the person briefly raises their head, two of the troops drag the person down the street by the arms.

In other footage, which appears to be pulled from a security camera, about two dozen security forces, some with their firearms drawn, chase two people wearing the construction helmets donned by many protesters down a street. When they catch up to the people, they repeatedly beat them with rods and kick them. One of the officers, who appears to offer direction to some of his comrades at one point, is filming the brutality on his cell phone.

In another video, several police officers repeatedly kick and hit a person with rods, while the person cowers on the ground, hands over their head. Officers move in and out of the frame, getting a few kicks in and then casually walking away.

Wednesday's shocking death toll and the sheer volume of footage of brutality sparked outrage, with State Department spokesman Ned Price saying the U.S. was "appalled" at the images of "horrific violence"

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and the U.N.'s independent expert on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, saying the "systematic brutality of the military junta is once again on horrific display."

"I urge members of the UN Security Council to view the photos/videos of the shocking violence being unleashed on peaceful protesters before meeting in Friday's close-door session," he said on Twitter.

The Security Council has scheduled those consultations on calls to reverse the coup — including from U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres — and stop the escalating military crackdown.

But any kind of coordinated action at the U.N. 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.

Even if the council did take action, U.N. envoy Schraner Burgener cautioned it might not make much of a difference. She said she warned Myanmar's army that the world's nations and the Security Council "might take huge strong measures."

"And the answer was, 'We are used to sanctions and we survived those sanctions in the past,'" she said. When she also warned the army that Myanmar would become isolated, Schraner Burgener said, "the answer was, 'We have to learn to walk with only a few friends.'"

The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar, which for five decades had languished under strict military rule that led to international isolation and sanctions. As the generals loosened their grip, culminating in Suu Kyi's rise to power in the 2015 elections, the international community responded by lifting most sanctions and pouring investment into the country.

Wednesday's highest death toll was in Yangon, the country's biggest city, where an estimated 18 people died. Most if not all of the deaths occurred in the eastern neighborhood of North Okkalapa.

Video at the main hospital there showed grieving relatives collecting the blood-soaked bodies of family members. Some relatives sobbed uncontrollably, while others looked in shock at the scene around them.

There were efforts at holding new protests Thursday in at least three areas of Yangon: North Okkalapa, Sanchaung and Insein, all scenes of violence for the past few days. Police again used tear gas to try to disperse crowds, while protesters again set up barriers across major roads.

Protests also continued in Mandalay, the country's second-biggest city, where three people were reported killed Wednesday. A formation of five fighter planes flew over the city on Thursday morning in what appeared to be a show of force.

Protesters in the city flashed the three-fingered salute as they rode their motorbikes to follow a funeral procession for Kyal Sin, also known by her Chinese name Deng Jia Xi, a university student who was shot dead as she attended a demonstration the day before. Many thousands of people attended.

As part of the crackdown, security forces have also arrested well over a thousand people, including journalists, according to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. On Saturday, at least eight journalists, including Thein Zaw of The Associated Press, were detained. He and several other members of the media have been charged with violating a public safety law that could see them imprisoned for up to three years.

One Good Thing: A taste of the islands makes lockdown easier

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Glenda Andrew pulls a tray of salmon from the oven, filling the community center's kitchen with the aroma of garlic, cayenne and lemon rising from its crackling skin.

It is the scent of memory, of family dinners and church socials — the warmth of the Caribbean in the middle of a gray English winter made gloomier by COVID-19.

This is food for the soul, Andrew says, and it's needed now more than ever by Britain's older immigrants who have been isolated from friends and family by the pandemic. Once a week the 57-year-old joins other volunteers to prepare hot meals with the zing of the islands, which they distribute for free to people in Preston and surrounding communities in northwestern England. The area has recorded some of the U.K.'s highest coronavirus infection rates.

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"It's a great way to connect and build that relationship, but I didn't know that at the time," Andrew said of the project's beginnings. "I just knew that I wanted to do something and make sure that they were getting a hot meal — not sandwiches, not soup — getting something that they're accustomed to eating and hope that they would enjoy it."

Once a week, for the last 42 weeks, the lucky seniors on Andrew's list have been treated to delicacies such as jerk pork, curry goat and cow foot soup accompanied by rice and peas, yams and plantains. Portions are hefty, so there's enough to go in the freezer for another day. Last week, some 400 meals were packed into yellow foam packages and delivered by volunteers.

The meal program grew out of Andrew's work with Preston Windrush Generation & Descendants, a group organized to fight for the rights of early immigrants from the Caribbean and other former British colonies who found themselves threatened with deportation in recent years.

The Windrush Generation, named after the ship that carried the first migrants from the Caribbean in 1948, came to Britain in response to a government call for workers from throughout the Empire to help rebuild the country after World War II.

The Windrush Scandal rocked Britain in 2018 amid a crackdown on illegal immigration. Long-term legal residents lost jobs, homes and the right to free medical care because many arrived as children and couldn't produce paperwork proving their right to live in the U.K. Some were detained, and an unknown number were deported to countries they barely remembered.

When the coronavirus pandemic struck Britain, the free-spirited Andrew didn't want the community to be victimized again. She decided to create her own food program tailored to the taste buds of the people she grew up with.

Nothing is too good for Andrew's people. They get the best. No pilchards here.

"Salmon is a delicacy, isn't it? You know what I mean? They're worth it," she said. "They brought us up, they've taught us so many things. They gave up their life in the Caribbean to come here."

In addition to food, the volunteers offer a bit of human contact.

The loneliness and isolation of the past year is painful for many of the seniors. When deliveries arrive, they seek out friendly gossip with the volunteers about what their neighbors are up to.

Sylus Toussaint, 81, who came from Dominica in 1960, said chatting with volunteers like Dave Williams helps as much as the food.

"They say hello and give you a meal, and maybe for just a few seconds at least you see someone new; someone you haven't seen all week," Toussaint said as his wife, Bridget, shot him a bemused look. "If you are on your own, it is so nice to see a fresh face — especially bringing gifts."

Andrew wants to keep the meals flowing, even as optimism grows that Britain's mass vaccination program may soon allow lockdown restrictions to be eased.

The project runs on donations and the energy of Andrew, who seemed to be in a dozen places at once as she marshaled her volunteer chefs last week. For now, they use a donated kitchen in a community center, but there's a glimmer of hope for a more permanent venue at some point — maybe a place the community can gather.

But that's in the future. For now, the volunteers plan to just keep going, gluing the community together with plates of rice and peas.

"Initially it was the food and, as I said, I didn't know what we were creating," Andrew said. "And it's been amazing."

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

EU regulator starts a review of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine

By MARIA CHENG and DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

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MOSCOW (AP) — The European Medicines Agency has started a rolling review of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, many months after it was first approved for use in Russia and after dozens of countries around the world have authorized it.

In a statement Thursday, the European regulator said the review is based on results from lab studies and research in adults, which suggests the vaccine may help protect against the coronavirus.

Despite skepticism about Russia's hasty introduction of the vaccine, which was rolled out before it had completed late-stage trials, the vaccine appears to be safe and effective. According to a study published last month in the journal *Lancet*, Sputnik V is 91% effective and appears to prevent inoculated individuals from becoming severely ill with COVID-19, although it's still unclear if the vaccine can prevent the spread of the disease.

With a global shortage of COVID-19 vaccines, some experts say boosting the use of vaccines made by China and Russia — which have not been as in demand as those made by Western companies — could offer a quicker way to increase the global supply. The pandemic has already infected over 115 million people, killing over 2.5 million of them, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

The EMA has so far approved three COVID-19 vaccines for use across the 27-nation European Union: shots made by Pfizer-BioNtech, Moderna and AstraZeneca. It could license a fourth shot made by Johnson & Johnson at an expert meeting next Thursday.

The EMA has not set a date for when its expert group might meet to assess Sputnik V data but the rolling review aims to expedite the authorization process, which can typically take months.

Dr. Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, called the EMA announcement on Sputnik V "good news."

"We desperately need to enlarge our portfolio of vaccines, so I see this as a very welcome development," Kluge said.

In the meantime, dozens of countries have already authorized Sputnik V for use — including EU member Hungary — and many have agreed to purchase millions of doses of the shot.

Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund that bankrolled the development of the vaccine, said Thursday that "vaccine partnerships should be above politics and cooperation with EMA is a perfect example, demonstrating that pooling efforts is the only way to end the pandemic."

"Following EMA approval, we would be able to provide vaccines for 50 million Europeans starting from June," Dmitriev added.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said Thursday it is not looking to add the Russian vaccine to its portfolio at this stage.

"No talks are ongoing between negotiation teams and the producers, or institutes, or companies or organizations behind the Sputnik vaccine," said Stefan De Keersmaecker, the Commission's health policy spokesman.

The RDIF has been pushing for the EMA to review Sputnik V for months, with Dmitriev first announcing an application to the European regulator in November. In January, the EMA met with the developers of the vaccine.

Although there was considerable scientific skepticism when Russia unrolled its vaccine without completing advanced trials, many doubts have since been assuaged with the publication of its latest research. Experts said Russia's initial immunization campaign was marred by "unseemly haste, corner cutting and an absence of transparency."

Sputnik V uses a modified version of the common cold-causing adenovirus to carry genes for the spike protein into the coronavirus to prime the body to react if COVID-19 comes along. That's a similar technology to the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

But unlike AstraZeneca's two-dose vaccine, Sputnik V uses a slightly different adenovirus for the second booster shot, a factor that some scientists say may account for its apparently high efficacy rate.

The World Health Organization is also considering whether or not to issue an emergency use approval for Sputnik V; officials last month were awaiting further details from its Russian developers. That approval would be essential for any Sputnik V vaccines to be used in the U.N.-backed COVAX program to try to dis-

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tribute vaccines fairly to nations around the world, but COVAX has not yet signed any deals for Sputnik V.

Questions have been raised in the West over Russia's eagerness to export its vaccine amid its comparatively slow domestic vaccine rollout — officials say nearly 4 million people, less than 3% of Russia's population of 146 million, have received the shots so far.

"I must say we still wonder why Russia is offering theoretically millions and millions of doses while not sufficiently progressing in vaccinating their own people," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov retorted that Russia's vaccination campaign is going at "normal" rates, adding that the international demand for Sputnik V is "so high that it significantly exceeds (Russia's) production capacity."

The RDIF says it has received requests for 2.4 billion doses of the two-shot vaccine, enough to immunize 1.2 billion people, from over 50 countries. According to Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Russia has so far produced just over 10 million doses.

Jamey Keaten in Geneva and Samuel Petrequin in Brussels contributed to this report.

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

Hospitalized Prince Philip has successful heart procedure

By JILL LAWLESS and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Philip has had a successful heart procedure at a London hospital and is expected to remain for several days of "rest and recuperation," Buckingham Palace said Thursday.

The palace said the 99-year-old husband of Queen Elizabeth II "underwent a successful procedure for a pre-existing heart condition at St Bartholomew's Hospital."

"His royal highness will remain in hospital for treatment, rest and recuperation for a number of days," the palace said in a statement.

Philip, 99, has been hospitalized since being admitted to King Edward VII's Hospital in London on Feb. 16, where he was treated for an infection. On Monday he was transferred to a specialized cardiac care hospital, St. Bartholomew's.

Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, said Wednesday that Philip's condition was "slightly improving."

"We'll keep our fingers crossed," said Camilla, who is married to Prince Charles, eldest son of Philip and the queen.

Philip's illness is not believed to be related to the coronavirus. Both Philip and the monarch received COVID-19 vaccinations in January and chose to publicize the matter to encourage others to also take the vaccine.

Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, retired in 2017 and rarely appears in public. Before his hospitalization, Philip had been isolating at Windsor Castle, west of London, with the queen.

Although he enjoyed good health well into old age, Philip has had heart issues in the past. In 2011, he was rushed to a hospital by helicopter after suffering chest pains and was treated for a blocked coronary artery.

The longest-serving royal consort in British history, Philip married the then-Princess Elizabeth in 1947. He and the queen have four children, eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

His illness comes as the royal family braces for the broadcast of an interview conducted by Oprah Winfrey with Meghan, Duchess of Sussex.

Meghan and husband Prince Harry quit royal duties last year and moved to California, citing what they said were the unbearable intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media.

Relations between the couple and the palace appear to have become increasingly strained. On Wednesday, the palace said it was launching a human resources investigation after a newspaper reported that a

former aide had accused Meghan of bullying staff in 2018.

In a clip from the pre-recorded Winfrey interview, released by CBS, Winfrey asks Meghan how she feels about the palace "hearing you speak your truth today?"

"I don't know how they could expect that after all of this time we would still just be silent if there was an active role that the firm is playing in perpetuating falsehoods about us," the duchess says.

"The Firm" is a nickname for the royal family, sometimes used with affection and sometimes with a note of criticism.

The Latest: Virus cases up 9% in Europe in significant shift

By The Associated Press undefined

GENEVA — COVID-19 cases rose 9% last week over a 53-country region of Europe, snapping a six-week run of declines, the World Health Organization said Thursday as its European chief insisted that countries need to get "back to the basics."

Dr. Hans Kluge says more than 1 million cases were tallied over the last week in the region. He said the resurgence was particularly noticeable in central and eastern Europe, but some Western European countries saw increases as well.

More than half of the region noted increasing numbers of new infections, he said.

Alluding to the "solidarity" shown by some European countries that have taken in patients from hard-hit neighbors, Kluge said "over a year into the pandemic, our health systems should not be in this situation."

"We need to get back to the basics," he told reporters from WHO Europe headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Kluge called for measures like increased vigilance to fend off variants, improved testing and isolation of cases, more efforts to counter public "pandemic fatigue" and an accelerated rollout of vaccines.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- The EU's medicines agency will review Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine
- Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires diverged on social distancing, and those choices took the 2 cities in opposite directions
- Germany extends its coronavirus shutdown but easing restrictions in some areas
- Democrats tighten eligibility for stimulus checks in concession to party moderates as COVID-19 relief bill is prepared for Senate
- California will set aside 40% of vaccine doses for the state's most vulnerable neighborhoods
- Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

AMSTERDAM — The European Medicines Agency said it has started a rolling review of Sputnik V, many months after the vaccine was first approved for use in Russia and after dozens of countries around the world have authorized it.

In a statement Thursday, the European regulator said the review is based on results from lab studies and research in adults, which suggests the vaccine may help protect against coronavirus.

Despite skepticism about Russia's hasty introduction of the vaccine, which was rolled out before it had completed late-stage trials, the vaccine appears to be safe and effective. According to a study published in the journal *Lancet*, Sputnik V was about 91% effective in preventing people from becoming severely ill with COVID-19.

The EMA has not set a date for when its expert group might meet to assess Sputnik V data to decide if it should be approved across the European Union,

LONDON — Regulators in the U.K. and four other countries have announced new rules to fast-track the

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development of modified COVID-19 vaccines to ensure drugmakers can move swiftly to target emerging variants of the disease.

Previously authorized vaccines that are modified to combat new variants "will not need a brand new approval or 'lengthy' clinical studies," Britain's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency said Thursday.

"The clear goal is that future vaccine modifications that respond to the new variants of coronavirus can be made available in the shortest possible time to U.K. recipients without compromising at any stage on safety, quality or effectiveness," Dr. June Raine, the head of the agency, said in a briefing.

The new guidance is based on the model already used to modify the seasonal flu vaccine to keep up with annual changes in the virus and was issued jointly by regulators in the U.K., Australia, Canada, Singapore and Switzerland. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and European Medicines Agency have issued similar guidance.

HONG KONG — Hong Kong's government says a court has sentenced a woman to 10 days in jail for breaching coronavirus quarantine requirements.

A news release Thursday said the 61-year-old, who wasn't further identified, had been ordered to quarantine at home for 14 days last June. However, she left the place of quarantine on June 26 "without reasonable excuse nor permission given by an authorized officer," the news release said.

Hong Kong requires all those arriving from Macao, mainland China and Taiwan to undergo 14 days of compulsory quarantine, while those who have visited a foreign country within 21 days of their arrival must undergo 21 days of quarantine at a designated hotel.

A total of 115 people in Hong Kong have been convicted for violating quarantine rules and received fines and sentences of up to 14 days

Taiwan, mainland China and Macao have virtually eliminated local transmission of the virus, while Hong Kong on Thursday reported 14 new local cases for a total of 11,047 with 200 deaths.

LONDON — Britain says it will receive 10 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine that will be delivered from the Serum Institute of India, a company that was meant to be producing vaccines for the world's developing countries.

The 10 million doses being shipped to the U.K. are part of a larger order of 100 million doses that was part of the U.K.'s original deal for COVID-19 vaccines made by AstraZeneca.

In a statement Thursday, a U.K. government spokesman said the Serum Institute "is one part of our supply chain for the AstraZeneca vaccine," which also includes facilities in Britain and Europe.

The government said Britain's Medicines and Health products Regulatory agency had carried out an inspection of the Serum Institute's facilities and confirmed that "globally-recognized quality standards are being met."

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lanka's drug regulatory body has approved the Russian Sputnik V vaccine as the second available for use in the Indian Ocean island nation.

The state minister overseeing pharmaceutical products, Channa Jayasumana, said Sri Lanka has requested doses from Russia's Gamaleya Research Institute and was awaiting confirmation of the amount it would get.

Sri Lanka already is administering the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute in India. It received 1 million doses, half donated and half purchased from the institute.

Starting in January with frontline health workers, Sri Lanka has given the vaccine to more than 550,000 people.

Sri Lanka has counted 84,225 cases of COVID-19 with 484 fatalities.

BRUSSELS — Brussels Airlines reported a loss of 293 million euros in the financial year 2020 mainly due to travel disruptions linked to the coronavirus pandemic.

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The company on Thursday announced revenues down by 72% to 414 million euros while passenger numbers decreased by 77% to 2.4 million. It said the summer season will be essential as 2021 remains "a challenging year."

After grounding its planes for 12 weeks last year, the airline resumed operations on a reduced schedule during the summer. Hard-hit by the crisis, Brussels Airlines has reduced its fleet by 25% and its workforce by 20% after the Belgian government and Lufthansa, the airline's parent company, agreed on a rescue plan.

SANTA FE, N.M. -- New Mexico's top insurance regulator is putting medical providers on notice that people cannot be charged for coronavirus testing after reports that residents have been required to pay for coronavirus rapid-result tests.

Insurance Superintendent Russell Toal said Wednesday that his office is preparing an administrative bulletin to ensure testing costs are not passed directly on to consumers as state health officials push for robust testing to track infection rates and new strains of COVID-19.

Toal says the Office of the Superintendent of Insurance has received reports of people being charged in excess of \$100 for testing services that should be free.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's central bank says the country's economy shrank for the first time in 22 years in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic destroyed service industry jobs and depressed consumer spending.

Preliminary data released by the Bank of Korea on Thursday showed that the country's gross domestic product last year contracted 1% from 2019. It marked the first annual contraction for the country's economy since 1998, when it was in the midst of a crippling financial crisis.

The economy would have been even worse if not for the country's technology exports, which saw increased demand driven by personal computers and servers as the pandemic forced millions around the world to work at home.

The bank expects South Korea's economy to manage a modest recovery this year driven by exports. But it says it would take a longer time for the job market to recover from the damage to services industries such as restaurants and transportation.

The country reported another new 424 cases of the coronavirus on Thursday, bringing its national case-load to 91,240, including 1,619 deaths.

TORONTO — An expert panel is recommending Canadian provinces extend the interval between doses of a COVID-19 vaccine to quickly inoculate more people.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization says extending the dose interval to four months would create opportunities to protect the entire adult population within a short time.

The panel says many as 80% of Canadians older than 16 could receive a single dose by the end of June simply with the expected supply of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines. In comparison, the federal government previously said 38% of people would receive two doses by the end of June.

The committee's recommendation came hours after Newfoundland and Labrador said it will extend the interval between the first and second doses to four months, and days after health officials in British Columbia announced they were doing so.

Manitoba and Quebec also say they will delay second doses. Ontario previously said it was weighing a similar move but would seek advice from the federal government. The provinces administer health care in Canada.

BERLIN — Germany is extending its coronavirus shutdown by three weeks until March 28, but easing some restrictions to allow nonessential stores and other businesses to reopen in areas with relatively low infection rates.

After about nine hours of talks, Chancellor Angela Merkel and the governors of the country's 16 states

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agreed Wednesday to measures aimed at balancing concern over the impact of more contagious coronavirus variants with a growing clamor for a return to a more normal life.

The first moves have already been made: many elementary students returned to school last week. And on Monday, hairdressers opened after a 2 1/2-month break. Current lockdown rules were set to run through Sunday.

On Wednesday, Merkel and the state governors -- who in highly decentralized Germany have the power to impose and lift restrictions -- set out a phased plan that allows for a gradual, if limited, relaxation of restrictions.

"These should be steps toward opening but at the same time steps that do not set us back," Merkel told reporters in Berlin. "There are a great many examples in Europe of a dramatic third wave."

She pledged that "spring 2021 will be different from spring a year ago."

ATLANTA — Gov. Brian Kemp said Georgia's government will open five more mass-vaccination sites later this month as he defended the state's performance in delivering COVID-19 vaccines.

The state will open sites beginning March 17, joining four sites the state is already running. The Republican governor said Wednesday that the sites are being set up in advance of a further expansion of vaccine eligibility in the state to be announced later this month.

Numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that Georgia has administered only 68% of the vaccines it has received and has 1 million unadministered doses. The data show only the District of Columbia and Kansas lag further behind.

Georgia officials have disputed the CDC data for weeks. The state's own numbers show it has given 76% of available vaccines.

"We can't control who's holding second doses," Kemp said. "I don't think they should be doing that. They should be giving those doses."

Double standard? Gillibrand in spotlight after Cuomo scandal

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Kirsten Gillibrand was the first Democratic senator to call for her colleague Al Franken's resignation in 2017 as he faced allegations of sexual misconduct, building a profile as a leading advocate for women that became the centerpiece of her 2020 presidential bid.

But the New York senator is taking a different tact when it comes to sexual harassment allegations hitting closer to home, those against her state's Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo.

In a series of statements, Gillibrand has said accusations of offensive behavior by Cuomo are "serious and deeply concerning" and that the three women "who have come forward have shown tremendous courage." She has said that the claims against Cuomo are "completely unacceptable" and called for a full investigation — but stopped short of demanding his resignation.

Top Democrats in New York and nationally have similarly refrained from suggesting that Cuomo step down. That includes New York's senior senator and the chamber's majority leader, Democrat Chuck Schumer. It's a far more cautious approach than the parade of Democratic senators who followed Gillibrand's lead in calling for Franken's resignation.

That's fueling questions about whether, more than three years into the #MeToo movement, the push to hold powerful men accountable for sexual harassment and abuse is losing steam. Gillibrand paid a political price for her role in the Franken resignation and her tone toward Cuomo may reflect that.

"Our country needs to do better for women writ large," said Rachel O'Leary Carmona, executive director of Women's March, an advocacy group that grew out of the January 2017 demonstration when tens of thousands of women, most clad in pink, descended on Washington to protest Donald Trump's presidency. "Both parties and at every level of government."

Franken ultimately resigned, but Democrats later questioned whether they had moved too quickly to oust him. During her presidential campaign, Gillibrand faced questions about her decision and insisted she

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didn't regret calling for Franken to give up his Senate seat. But she acknowledged that doing so hurt her with top donors and may have hampered her effort to win a following in the leadoff caucuses in Iowa, which borders Franken's state of Minnesota.

Pete Buttigieg, who essentially tied for first place in Iowa, has said that when it came to Franken, he would "not have applied that pressure at that time before we knew more." The former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, is now President Joe Biden's transportation secretary.

Carmona's group has gone a step farther than Gillibrand and other leading Democrats, calling for an investigation against Cuomo but also demanding his "immediate resignation," noting that "conduct doesn't have to be illegal to be disqualifying."

Cuomo flatly rebuffed such calls Wednesday, saying that while he was "embarrassed" by the allegations, he has no intention of resigning.

"I work for the people of the state of New York," the governor said, breaking days of silence during a news conference. "They elected me."

A spokesman for Gillibrand declined to comment on whether the senator considered calling on Cuomo to resign. But, even in 2017, Gillibrand spent weeks calling for an investigation into Franken and only became the first Democratic senator to say he should step aside when word of a seventh woman accusing misconduct surfaced.

She also has argued that a "double standard" was at work, with her getting blamed for her party losing a once rising star in Franken even though so many Democrats eventually called for his resignation.

"Who is being held accountable for Al Franken's decision to resign? Women senators, including me," Gillibrand said in July 2019, about a month before she left the presidential race. "It's outrageous. It's absurd."

She's not the only one to see sexism in pressure falling on women to denounce alleged wrongdoing by a man. But Gillibrand has promoted herself as a feminist leader and champion of women's rights, and the Cuomo scandal concerns her state.

Gillibrand founded an activist group called Off the Sidelines, which raised millions of dollars to help mobilize more women to participate in politics, and for years relished being sometimes called the "#MeToo Senator."

"We all wish she had more courage right now, but she is not the story and she should not become the story," said Rebecca Katz, a Democratic consultant in New York City who said equating Gillibrand with Cuomo's alleged misconduct is "missing the whole point."

Gillibrand has nonetheless seen her national profile decline after her presidential bid.

She campaigned for Biden last fall. But unlike several other Senate colleagues who competed against Biden for the Democratic nomination, Gillibrand was never seriously considered a leading option to be Biden's running mate, despite his long-standing promise to pick a woman.

Already a senator for a dozen years, the 54-year-old Gillibrand has time to mount another presidential run, though questions about her handling of the scandal involving Franken — and now perhaps even her reaction to Cuomo — may linger.

"We need to stop blaming women for men's harassment," Katz said. "Sen. Gillibrand took a lot of incoming for rightly calling out Al Franken many years ago — for being one of many to call out Al Franken. We're doing this wrong."

EXPLAINER: Why Ethiopia's deadly Tigray crisis is growing

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Civilians massacred. Journalists arrested. People starving to death. Ethiopia's government is under growing pressure to allow the world to see firsthand what has occurred in its embattled Tigray region as its Nobel Peace Prize-winning prime minister rejects "partisan interventions."

That pressure is expected to spike this month as the United States chairs the United Nations Security Council and addresses the first major African crisis of the Biden administration. Millions of dollars in aid to Ethiopia, a key security ally in the region, are at stake.

Here's a look at the turmoil in Tigray as the Security Council meets behind closed doors on Thursday

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to discuss it:

WHAT ABOUT CIVILIANS MASSACRED?

Last month The Associated Press exposed the killing of an estimated 800 people in the city of Axum, citing several witnesses, and a week later Amnesty International reported "many hundreds" killed there, citing more than 40 witnesses. Soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, long an enemy of Tigray's now-fugitive leaders, were blamed.

Ethiopia continues to deny the Eritreans' presence, even as senior officials with the interim Tigray government that Ethiopia appointed are increasingly outspoken about them. There is growing concern that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who won the Nobel in 2019 for making peace with Eritrea, has now teamed up with it in war. Eritrea called the AP story on Axum "outrageous lies."

Amid the denials, untold thousands of civilians have been killed as Ethiopian and allied forces pursue the former Tigray leaders who once dominated Ethiopia's government before Abiy took office in 2018. Each side came to regard each other as illegitimate, then turned to fighting.

Axum is far from the only massacre alleged in the Tigray conflict. More are now coming to light as telephone service resumes in the region and more people flee.

The Telegraph, citing witnesses, has reported one in Debre Abay. CNN, citing witnesses, has reported one in Dengelat. And Agence France-Presse further exposed the Dengelat killings during a rare visit to the scene.

On Thursday, U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said her office has corroborated information about incidents including "mass killings" in Axum and Dengelat, and warned of possible war crimes. Victims "must not be denied their rights to the truth and to justice," she said, urging Ethiopia to let independent monitors into Tigray.

After U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken over the weekend issued the strongest statement yet from Washington on Tigray and spoke with Abiy this week, the prime minister's office on Wednesday reversed its skeptical stance on the Axum massacre and said it was investigating "credible allegations" in the city and elsewhere in the region.

But human rights groups and others are calling for independent international investigations, ideally led by the U.N., arguing that a government accused of involvement in atrocities cannot effectively investigate itself.

CAN JOURNALISTS REPORT FROM TIGRAY?

Yes, at their peril. Ethiopia in recent days began allowing a limited number of foreign media outlets to visit Tigray — the AP did not receive permission — but several Ethiopian media workers with the outlets were quickly detained.

Even as it announced the limited media access, Ethiopia warned journalists to essentially behave themselves. The government's statement on Wednesday said Ethiopian defense forces would "ensure the security" of journalists in the parts of Tigray under their control, but those who leave the areas do so at their own risk. And journalists who break national laws, "including by aiding and abetting criminal entities and perpetrators, will be held accountable."

The Committee to Protect Journalists this week criticized Ethiopia's actions, saying that "the scarcity of independent reporting coming out of Tigray during this conflict was already deeply alarming. Now, the Ethiopian military's arrests of journalists and media workers will undoubtedly lead to fear and self-censorship."

Without unhindered access to Tigray, it is challenging to determine the fate of an estimated 6 million people four months after the region was cut off from the world.

ARE PEOPLE STARVING TO DEATH?

Yes, according to local officials, though it's not clear how many. While humanitarian aid to Tigray has increased in recent weeks, aid workers have said it is far from enough and some 80% of the region remains unreachable.

In the starkest warning yet, the Ethiopian Red Cross last month said if humanitarian access didn't improve, thousands of people would be starving to death in a month, and tens of thousands in two months.

Ethiopia's government on Wednesday said it had distributed food aid to some 3.8 million people, and it

again asserted that humanitarian organizations now have unfettered access to Tigray.

But humanitarian workers say the reality is far different, citing obstacles from authorities and the insecurity. An access map published this week by the U.N. humanitarian agency showed much of Tigray inaccessible beyond major roads and cities.

The fighting, which is ongoing in parts of Tigray, erupted on the brink of harvest in the largely agricultural region and sent an untold number of people fleeing their homes. Witnesses have described widespread looting by Eritrean soldiers as well as the burning of crops, while forces from the neighboring Amhara region have reportedly occupied large parts of Tigray.

This week a senior interim Tigray official, Gebremeskel Kassa, told the BBC that "we are not able to know the whereabouts of a million people."

The U.S. now says both the Eritreans and the Amhara forces should leave Tigray immediately.

Takeaways: What hearings have revealed about Jan. 6 failures

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many questions remain unanswered about the failure to prevent the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. But after six congressional hearings, it's clear that the Capitol Police were unprepared and overwhelmed as hundreds of Donald Trump's supporters laid siege to the building. It's also clear that no one wants to take responsibility for it.

Officials who were in charge of protecting the Capitol, and the people inside it, have pointed fingers at each other in testimony to the House and Senate. Their deflections are indicative of the chaos of that day, the lack of intelligence leading up to the attack and the fact that none of the law enforcement agencies involved imagined that so many of Trump's supporters would violently lay siege to the Capitol with the mission of overturning his defeat.

So far, lawmakers have focused on the lack of clear intelligence about the plans of the rioters, given that Trump's supporters openly discussed the insurrection online. They have also questioned military and law enforcement leaders about why it took more than three hours for the National Guard to get to the Capitol when the rioters were already inside.

Five people died as a result of the violence, including a Capitol Police officer and a woman who was shot by police as she tried to break into the House chamber through a broken window.

What we have learned so far about the failures that led to the Jan. 6 insurrection:

BROAD FAILURES, ACROSS THE BOARD ...

Congress hasn't pinned the blame on any one agency or official as it investigates the riot, as it's obvious there were failures on all levels. The rioters easily broke through police barriers and overwhelmed the officers who were there, injuring many of them, as the Capitol Police had planned for a much smaller event. The National Guard did not arrive for several hours after a mob of around 800 people broke the doors and windows of the Capitol, entered the Senate shortly after it had been evacuated and tried to beat down the doors of the House with lawmakers still inside.

As all of that was happening, law enforcement and national security officials at multiple agencies have described frantic pleas for help from Capitol Police that were followed by layers of required approvals, conversations about optics and the logistics of hastily readying a response.

Capitol Police officials made clear that they never envisioned anything close to the scope of what happened. "We had planned for the possibility of violence, the possibility of some people being armed, not the possibility of a coordinated military-style attack involving thousands against the Capitol," said former chief Steven Sund, who was ousted from his job the day after the attack.

... BUT FEW WILLING TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

The acting Capitol Police chief, Yogananda Pittman, told a House appropriations subcommittee in February that the force "failed to meet its own high standards as well as yours." She listed several missteps: not having enough manpower or supplies on hand, not following through with a lockdown order she issued during the siege and not having a sufficient communications plan for a crisis.

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But she has also defended their role and suggested police couldn't have known how bad it would be.

In the hearings — so far two in the Senate and four in the House — most every official has deflected responsibility, blaming either the intelligence failures, the Pentagon for failing to send the National Guard more quickly or each other.

Sund described the difficult process of navigating the Capitol Police Board, which includes the two officials in charge of security for the House and Senate and the Architect of the Capitol. The House and Senate sergeants-at-arms, who were both forced to resign immediately after the rioting, have given conflicting accounts of the conversations the day of the riot, and in the days before, as Sund begged for National Guard support.

NATIONAL GUARD DELAYS

Multiple law enforcement officials, including Sund, Robert Contee, the acting chief of police for the Metropolitan Police Department, and Maj. Gen. William Walker, commanding general of the District of Columbia National Guard, have blamed Pentagon officials for delaying for around three hours as they sought approval for National Guard troops.

At a hearing on Wednesday, Walker told senators that Sund requested troops in a "voice cracking with emotion" in a 1:49 p.m. call just before rioters broke into the Capitol. He said he wasn't notified of approval until 5:08 p.m.

A senior Pentagon official, Robert Salesses, testified that it took time for the Army to sort out what the National Guard was being asked to do and what its support might look like, especially since the Capitol Police days earlier had not asked for any help. Military officials were also concerned about the optics of a substantial National Guard presence at the Capitol, and that such visuals could inflame the rioters, Walker said.

"Three hours and nineteen minutes," said Ohio Sen. Rob Portman, the top Republican on the Senate Homeland and Governmental Affairs Committee, one of the two panels that conducted the hearing. "That can't happen again."

MISSING INTELLIGENCE

All of the law enforcement officials have blamed failures of intelligence, saying they didn't realize the severity of the threat, even though extremists were planning some of it openly online.

Many of the questions have centered on the FBI's handling of a Jan. 5 bulletin 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, even though it had been forwarded to the office.

The Capitol Police also did its own intelligence assessment warning that Congress could be targeted on Jan. 6. But that report assessed the probability of civil disobedience or arrests, based on the information they had, as "remote" to "improbable" for the groups expected to demonstrate.

Four House committees are probing what went wrong with that data collection, including the House intelligence committee. California Rep. Adam Schiff, the chairman of that panel, said his impression is that those failures "contributed to the tragedy on Jan. 6."

"We need to answer the question why and what do we need to do differently," Schiff said in an interview this week.

EVERYTHING BUT TRUMP

The congressional investigations have picked up speed in the wake of the Senate's acquittal of Trump in his impeachment trial, where he faced a charge of inciting the insurrection. While Democrats — and even some Republicans — believe that Trump is ultimately responsible for the attack, it is clear after his acquittal that there are not the votes in Congress to officially lay the blame on the former president and prevent him from running for office again.

As a result, Congress is focusing on the security failures that day, and how law enforcement and the military could have been better prepared. The House Oversight and Reform Committee is investigating how right-wing social media could have contributed to the attack, and the Senate Judiciary Committee is looking at extremism.

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Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner said his committee will look at extremism around the world — a problem that began long before Trump's supporters broke into the Capitol. He says he thinks he could get bipartisan support for the probe even despite the "broad ideological breadth" of senators on the committee.

"I don't want our committee's examination to be about Trump or about Jan. 6," Warner, D-Va., said in an interview. "This is a problem that didn't start on Jan. 6."

NEXT STEPS UNCERTAIN

With the committee probes just begun, it's unclear how the Capitol will return to normal — or what steps will be taken to prevent another attack. Thousands of National Guard troops still guard the Capitol, which is now surrounded by fencing and barbed wire and closed off to the public.

Lawmakers have talked about legislation to overhaul the Capitol Police Board, but that could be far off, likely after the investigations are complete. Senators in both parties have said that they will likely want to talk to more Pentagon officials to understand how the National Guard was delayed for so many hours.

"Any minute that we lost, I need to know why," said Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.

Eager to act, Biden and Democrats leave Republicans behind

By LISA MASCARO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress are jamming their agenda forward with a sense of urgency, an unapologetically partisan approach based on the calculation that it's better to advance the giant COVID-19 rescue package and other priorities than waste time courting Republicans who may never compromise.

The coronavirus pandemic is driving the crush of legislative action, but so are the still-raw emotions from the U.S. Capitol siege and the hard lessons of the last time Democrats had the sweep of party control of Washington. Republicans are mounting blockades of Biden's agenda just as they did during the devastating 2009 financial crisis with Barack Obama.

Democrats, in turn, are showing little patience for the GOP objections and entertaining few overtures toward compromise, claiming the majority of the country supports their agenda. With fragile majorities in the House and the Senate, and a liberal base of voters demanding action, Democrats are operating as if they are on borrowed time.

For many lawmakers, it's personal.

Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif., led the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to House passage Wednesday on the 30th anniversary of the Rodney King beating by police in Los Angeles that she thought at the time would spur policing reforms. Instead, more Black Americans and others have died in police violence, even after Floyd's death at the hands of law enforcement last summer.

"It's examples like that that lead to the urgency," Bass said Wednesday.

The start of the first congressional session of the Biden administration was supposed to be a new era of bipartisan deal-making. The Senate evenly split, 50-50, and the House resting on a slim majority for Democrats set prime conditions for Biden to swoop in and forge across-the-aisle compromises.

But the rush through Biden's first 100 days is shaping up as an urgent era of hardball politics, with Democrats prepared to go it alone, even if that means that changes to the Senate filibuster rules are needed to work around Republican roadblocks to legislation that many Americans support.

"We said we're going to do X, Y and Z, but we didn't say we were going to be magicians," said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md. "We can't magically make the Republicans be for what the people are for."

Days before Biden entered office, White House chief of staff Ron Klain highlighted the urgency with which the incoming administration would seek to act. "We face four overlapping and compounding crises: the COVID-19 crisis, the resulting economic crisis, the climate crisis, and a racial equity crisis," he wrote in a memo. "All of these crises demand urgent action."

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From his first hours in office, Biden sought to take deliberate steps to deliver relief but also to raise awareness about those and other priorities on the theory that moving urgently would increase public support and raise pressure on Republican lawmakers who might stand in the way.

And within the White House there's another kind of urgency: Biden has staffed his administration with veterans of government service who are not looking to stick around that long. Some aides are open about their commitments to help Biden for just a year before returning to private-sector jobs.

Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan is coursing ahead on party line votes under budget rules that will allow Senate passage by a simple 51-vote threshold, denying Republicans the ability to block the bill with a filibuster that would take 60 votes to overcome.

House leaders have reworked this month's schedule for legislation to include voting rights, gun background checks and immigration in the queue — many of them do-overs of bills blocked last session by President Donald Trump and Senate Republicans. They still face a long haul to becoming law without GOP support in the Senate.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer often hark back to the lessons of 2009, when Obama took office during the financial crisis and Democrats cut back the recovery package to win a few Republican votes only to face an onslaught of attacks against the bill.

Many of the same Democrats in leadership today are unwilling to risk a repeat, especially as Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and other economists now say that paring back the 2009 rescue package stunted the recovery.

"One of the biggest lessons that Republicans learned in the '09 and '10 era is they could basically obstruct everything and not suffer at the ballot box," said Tre Easton, a senior adviser at the liberal Battle Born Collective.

The strategy is on display again. House Republicans used procedural objections to stall the COVID-19 package until well past midnight late last week after a marathon rules session spilled voting into early Saturday. Senate Republicans are now threatening similar delays.

"We'll be fighting this in every way that we can," Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said about the COVID-19 package.

McConnell wants Senate Republicans to vote in lockstep against the virus aid, calling it a bloated liberal wish list, following the lead of House Republicans who gave it zero support.

That leaves Democrats negotiating with themselves on the COVID-19 package, with Biden warning they won't like every aspect as he courts centrists. Progressives are being forced to abandon, for now, a provision to lift the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour. On Wednesday, Democrats decided to more narrowly target \$1,400 direct payments to households.

Yet Democrats are holding together, so far, because there's also the urgency that was not readily apparent until Biden was sworn into office.

Perhaps nothing has stiffened the Democratic resolve like the deadly Jan. 6 siege of the Capitol, which carved new fault lines between those who confirmed the presidential election results and those willing to side with the mob seeking to overturn Trump's defeat to Biden.

Democratic lawmakers who arrive at the fenced-in Capitol under the watchful protection of armed National Guard troops appear to have "zero" patience, as one aide put it, for engaging with Republicans — some of whom still question the election results. A new threat of violence sent lawmakers to wrap up work for the week late Wednesday.

Republicans are protesting the partisan start, even though they relied on a similar budget mechanism to try to pass Trump-era priorities. They set out to repeal "Obamacare," an effort that shockingly failed when Sen. John McCain gave it a thumbs-down vote. Later they passed \$2 trillion in tax cuts on a party-line vote.

The third-ranking Republican, Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, said Biden should go back to his campaign and inauguration themes of bipartisanship "and try to live up to it."

But a generation of House leaders who have served decades with Biden and are nearing retirement are increasingly pushing for Senate filibuster rules changes to counter Republican opposition.

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Rep. James E. Clyburn, D-S.C., the majority whip, said of Republican obstruction: "If that's what they're going to do, then they're going to have to live with it, because we're going to serve it up."

UK, 4 nations fast-track review of modified COVID vaccines

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Regulators in the U.K. and four other countries have announced new rules to fast-track the development of modified COVID-19 vaccines to ensure drugmakers can move swiftly to target emerging variants of the disease.

Previously authorized vaccines that are modified to combat new variants "will not need a brand new approval or 'lengthy' clinical studies," Britain's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency said Thursday.

"The clear goal is that future vaccine modifications that respond to the new variants of coronavirus can be made available in the shortest possible time to U.K. recipients without compromising at any stage on safety, quality or effectiveness," Dr. June Raine, the head of the agency, said in a briefing for reporters.

The new guidance is based on the model already used to modify the seasonal flu vaccine to keep up with annual changes in the virus and was issued jointly by regulators in the U.K., Australia, Canada, Singapore and Switzerland. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and European Medicines Agency have issued similar guidance.

Under the new rules, developers will be required to provide "robust evidence" that modified COVID-19 vaccines produce a strong immune response to the variant, as well as data showing they are safe and meet quality standards.

This means developers will be required to carry out small-scale trials on a few hundred people, rather than the trials in tens of thousands of individuals that were required for initial approval, said Dr. Christian Schneider, the MHRA's chief scientific officer.

"I'd like to emphasize that to date we don't have evidence that the vaccines in use in the U.K. are significantly lacking in effectiveness," Raine said.

The announcement comes amid concerns that the virus that causes COVID-19 may mutate to create new variants that are resistant to existing vaccines. The U.K. has banned direct flights from 33 countries in an effort to prevent variants first discovered in Brazil and South Africa from becoming established in Britain.

Vaccine makers have already been developing booster shots to target the new variants.

Moderna said Feb. 24 that it had shipped a variant-specific vaccine candidate to the U.S. National Institutes of Health for review.

The coronavirus pandemic has infected over 115 million people around the world and killed at least 2.5 million, according to Johns Hopkins University.

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

Some Belgians shout: 'King! Tear down your garden walls!'

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The people of Brussels are craving open spaces in this time of pandemic restrictions, often ending up in overcrowded city parks where social distancing is impossible. Yet one family stands above the fray.

The royal family has an extensive, lush garden right in the center of town, nearly the size of Monaco and replete with a massive palace and its own rare heron colony.

So, is there any wonder that more and more voices are clamoring for King Philippe to loosen up and open at least part of his palace garden to the public during the world's worst health crisis in a century?

So far, though, no walls have been torn down, no iron gates swung open.

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"They hardly ever get in there. Come on! Those gardens are simply empty," sighed an exasperated Brussels historian and former member of the European Parliament, Luckas Vander Taelen.

Furthermore, the gardens in the Brussels municipality of Laeken are surrounded by some of the nation's most densely populated, run-down and impoverished neighborhoods, filled with many families who lack the funds to travel to more verdant surroundings.

"Greenery gives a lust for life, especially when you are squeezed into a little apartment with an extended family," said Laeken social worker Saliha Mahdi. "So the local people want a park right here because they don't have the means to pay for transport."

The palace gardens are turning into a parable of royal privilege in times of intense need and change.

The monarchy has been tone-deaf before. Last year, early in the pandemic, King Philippe, in an ill-fated attempt at the common touch, allowed a drone to fly over the vast domain to show that his family, like all Belgian families, was in lockdown at home.

On a vast expanse of green, with the shadows of age-old trees and shrubbery lapping at the perfectly mowed grass, the family had written in huge letters, "Courage Strong Together."

Together? Not really.

A rumble in the political background for some years, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue to the forefront this spring, with the governing parties in Brussels and even some of the opposition behind a proposal to open the gardens to the public.

"People really need spaces, public spaces to unwind, to catch some oxygen, to play, to meet," said Brussels lawmaker Hilde Sabbe.

And even if the south of the capital has plenty of green open spaces for its resident diplomats, Eurocrats and the very well off, parts of the center and north of Brussels, where the king has his garden, are very different, with grit lining the streets, not stately trees.

"In Brussels, most people don't have a garden. They don't have a terrace. They don't have a balcony. So they have to go to the park, if there is one to find," Sabbe said.

In that sense, making part of the royal park available to the public would make a world of difference. "Couldn't you just let them in?" Sabbe pleaded with the king.

As with all seemingly simple things, though, it is much more complicated.

When it comes to royal ownership, there is a warren of legal intricacies with links to both the state and the royal family. Belgium's Byzantine institutional structure, with sometimes overlapping authority between city, region and nation, would make management of any open park even more complex.

In a more practical sense, the palace needs to remain secure, not only because the head of state resides there, but also because heads of state and government visit when they come through Brussels for trips to NATO or the European Union.

And a century-plus seclusion from the world outside has turned the park into a fragile biotope with unique plants and animals that need protection.

That remains an argument for some — even if Celine Vandeuren, who lives nearby, has to walk her cat Hector on a leash just outside the park's red-brick wall, unable to enjoy the beauty and tranquility inside.

"My fear is that if we open this space, our presence, perhaps a bit too untimely, would perturb nature," Vandeuren said.

Sabbe disagrees, saying there could be an easy fix to open up part of the 460-acre park. And she has faith in 60-year-old King Philippe, who is steadily making a name for himself as one of the most progressive in a line of monarchs stretching back to 1830.

The Royal Palace has remained mum on the issue and declined to respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

For historian Vander Taelen, however, the solution is a no-brainer for the king.

"It would be so positive for the Royal House to show that there is a bond with the city," he said. "Perhaps the most important is if they would show solidarity with the needs of their people, of their city."

AP video journalist Mark Carlson contributed.

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Will Paramount+ be a mountain or a molehill in streaming?

By MAE ANDERSON AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Paramount+ debuts Thursday as the latest — and last — streaming option from a major media company, this time from ViacomCBS. It's betting that consumers are willing to add yet another paid streaming service in an increasingly crowded field.

Its backers hope a smorgasbord of offerings — live sports and news, reboots of properties like "Frasier" and "Rugrats," original shows like "Star Trek: Discovery" and the ViacomCBS library — will entice viewers. But its relatively late entrance to a competitive landscape and a \$4 price increase compared to its predecessor, CBS All Access, could make it a challenging sell.

"Paramount+ has a mountain of challenges ahead of it," said Tim Hanlon, CEO of Vertere Group, playing off the Paramount+ tagline, "A mountain of entertainment." (The venerable Paramount logo features — you guessed it — a mountain, and the streamer's recent ad campaign featured a number of characters from its shows climbing a snowy peak.)

Over the last year and a half more and more streaming services have debuted to challenge the reigning triumvirate of Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. Disney+ kicked things off in late 2019, followed by WarnerMedia's HBO Max, NBCUniversal's Peacock and Discovery+.

In a way, ViacomCBS is a pioneer; CBS, then a separate company, debuted CBS All Access in 2014. The new service effectively rebrands All Access and adds other Viacom Properties channels including Comedy Central, BET, MTV and Nickelodeon.

But Paramount+ could have a brand awareness problem, Hanlon said. Most people associate the name Paramount with the mountainous title card that appears before movies. "Most consumers have very little understanding that Viacom, Paramount and CBS have the same parent, so the marketing team has a big job in front of it," he said.

Second, the pricing may leave some scratching their heads. The ad-free tier launching Thursday is \$10 a month. That's \$4 more than CBS All Access, although the new service will offer a lot more material, including live news and sports. A \$5 monthly ad-supported version will launch in June, but it won't include the live local CBS stations that CBS All Access offered. Showtime and BET+, both owned by ViacomCBS, will remain separate subscription services.

Still, the service also has some potential advantages over others. CBS All Access, Showtime and BET+ now have nearly 30 million subscribers, some of who will shift to Paramount+. ViacomCBS projects that those services will reach 65 million subscribers by 2024, with most of the growth coming from Paramount+.

ViacomCBS plans to increase its investment in streaming, from \$1 billion a year to at least \$5 billion annually by 2024. It will introduce 36 original shows in 2021, including a spinoff of "60 Minutes" called "60 Minutes+," a documentary series about the making of "The Godfather," a reboot of MTV's "The Real World" that reunites the original New York City cast from 30 years ago, and series based on movies including "Fatal Attraction" and "Flashdance."

"Viacom really has all assets they need to have a thriving business," said Brian Wieser, GroupM global president of business intelligence. "A meaningful investment in original programming attracts people to the platform. And a deep library causes people to stay. Put those two together and you could have a viable successful service."

But they may not be taking bold enough steps to stand out, said Colin Gillis, director of research at Chatham Road Partners. ViacomCBS said some of the studio's films, including "Mission: Impossible 7" and "A Quiet Place Part II," will go to its fledgling streaming service, Paramount+, after 45 days in theaters. But that's not as bold a step as HBO Max has done, releasing 17 of their films on HBO Max the same day they're released in theaters.

"That type of strategy, plus being late to the market, looks a lot like a 'me too' move," Gillis said. "If they want to act like a second tier streaming service, they're doing a fantastic job."

Ahead of Pope visit, survivor recalls Iraq church massacre

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — It began like any other Sunday in the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad for worshipper Louis Climis. That day nearly 11 years ago would end with blood-stained pews, anguish and lives lost.

Six al-Qaeda-linked militants stormed and seized the church, killing dozens inside. At the time, the Oct. 31, 2010 attack was the bloodiest in a drumbeat of violence that Iraq's Christians suffered during the brutal sectarian warfare following the 2003 U.S. invasion. More than a decade later, it still stands as perhaps the deadliest single attack against the community.

The carnage prompted many Christians to flee Iraq and deepened the mistrust between the community and its Muslim neighbors, a chasm that endures to this day.

Some are now counting on a much anticipated visit to the church by Pope Francis on Friday to help mend the wounds. Our Lady of Salvation, which belongs to the Syriac Catholic Church, is one of the pontiff's first stops in a historic visit to Iraq that Christians hope will secure their tenuous place in the country.

"The pope's visit is hope for us, that he will talk with Iraqi officials to tell them to stop the violence, stop the armed groups and protect minorities," Climis said.

On that fateful day in 2010, Climis, then 55, was a youth leader at the church. He had arrived just in time for weekly Mass with his 18-year-old son, Radi. His wife and other children stayed home to supervise kitchen repairs. For this, Climis would later be thankful.

The lofty church interiors resounded with the voice of Father Thair reading a Bible passage. He would never finish. It was right then that the first suicide bomber detonated his explosive-laden vest.

The blast threw Climis to the floor. Stunned, his eyes strained to focus on the unfolding chaos — smoke, debris and screams. Worshipers lay lifeless.

He counted four gunmen. Under the icon of the Virgin Mary, one began singing the adhan, the Islamic call to prayer.

Quickly, Climis grabbed his son and ran toward the sacristy room, where church furnishings and records were stored. As people scrambled for cover, he beckoned them inside. With over 40 people in the room, he shut the wooden doors and slid a steel rod to bar the handles.

"But it was very thin... any one of the four terrorists could enter the room and kill us easily," he said, recalling the scene from his Baghdad home.

Climis and his son lay frozen on the floor, listening to the horrors on the other side of the door. Shrieks were followed by bullets. Children cried out. Explosion after explosion shook the walls.

One gunman told a mother to quiet her wailing infant. When she was unable, Climis heard the pop of a bullet. The screaming ceased.

He could hear Father Wassim, his friend, try and reason with the men. He too was shot and killed.

From a small hole in the door he eyed another gunman, standing just a few feet away.

How young he was, he thought in that moment.

A grenade was tossed so close to the sacristy that the water cooler burst, flooding the room and those huddled inside. Shivering, Climis noticed his ears were ringing.

Eleven years on, he is still deaf in his right ear.

Desperate, he called a friend who worked in the Baghdad Operations Command. Half an hour and help would come, the friend told him.

Four panic-stricken hours later, the lights suddenly went off. Climis braced for the worst. Another explosion followed, louder than any before. Then the rush of footsteps and volley of firearms.

Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service stormed the church at 9 p.m. But Climis didn't let anyone leave the room — they had no idea what was going on.

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After a minute, someone knocked on the door, and a voice came: "I am your brother from the CTS, and everyone will leave this church safely."

Climis had to see his beloved church one last time. The CTS officer told him no, it was very dangerous, there could be IEDs.

But he dared to look anyway.

"I don't wish anyone to see what I saw. Body parts everywhere. I saw one body with just a head, hands and chest, the rest was blown apart."

Then, his gaze turned up toward the vaulted ceiling.

"There were scraps of human flesh," he said. "It stayed there for weeks."

In total, 52 worshippers and police were killed in the attack and the ensuing raid by security forces to free the hostages. The Islamic State of Iraq, an al-Qaida-affiliated group, claimed the attack.

Four years later, a new iteration of the group calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria would overrun vast swaths of northern Iraq, pushing out entire Christian communities, prompting concerns of more marginalization within the historic Iraqi minority. Later, Shiite militia groups would move in and erect checkpoints provoking fear among those who remained.

Two events that traumatic October night sowed the seeds of distrust for over a decade to come.

As gunmen wreaked havoc inside the church, someone fired shots from the outside through a window into the sacristy. Climis couldn't see who, but thought they were outsiders supporting the terrorists.

In fact, it was the Federal Police who mistakenly fired during the hours-long standoff. A row later ensued between them and the CTS over the incident, other witnesses said.

The bullets are still lodged in books stacked in the sacristy, Climis said.

The second event still haunts Climis. Why upon arriving to the church, he asks, did the CTS wait and not launch the raid directly.

"They did not enter until they got permission from Iraq's government," he said. The waiting cost precious lives.

That day, he said, "the Iraqi government did not do their duty toward (us), an ancient Iraqi community,"

The bloodbath shook Iraq's Christians to the core. Their exodus had begun after the 2003 U.S. invasion, but increased markedly after the massacre. One by one, many of Climis' friends and family began leaving, seeing no hope for justice.

With the IS onslaught a few years later, little has changed to improve their lot. Most of Climis' family hails from the northern Christian town of Qaraqosh but are scattered around the world. He has run out of fingers to count the various countries where his relatives reside.

The pope's visit to Iraq brings hope that he might be able to not only reconnect Iraq's Christians to their homeland, but also, talk sense into Iraqi leaders who have so far neglected them, Climis said.

Despite his community shrinking around him, Climis has remained in Iraq with his family. Today he is a deacon in the Our Lady of Salvation Church, which is open and holds regular services, still with security presence outside. The immaculate interiors show no signs of its dark history, but the memory of those terrifying hours is still etched in the minds of its worshippers.

So why did Climis stay?

"Because this is my country," he said.

California to give 40% of vaccine doses to vulnerable areas

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California will begin setting aside 40% of all vaccine doses for the state's most vulnerable neighborhoods in an effort to inoculate people most at risk from the coronavirus and get the state's economy open more quickly.

Two officials in Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration shared details Wednesday on condition of anonymity.

The doses will be spread out among 400 ZIP codes with about 8 million people eligible for shots. Many of the neighborhoods are concentrated in Los Angeles County and the Central Valley. The areas are considered most vulnerable based on metrics such as household income, education level, housing status and

access to transportation.

Once 2 million vaccine doses are given out in those neighborhoods, the state will make it easier for counties to move through reopening tiers that dictate business and school reopenings.

Right now, a county can move from the most restrictive purple tier to the lower red tier based on several metrics, including having 7 or fewer new COVID cases per 100,000 people per day over a period of several weeks. That metric will change to 10 new cases or fewer. In the red tier, businesses such as restaurants and gyms can open for indoor services at limited capacity.

Also in the red tier, schools that want to access new state funding must provide in-person learning for students in transitional kindergarten through grade 6 and at least one grade each in middle and high school.

About 1.6 million vaccine doses already have been given to people in those 400 ZIP codes, and the state will hit the 2 million mark in the next week or two, officials said.

Once the state gives out 4 million doses in those neighborhoods, it will revise the metrics for getting into the even less restrictive orange and yellow tiers.

Newsom has called equity the state's "North Star." Yet community health clinics focused on serving low-income and vulnerable Californians say they haven't been getting enough doses.

The changes mark a fresh round of twists in California's vaccination and reopening plans. People age 65 and over, farmworkers, educators and emergency service workers are also eligible for shots.

More counties have already been moving into the red tier as caseloads, hospitalizations and deaths drop. The state's average 2.2% test positivity rate over 7 days is a record low.

Officials are making it easier to move through reopening tiers, arguing the likelihood of widespread transmission that can overwhelm hospitals will decrease as more people are vaccinated. That's particularly true as the most vulnerable populations that are more likely to get seriously ill receive the shots.

While race and ethnicity are not explicit factors in designating vaccinations, the 400 vulnerable ZIP codes overlap heavily with neighborhoods with higher populations of Blacks, Latinos and Asian and Pacific Islanders, officials said.

Los Angeles County could move into the next phase of reopening with fewer restrictions as early as next week, though any actual lifting of coronavirus-related constraints would not happen immediately, county officials said earlier Wednesday.

Most San Francisco Bay Area counties have advanced to the next phase, which allows restaurants and movie theaters to open indoors at 25% capacity and gyms to operate at 10% capacity.

House passes sweeping voting rights bill over GOP opposition

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats passed sweeping voting and ethics legislation over unanimous Republican opposition, advancing to the Senate what would be the largest overhaul of the U.S. election law in at least a generation.

House Resolution 1, which touches on virtually every aspect of the electoral process, was approved Wednesday night on a near party-line 220-210 vote. It would restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to a murky campaign finance system that allows wealthy donors to anonymously bankroll political causes.

The bill is a powerful counterweight to voting rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump's repeated false claims of a stolen 2020 election. Yet it faces an uncertain fate in the Democratic-controlled Senate, where it has little chance of passing without changes to procedural rules that currently allow Republicans to block it.

The stakes in the outcome are monumental, cutting to the foundational idea that one person equals one vote, and carrying with it the potential to shape election outcomes for years to come. It also offers a test of how hard President Joe Biden and his party are willing to fight for their priorities, as well as those of their voters.

This bill "will put a stop at the voter suppression that we're seeing debated right now," said Rep. Nikema Williams, a new congresswoman who represents the Georgia district that deceased voting rights champion

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John Lewis held for years. "This bill is the 'Good Trouble' he fought for his entire life."

To Republicans, however, it would give license to unwanted federal interference in states' authority to conduct their own elections — ultimately benefiting Democrats through higher turnout, most notably among minorities.

"Democrats want to use their razor-thin majority not to pass bills to earn voters' trust, but to ensure they don't lose more seats in the next election," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said from the House floor Tuesday.

The measure has been a priority for Democrats since they won their House majority in 2018. But it has taken on added urgency in the wake of Trump's false claims, which incited the deadly storming of the U.S. Capitol in January.

Courts and even Trump's last attorney general, William Barr, found his claims about the election to be without merit. But, spurred on by those lies, state lawmakers across the U.S. have filed more than 200 bills in 43 states that would limit ballot access, according to a tally kept by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University.

In Iowa, the legislature voted to cut absentee and in-person early voting, while preventing local elections officials from setting up additional locations to make early voting easier. In Georgia, the House on Monday voted for legislation requiring identification to vote by mail that would also allow counties to cancel early in-person voting on Sundays, when many Black voters cast ballots after church.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court appeared ready to uphold voting restrictions in Arizona, which could make it harder to challenge state election laws in the future.

When asked why proponents sought to uphold the Arizona laws, which limit who can turn in absentee ballots and enable ballots to be thrown out if they are cast in the wrong precinct, a lawyer for the state's Republican Party was stunningly clear.

"Because it puts us at a competitive disadvantage relative to Democrats," said attorney Michael Carvin. "Politics is a zero-sum game."

Battle lines are quickly being drawn by outside groups who plan to spend millions of dollars on advertising and outreach campaigns.

Republicans "are not even being coy about it. They are saying the 'quiet parts' out loud," said Tiffany Muller, the president of End Citizens United, a left-leaning group that aims to curtail the influence of corporate money in politics. Her organization has launched a \$10 million effort supporting the bill. "For them, this isn't about protecting our democracy or protecting our elections. This is about pure partisan political gain."

Conservatives, meanwhile, are mobilizing a \$5 million pressure campaign, urging moderate Senate Democrats to oppose rule changes needed to pass the measure.

"H.R. 1 is not about making elections better," said Ken Cuccinelli, a former Trump administration Homeland Security official who is leading the effort. "It's about the opposite. It's intended to dirty up elections."

So what's actually in the bill?

H.R. 1 would require states to automatically register eligible voters, as well as offer same-day registration. It would limit states' ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons' voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require states to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no-excuse absentee balloting.

On the cusp of a once-in-a-decade redrawing of congressional district boundaries, typically a fiercely partisan affair, the bill would mandate that nonpartisan commissions handle the process instead of state legislatures.

Many Republican opponents in Congress have focused on narrower aspects, like the creation of a public financing system for congressional campaigns that would be funded through fines and settlement proceeds raised from corporate bad actors.

They've also attacked an effort to revamp the federal government's toothless elections cop. That agency, the Federal Election Commission, has been gripped by partisan deadlock for years, allowing campaign finance law violators to go mostly unchecked.

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Another section that's been a focus of Republican ire would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which are a magnet for wealthy interests looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

Still, the biggest obstacles lie ahead in the Senate, which is split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats.

On some legislation, it takes only 51 votes to pass, with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker. On a deeply divisive bill like this one, they would need 60 votes under the Senate's rules to overcome a Republican filibuster — a tally they are unlikely to reach.

Some Democrats have discussed options like lowering the threshold to break a filibuster, or creating a workaround that would allow priority legislation, including a separate John Lewis Voting Rights bill, to be exempt. Biden has been cool to filibuster reforms and Democratic congressional aides say the conversations are fluid but underway.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has not committed to a time frame but vowed "to figure out the best way to get big, bold action on a whole lot of fronts."

He said: "We're not going to be the legislative graveyard. ... People are going to be forced to vote on them, yes or no, on a whole lot of very important and serious issues."

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

California to give 40% of vaccine doses to vulnerable areas

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California will begin setting aside 40% of all vaccine doses for the state's most vulnerable neighborhoods in an effort to inoculate people most at risk from the coronavirus and get the state's economy open more quickly.

Two officials in Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration shared details Wednesday on condition of anonymity.

The doses will be spread out among 400 ZIP codes with about 8 million people eligible for shots. Many of the neighborhoods are concentrated in Los Angeles County and the Central Valley. The areas are considered most vulnerable based on metrics such as household income, education level, housing status and access to transportation.

Once 2 million vaccine doses are given out in those neighborhoods, the state will make it easier for counties to move through reopening tiers that dictate business and school reopenings.

Right now, a county can move from the most restrictive purple tier to the lower red tier based on several metrics, including having 7 or fewer new COVID cases per 100,000 people per day over a period of several weeks. That metric will change to 10 new cases or fewer. In the red tier, businesses such as restaurants and gyms can open for indoor services at limited capacity.

Also in the red tier, schools that want to access new state funding must provide in-person learning for students in transitional kindergarten through grade 6 and at least one grade each in middle and high school.

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Dems tighten relief benefits, firm up support for virus bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Democrats agreed to tighten eligibility limits for stimulus checks, bowing to party moderates as leaders prepared to move their \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill through the Senate.

At the same time, the White House and top Democrats stood by progressives and agreed that the Senate package would retain the \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefits included in the House-passed pandemic legislation. Moderates have wanted to trim those payments to \$300 after Republicans have called the bill so heedlessly generous that it would prompt some people to not return to work.

The dealmaking Wednesday underscored the balancing act Democrats face as they try squeezing the massive relief measure through the evenly divided, 50-50 Senate. The package, Biden's signature legislative priority, is his attempt to stomp out the year-old pandemic, revive an economy that's shed 10 million jobs and bring some semblance of normality to countless upended lives.

Democrats have no choice but to broker compromises among themselves, thanks to their mere 10-vote House margin and a Senate they control only with Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote. The party's moderate and progressive factions are competing to use their leverage, but without going so far as to scuttle an effort they all support.

"He's pleased with the progress that is being made with the rescue plan," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said of Biden, reflecting the flexibility he and all Democrats will need to prevail. "He's always said he's open to good ideas."

So far, Republicans have presented a unified front against the bill. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said he wants unanimous GOP opposition.

But Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, didn't rule out breaking ranks and supporting the measure. She told reporters her state's tourism industry has been walloped by the pandemic and said she's talked to administration officials about "how this helps a state like Alaska."

The Senate could begin debating the bill Thursday, but Democrats faced mountains of GOP amendments and other delays that could take days to plow through. The House will have to approve the Senate's version before shipping it to Biden, which Democrats want to do before the last round of emergency jobless benefits run dry March 14.

"I would expect a very long night into the next day and keep going on," said Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., describing GOP plans to force votes.

Under the legislation, individuals earning up to \$75,000, and couples up to \$150,000, would get \$1,400 checks per person. The House-approved version would gradually phase down that amount, with individuals making \$100,000 and couples earning \$200,000 receiving nothing.

Under Wednesday's agreement, the Senate bill would instead halt the payments completely for individuals making \$80,000 and couples earning \$160,000, said a Democratic official, who described the agreement only on condition of anonymity.

That means some people who received the last round of \$600 relief checks approved in December wouldn't get anything this time. The liberal Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy estimated that the

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pared-down Senate eligibility levels means 280 million adults and children would receive stimulus checks, compared to 297 million people under the House plan.

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the chamber's most conservative Democrat, has favored lowering the relief check eligibility limits and opposed the House bill's minimum wage increase. He suggested Wednesday he'd back the emerging Senate legislation, saying it "really does have enough good stuff that we should be able to make this work."

In a swipe at moderates, Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., a leader of his chamber's progressives, called the new phase-out of relief checks a "silly and stupid" effort to appease "the one or two people who can hold things up."

Yet asked if the change could threaten the overall bill, Pocan said, "Let's hope they don't screw too many things up. We need to get this done."

Liberals were already angry after Senate Democrats jettisoned the House bill's minimum wage increase to \$15 by 2025. They did so after the Senate parliamentarian said the chamber's rules wouldn't allow the boost in the bill and as Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., said they'd oppose its inclusion, sealing its fate.

The House version of the relief checks would cost \$422 billion, making them the package's single most expensive item.

The two chambers' bills are largely similar, with both bearing money for state and municipal governments, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, schools, health care subsidies and tax breaks for children and lower-earning people.

Republicans continued lashing the measure as an overpriced Democratic wish list of liberal causes that lavishes help on many who don't really need it.

"Democrats had a choice," McConnell said. "They chose to go it alone, tack to the left, leave families' top priorities on the cutting room floor."

"This is not a liberal wish list," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "This is an American wish list. When people want checks to help them get out of the morass, that's not a liberal wish list. That's what the American people want."

Slowly, the Senate bill's contours were taking shape.

Senate Democrats were removing \$1.5 billion for a bridge between New York state and Canada and around \$140 million for a rapid transit project south of San Francisco after Republicans cast both as pet projects for Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Aides to both Democratic leaders said the projects weren't new and had been supported by the Trump administration.

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.

Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Police uncover 'possible plot' by militia to breach Capitol

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Capitol Police say they have uncovered intelligence of a "possible plot" by a militia group to breach the U.S. Capitol on Thursday, nearly two months after a mob of supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the iconic building to try to stop Congress from certifying now-President Joe Biden's victory.

The threat appears to be connected to a far-right conspiracy theory, mainly promoted by supporters of QAnon, that Trump will rise again to power on March 4. That was the original presidential inauguration day until 1933, when it was moved to Jan. 20.

Online chatter identified by authorities included discussions among members of the Three Percenters, an anti-government militia group, concerning possible plots against the Capitol on Thursday, according to

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two law enforcement officials who were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. Members of the Three Percenters were among the extremists who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6.

The announcement comes as the Capitol police and other law enforcement agencies are taking heat from Congress in contentious hearings this week on their handling of the Jan. 6 riot. Police were ill-prepared for the mass of Trump supporters in tactical gear, some armed, and it took hours for National Guard reinforcements to come. By then, rioters had broken and smashed their way into the building and roamed the halls for hours, stalling Congress' certification effort temporarily and sending lawmakers into hiding.

"The United States Capitol Police Department is aware of and prepared for any potential threats towards members of Congress or towards the Capitol complex," the agency said in a statement. "We have obtained intelligence that shows a possible plot to breach the Capitol by an identified militia group on Thursday, March 4." Police did not identify the militia group in the statement.

The U.S. House was abruptly wrapping its work for the week Wednesday night given the threat of violence.

An advisory sent earlier this week to members of Congress by Timothy Blodgett, the acting House sergeant-at-arms, said that the Capitol Police had "no indication that groups will travel to Washington D.C. to protest or commit acts of violence."

But that advisory was updated in a note to lawmakers Wednesday morning. Blodgett wrote that the Capitol Police had received "new and concerning information and intelligence indicating additional interest in the Capitol for the dates of March 4th – 6th by a militia group."

In her testimony to the House panel, acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said her investigators had collected "some concerning intelligence," but declined to provide any details publicly, saying that it was "law enforcement sensitive" and that she would provide a private briefing for the subcommittee members.

Lawmakers, congressional staffers and law enforcement officials are still on edge after the attack last month, even as the security posture around the Capitol remains at an unprecedented level.

On Wednesday, federal agents were seeking to determine whether there was an increase in the number of hotel rooms being rented in Washington, as well as monitoring flights to the area, car rental reservations and any buses being chartered to bring groups into the capital, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. The person could not publicly discuss details of the security planning and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The FBI and Department of Homeland Security also sent a joint intelligence bulletin to local law enforcement officials Tuesday warning that a group of militia extremists had discussed trying to take control of the Capitol on March 4 and encouraging thousands of people to come to D.C. to try to remove Democrats from power.

There has been a noticeable decline in online activity on some social media platforms surrounding efforts on March 4, and there was already considerably less online chatter than during the lead-up to Jan. 6, a day that Trump repeatedly had promoted for a his rally and encouraged thousands to come to the nation's capital.

Several QAnon groups still operating on the social media messaging platform Telegram warned followers to stay away from any events on March 4, claiming it was a setup for Trump supporters.

"If there are groups out there planning and advertising events on or around March 4 anywhere in the country (DC included) we strongly urge everyone to avoid them entirely," one Telegram user wrote late last month in a QAnon group that has more than 65,000 followers.

There's also a very large fence in place around the U.S. Capitol that blocks off all avenues of entry including on the streets around the building, which was put in place after Jan. 6.

Also, thousands of accounts that promoted the Jan. 6 event that led to a violent storming of the U.S. Capitol have since been suspended by major tech companies like Facebook and Twitter, making it far more difficult for QAnon and far-right groups to organize a repeat of the mass gathering on Thursday.

Twitter banned more than 70,000 accounts after the riots, while Facebook and Instagram removed posts mentioning "stop the steal," a pro-Trump rallying cry used to mobilize his supporters in January. And the conservative social media platform Parler, which many of Trump's supporters joined to promote false

election fraud conspiracy theories and encourage friends to “storm” the Capitol on Jan. 6, was booted off the internet following the siege.

Capitol Police say that they have stepped up security around the Capitol complex since January’s insurrection, adding physical security measures such as the fencing topped with razor wire around the Capitol and members of the National Guard who remain at the complex. The statement said the agency was “taking the intelligence seriously” but provided no other specific details on the threat.

“I think they are definitely prepared for any threats that may come our way in the next couple days,” said Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-Va., who was one of several lawmakers briefed privately by the police. Wexton added that she still questioned the long-term security plan for the Capitol and said Pittman, the acting chief, “has not come up with proactive ways to fix the issues that they had.”

So far, about 300 people have been charged with federal crimes for their roles in the riot. Five people, including a Capitol Police officer, died.

Since his defeat, Trump has been promoting lies that the election was stolen from him through mass voter fraud, even though such claims have been rejected by judges, Republican state officials and Trump’s own administration. He was impeached by the House after the Jan. 6 riot on a charge of incitement of insurrection but was acquitted by the Senate.

Associated Press writers Nomaan Merchant in Houston; Colleen Long, Alan Fram, and Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington; and Amanda Seitz in Chicago contributed to this report.

Migrant workers face dire conditions at South Korean farms

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

POCHEON, South Korea (AP) — “It’s a world of lawlessness,” Rev. Kim Dal-sung muttered over the phone as he drove his tiny KIA over narrow dirt paths zigzagging through greenhouses made of plastic sheets and tubes.

In the bleak landscape of dull blue and gray in Pocheon, a town near South Korea’s ultra-modern capital, hundreds of migrant workers from across Asia toil in harsh conditions, unprotected by labor laws while doing the hardest, lowest-paid farm work most Koreans avoid.

The death of a 31-year-old Cambodian woman worker at one of the farms in December has revived decades-long criticism over South Korean exploitation of some of the poorest, most vulnerable people in Asia. Officials have promised reforms, but it’s unclear what will change.

More than two months after Sokkheng’s death, South Korea this week announced plans to improve conditions for migrant farm workers, including expanding health care access. Daunted by opposition from farmers, officials chose not to ban using shipping containers as shelter.

On a chilly February afternoon, groups of workers wearing bandanas and conical hats appeared and disappeared among hundreds of translucent tunnel-shaped greenhouses — each about 100 yards long — harvesting spinach, lettuce and other winter greens and stacking them high in boxes.

Kim, a pastor and outspoken advocate for migrant workers’ rights, is an unwelcome visitor at the farms in Pocheon, especially after the Cambodian woman, Nuon Sokkheng, was found dead on Dec. 20 inside a poorly heated, squalid shelter at one of the farms.

Her death, and those of many others, highlight the often cruel conditions facing migrant workers who have little recourse against their bosses.

“Farm owners here are like absolute monarchs ruling over migrant workers,” Kim said. “Some say they want to kill me.”

There are around 20,000 Asian migrant workers legally working on South Korean farms, mostly from Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Nepal. They were brought in under its Employment Permit System. To keep out undocumented immigrants, it makes it extremely difficult for workers to leave their employers, even when they are grossly overworked or abused.

One Korean farmer watched, scowling with hands on his hips, then got on a tractor and began trailing

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visiting reporters to prevent his foreign employees from talking to them.

Another shouted and waved her hand furiously as she approached, stopping an interview with two Cambodian workers who went back into a shipping container.

South Korean farmers, too, are suffering. The industry is in decline, hurt by decades of labor shortages and increasing foreign competition. They get by importing labor to work long hours for low pay.

"Who are you to come here?" the woman farm owner fumed. "Do you even know what farming is really like?"

Activists and workers say migrant workers in Pocheon work 10-15 hours a day, with only two Saturdays off per month. They earn around \$1,300-1,600 per month, well below the legal minimum wage their contracts are supposed to ensure.

Rising before sunrise, they crouch or bend for hours as they work their way through the huge plastic tunnels at each farm, planting, weeding, picking and thinning crops.

The workers often are crammed in shipping containers or flimsy, poorly ventilated huts, like the one where Sokkheng died.

Activists who interviewed her coworkers say she came to Pocheon in 2016 and died just weeks before she was due to return to Cambodia to spend time with her family. Sokkheng appeared to have no obvious health problems, but an autopsy showed she died from complications from cirrhosis, likely worsened by the harsh conditions she lived and worked in, the activists say.

She died during a bitter cold snap, when temperatures fell to minus 18 C. The shelter's heating system was faulty, and others living there went to stay with friends to escape the cold. Sokkheng refused to go, they told activists.

A Nepalese farm worker, who asked that his name not be used because he feared reprisals from his employer, said he was considering running away to find factory work as an undocumented migrant after five years of working for a farmer who he said was abusive and occasionally violent.

"At least I'll get more days off," said the worker, who slipped out to a coffee shop outside the farm one evening for an interview.

"It's just an extreme amount of work (each day). You don't get bathroom breaks. You don't even have time to drink water," said the Nepalese man. He complained of excruciating back and shoulder pain, likening the situation to slavery.

Just 10% of the 200,000 migrant workers brought to South Korea under its Employment Permit System, or EPS, work on farms. About eight in 10 EPS workers toil in factories, while the rest work in construction, fisheries and service industry jobs.

The Labor Ministry told a lawmaker in October that 90-114 EPS workers died each year from 2017 to 2019.

Ven. Linsaro, a Cambodian Buddhist monk based in South Korea, helps with funerals and sending cremated remains to grieving families in Cambodia. He said he knew of at least 19 Cambodian workers who died in 2020. So far in 2021, one farm worker and one worker have been found dead in their shelters.

"Most of them are in their 20s and 30s . . . Many of them just died in their sleep," said Linsaro. He wonders if serious illnesses are going undetected because of workers' lack of medical access.

The Employment Permit System was launched in 2004, to replace a 1990s industrial trainee system notorious for exposing migrant workers to horrific working conditions. It was meant to afford migrant workers the same basic legal rights as Koreans. But critics say the current system is even more exploitative and traps workers into a form of servitude.

Migrant farm workers are more vulnerable than factory workers since rules about working hours, breaks and time off don't apply to agriculture. The country's Labor Standards Act doesn't apply at all to workplaces with four or less employees, which is typical of many farms.

Choi Jung Kyu, a human rights lawyer, says workers at these farms are virtually unprotected against unjust firings or wage theft, uncompensated for workplace injuries and have scant access to health care. They often must pay \$90-\$270 a month to stay in miserable makeshift dormitories that often are just shipping containers equipped with propane tanks for cooking. Such temporary structures usually only

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have portable toilets.

"The government should absolutely stop letting farms with less than five workers use the EPS," said Choi.

Three Cambodian workers who were interviewed at a Pocheon farm but didn't want to be named complained about the grueling work, South Korea's bitterly cold winter and harassment by their employer, who calls them "dogs."

They said they persevere because the wages are better than in Cambodia, giving them a chance to escape poverty.

"I will deal with whatever hardship is thrown at me here," said one, who is helping pay for educating his three siblings. He dreams about buying a farm and a cow when he returns home.

Farmers insist they are barely getting by, too.

"Our farming communities are badly aged," said Shin Hyun-yoo, leader of a farmers' association in Gyeonggi Province, where Pocheon is located. "Many will collapse if it becomes harder to hire foreign workers."

AP writer Sopheng Cheang contributed from Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

US-China tensions threaten global climate change efforts

By CHRISTINA LARSON and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The world's hopes for curbing climate change hinge on action by two giant nations whose relations are deteriorating: China and the United States. The two countries both say they are intent on retooling their economies to burn less climate-wrecking coal, oil and gas. But tensions between them threaten their ultimate success.

China and the United States are the world's No. 1 and No. 2 carbon polluters, respectively, pumping out nearly half of the fossil fuel fumes that are warming the planet's atmosphere.

The fast cuts in carbon needed to stave off the worst of climate change are all but impossible unless these countries work together and basically trust each other's pledges. During the Trump administration, the U.S. used China's emissions as an excuse not to act, and in the past China pointed to U.S. historical emissions as a reason to resist action.

New details of how quickly China plans to reduce carbon emissions will be revealed Friday when Beijing releases its next Five Year Plan. And in April, President Joe Biden is expected to announce the United States' own new targets for emissions cuts.

The U.S. and China both have appointed veteran envoys as their global climate negotiators, John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua. But while the two senior statesmen worked well together in laying groundwork for the 2015 Paris climate accord, now they face new challenges.

U.S.-China climate diplomacy threatens to be overshadowed by what the United States sees as Beijing's menacing policies toward Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea, conflict over human rights and trade, and U.S. claims of Chinese espionage.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials are upset about restrictions imposed by the Trump administration on trade, technology, Chinese media and students in the U.S., and the State Department's declaration this year that atrocities against China's Muslim minorities are a "genocide."

Kerry, a secretary of state under President Barack Obama who was brought back to be Biden's climate envoy, recently told reporters: "Those issues" with China "will never be traded for anything that has to do with climate. That's not going to happen." But Kerry also called the climate "a standalone issue" with China, drawing criticism from China and from some human-rights advocates in the U.S.

Can climate talks between the two countries survive their other geopolitical battles?

"That's, I think, the huge question," said John Podesta, who oversaw the Obama administration's climate efforts and is close to the Biden administration.

"Can you create a lane where you get cooperation on climate" while more contentious issues are dealt with separately? Podesta asked. "Or do they wind up interfering?"

Xie Zhenhua may help the odds. With his appointment as climate envoy last month, Xie is reprising the

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role he held during pivotal U.N. climate conferences that struck the world's first major commitments on reducing emissions from fossil fuels.

Prior to his appointment, Xie led a research effort at Tsinghua University in Beijing to map ways for China to stop contributing to global warming by midcentury. His research underpinned President Xi Jinping's surprise pledge in September that China planned to go carbon neutral by 2060 — the first time the country announced a net-zero target.

Joanna Lewis, an expert in China energy and environment at Georgetown University, called Xie "a visionary, and very influential in setting China's domestic policy targets," as well as a skilled negotiator.

Xie's appointment "was a huge overture toward the United States, and particularly to John Kerry," said Angel Hsu, an expert on China and climate change at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Biden has pledged the U.S. will switch to an emissions-free power sector within 14 years, and have an entirely emissions-free economy by 2050. Kerry is also pushing other nations to commit to carbon neutrality by then.

Behind the dry numbers, massive spending on infrastructure and technology is needed to switch to a more energy-efficient economy, running on wind, solar and other cleaner-burning fuels. And Biden has a narrow majority in Congress to push his agenda, with Republicans, as well as some Democrats, opposing his plans.

Climate scientists say countries need to move fast to avert catastrophic temperature rises.

In 2019, coal accounted for 58% of China's total primary energy consumption, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Last year, as China's government directed economic relief money to infrastructure projects during the pandemic, the country actually upped its net power capacity from coal — by about the equivalent of 15 Hoover Dams, or 30 gigawatts — according to the Global Energy Monitor and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air. China also funds building of coal-fired power plants abroad, partly to build influence.

Many experts question whether the construction of coal-fired plants is driven by demand, or simply meant to stimulate the economy during a downturn. Either way, the brand-new coal plants have consequences.

"Every new coal plant that China builds is basically locking in carbon emissions for the next 50 years," said Georgetown's Lewis.

The most important questions now, said Deborah Seligsohn, an expert in Chinese governance and air pollution at Villanova University, are: "How soon can China's carbon emissions peak, and at what level?"

She is watching closely to see what targets are incorporated in the next Five Year Plan, and into China's updated pledges for emission cuts under the Paris climate accord.

The key, climate negotiators say, will be making it worth China's while — financially and in terms of its international standing — to slow down its building and funding of new coal plants and speed up spending on clean energy.

Biden has reached out to European allies as a first step, trying to build consensus among China's trade partners about market and trade-based rewards and disincentives as a way of prodding China to reduce reliance on coal.

"None of these countries are wanting to save the planet and be completely selfless about this," Christiana Figueres, who helped broker the landmark climate deal in 2015, told The Associated Press. "Only if it also serves their interest."

Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City. AP Science Writer Seth Borenstein in Washington contributed to this report.

Buenos Aires reopens as virus surge forces Sao Paulo to shut

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DEBORA REY Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires were a tale of two cities this week, with Brazil's megapolis partially shutting down and bracing for possibly the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, while residents

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of Argentina's capital were stepping out to movie-theaters and restaurants.

The two biggest cities in the South American neighbors are headed in opposite directions, a trend that experts say demonstrates how places that loosen restrictions against the advice of scientists see a spike in the pandemic while those that keep social distancing measures in place can reopen their economies sooner.

Sao Paulo, home to almost 12 million people, is facing the worst two weeks yet in the pandemic and the growing risk that its once-resilient health care system will collapse, Gov. João Doria told reporters Wednesday. More than 75% of the city's intensive-care beds are occupied by COVID-19 patients and some wards — like those of the private Albert Einstein hospital — are full for the first time.

Doria said the entire state, where 46 million people reside, on Saturday will face the highest level of restrictions to limit the virus' spread. That means closure of all bars, restaurants, shopping malls and any other establishment deemed non-essential until at least March 19.

Meanwhile, the nearly 3 million residents of Buenos Aires are enjoying an easing of their restrictions, with authorization to attend movie theaters taking effect this week. On Wednesday, official figures showed just 26% of intensive-care beds were occupied by COVID-19 patients. The low hospitalization rate also enabled local authorities in mid-February to reopen bars and restaurants until 2 a.m. -- something long sought in a city famous for its all-hours culture.

That means Buenos Aires' famed steakhouses are reigniting their fires, while counterparts in Sao Paulo extinguish theirs.

Buenos Aires' casinos also reopened at the end of 2020, and authorities are discussing whether the soccer-crazy city will be able to return to the stadiums soon. In Brazil, despite President Jair Bolsonaro's push to allow fans back, no local authorities are seriously considering opening stadiums. The 48,000-seater NeoQuimica arena on the east side of Sao Paulo is being used as a vaccination post.

Some good news from the Sao Paulo region came on Tuesday, when soccer great Pelé received his first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. The 80-year-old posted the news on his social media channels.

"The pandemic is not over yet. We must keep discipline to preserve lives until many people have taken the vaccine," the three-time World Cup winner said. "When you go out please don't forget your mask and maintain social distance."

His plea is important as Bolsonaro continues to cast doubt on the effectiveness of masks.

The distance between the two nations has seemingly widened during the pandemic, with Bolsonaro and Argentina's Alberto Fernández adopting opposite tacks in their handling of the crisis. The former downplayed the disease's risks and has insisted on keeping the economy churning, while the latter has taken a more cautious approach.

Fernández imposed one of the longest quarantines in the world between March and October, despite risks of damaging an economy already in a recession.

Over the past week, Brazil has recorded 35 COVID-19 deaths per million residents, almost triple that of Argentina.

Troubles in Sao Paulo worsened after furtive Carnival celebrations in mid-February. Though street celebrations and parades were canceled, many paulistas, as residents are known, traveled or joined unmasked gatherings. The city declined to allow days off work traditionally allowed during the Carnival period, in a bid to keep people from partying.

Izidoro Silveira, 34, got a job waiting tables at a pizzeria in downtown Sao Paulo two months ago, after almost a full year unemployed. He's upset about his restaurant's imminent shutdown.

"Those doing deliveries won't be hurt, but I and many others will," a distressed Silveira said as he watched a televised news broadcast about the shutdown. "I don't know what to tell my wife and my daughter. I'm afraid I'll lose my job again, even though I work at a place that takes all precautions."

Not far away, movie theaters on the city's main drag, Paulista Avenue, are empty, just as they have been since the pandemic first began.

Argentina's ease doesn't mean the virus is completely under control. Wednesday's official figures showed 262 deaths and more than 8,700 new infections in the country. Vaccine rollout is slow. But the overwhelm-

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ing gloom seen in Sao Paulo seems to be far from Buenos Aires.

With a bag of popcorn in one hand and a soft drink in the other, 8-year-old Bautista Sundblat was eager to enter a movie theater in Buenos Aires' tony Palermo neighborhood to watch "Bad Boys Forever".

"He's very excited," said his mother, Martina. "We'd been waiting for a long time. He's a movie fanatic. There's still a long way to go, but little by little we're getting where we wanted."

___ Rey reported from Buenos Aires.

Animated 'Demon Slayer' strikes chord with pandemic Japan

By YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The demons are everywhere, sometimes spreading like purple slime, lurking, killing. The terrifying plight depicted in the swashbuckling animated film, "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train," has struck a chord with pandemic-era Japan, and possibly with the world.

"Demon Slayer" has become the biggest grossing film for Japan, surpassing live-action films and even Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away."

The 2020 film, directed by Haruo Sotozaki, got a limited run in Miami, starting last month. A U.S. run is required to be eligible for the 2021 Academy Awards. Nominations are announced March 15, for the April 25 awards ceremony.

Akina Nasu, a Tokyo hairstylist, says the story of a spiritually pure hero trying to save lives despite adversity struck home, especially amid a pandemic.

"There are many characters, but each one, even the demons, have their own unique stories. People can really empathize with their experience," she said.

Nasu got so enraptured in a scene she cried in the theater. She said she identifies closely with the main character's sense of justice.

The theme is perennial: Family love and the universal yearning for that simple normal lifestyle, perhaps taken for granted until the sudden appearance of the demons, or COVID-19, as some fans, like Nasu, are seeing metaphorically.

Like the rest of the world, Japan has been hurt by the pandemic, not only economically but also psychologically. People are worried. Some are in mourning. The nation has seen about 8,000 related deaths, much fewer than some nations, but they are rising. The vaccine rollout has barely started.

Japan has never had a lockdown, and movie theaters are open with social-distancing measures.

The hero of "Demon Slayer" is Tanjiro Kamado, who sets out to become a warrior to save his sister, and ultimately the world, from the demons, or "oni." Like a cute doe-eyed Musashi, the legendary swordsman, he displays his samurai techniques in a flurry of colorful animation.

The movie, which takes place on a nightmarish train ride, follows a hit TV animation series, now streaming on Netflix.

Its second season airs in Japan later this year but has already stirred controversy over its appropriateness for children. The setting is a brothel, although there is no graphic sex depicted.

The original comic series ran in weekly magazine Shukan Shonen Jump, from 2016, written and drawn by Koyoharu Gotouge, a pen name. The author has never appeared in public, though the "Time 100 Next" list named them among the "emerging leaders who are shaping the future."

Andy Nakatani, Shonen Jump editor-in-chief at VIZ Media, the American manga publisher and distributor, says "Demon Slayer," is one of its top-sellers with more than 3 million copies in print in the U.S.

"It's essentially a coming-of-age story," he said.

"Through it all, he manages to thrive, grow, and somehow he never gives up hope and is able to maintain the core of who he is. Maybe with all the things going on in the world today, this story of perseverance just particularly resonates with people," said Nakatani.

In Japan, "Demon Slayer" has spun off video games, toy figures, copycat products of the hero's earrings and Happy Meal stickers at McDonald's. The theme songs by LiSA are pop hits.

Stu Levy, founder and chief executive of TOKYOPOP, an American distributor and publisher of anime

and manga, loves the way "Demon Slayer" brought together Japanese folklore "with a modern hipness."

"It has the same appeal that the best zombie shows like 'The Walking Dead' have to Americans," he said, adding he tried to acquire the rights to "Demon Slayer," but they went to a competitor.

"The main characters have a great balance — likeability and intense fighting ability — the best Japanese manga features, these types of earnest, fun-loving, passionate, loyal and hard-working characters."

Yuri Kageyama is on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/yurikageyama>

House passes sweeping voting rights bill over GOP opposition

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats passed sweeping voting and ethics legislation Wednesday over unanimous Republican opposition, advancing to the Senate what would be the largest overhaul of the U.S. election law in at least a generation.

House Resolution 1, which touches on virtually every aspect of the electoral process, was approved on a near party-line 220-210 vote. It would restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to a murky campaign finance system that allows wealthy donors to anonymously bankroll political causes.

The bill is a powerful counterweight to voting rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump's repeated false claims of a stolen 2020 election. Yet it faces an uncertain fate in the Democratic-controlled Senate, where it has little chance of passing without changes to procedural rules that currently allow Republicans to block it.

The stakes in the outcome are monumental, cutting to the foundational idea that one person equals one vote, and carrying with it the potential to shape election outcomes for years to come. It also offers a test of how hard President Joe Biden and his party are willing to fight for their priorities, as well as those of their voters.

This bill "will put a stop at the voter suppression that we're seeing debated right now," said Rep. Nikema Williams, a new congresswoman who represents the Georgia district that deceased voting rights champion John Lewis held for years. "This bill is the 'Good Trouble' he fought for his entire life."

To Republicans, however, it would give license to unwanted federal interference in states' authority to conduct their own elections — ultimately benefiting Democrats through higher turnout, most notably among minorities.

"Democrats want to use their razor-thin majority not to pass bills to earn voters' trust, but to ensure they don't lose more seats in the next election," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said from the House floor Tuesday.

The measure has been a priority for Democrats since they won their House majority in 2018. But it has taken on added urgency in the wake of Trump's false claims, which incited the deadly storming of the U.S. Capitol in January.

Courts and even Trump's last attorney general, William Barr, found his claims about the election to be without merit. But, spurred on by those lies, state lawmakers across the U.S. have filed more than 200 bills in 43 states that would limit ballot access, according to a tally kept by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University.

In Iowa, the legislature voted to cut absentee and in-person early voting, while preventing local elections officials from setting up additional locations to make early voting easier. In Georgia, the House on Monday voted for legislation requiring identification to vote by mail that would also allow counties to cancel early in-person voting on Sundays, when many Black voters cast ballots after church.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court appeared ready to uphold voting restrictions in Arizona, which could make it harder to challenge state election laws in the future.

When asked why proponents sought to uphold the Arizona laws, which limit who can turn in absentee ballots and enable ballots to be thrown out if they are cast in the wrong precinct, a lawyer for the state's Republican Party was stunningly clear.

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"Because it puts us at a competitive disadvantage relative to Democrats," said attorney Michael Carvin. "Politics is a zero-sum game."

Battle lines are quickly being drawn by outside groups who plan to spend millions of dollars on advertising and outreach campaigns.

Republicans "are not even being coy about it. They are saying the 'quiet parts' out loud," said Tiffany Muller, the president of End Citizens United, a left-leaning group that aims to curtail the influence of corporate money in politics. Her organization has launched a \$10 million effort supporting the bill. "For them, this isn't about protecting our democracy or protecting our elections. This is about pure partisan political gain."

Conservatives, meanwhile, are mobilizing a \$5 million pressure campaign, urging moderate Senate Democrats to oppose rule changes needed to pass the measure.

"H.R. 1 is not about making elections better," said Ken Cuccinelli, a former Trump administration Homeland Security official who is leading the effort. "It's about the opposite. It's intended to dirty up elections."

So what's actually in the bill?

H.R. 1 would require states to automatically register eligible voters, as well as offer same-day registration. It would limit states' ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons' voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require states to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no-excuse absentee balloting.

On the cusp of a once-in-a-decade redrawing of congressional district boundaries, typically a fiercely partisan affair, the bill would mandate that nonpartisan commissions handle the process instead of state legislatures.

Many Republican opponents in Congress have focused on narrower aspects, like the creation of a public financing system for congressional campaigns that would be funded through fines and settlement proceeds raised from corporate bad actors.

They've also attacked an effort to revamp the federal government's toothless elections cop. That agency, the Federal Election Commission, has been gripped by partisan deadlock for years, allowing campaign finance law violators to go mostly unchecked.

Another section that's been a focus of Republican ire would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which are a magnet for wealthy interests looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

Still, the biggest obstacles lie ahead in the Senate, which is split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats.

On some legislation, it takes only 51 votes to pass, with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker. On a deeply divisive bill like this one, they would need 60 votes under the Senate's rules to overcome a Republican filibuster — a tally they are unlikely to reach.

Some Democrats have discussed options like lowering the threshold to break a filibuster, or creating a workaround that would allow priority legislation, including a separate John Lewis Voting Rights bill, to be exempt. Biden has been cool to filibuster reforms and Democratic congressional aides say the conversations are fluid but underway.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has not committed to a timeframe but vowed "to figure out the best way to get big, bold action on a whole lot of fronts."

He said: "We're not going to be the legislative graveyard. ... People are going to be forced to vote on them, yes or no, on a whole lot of very important and serious issues."

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed.

Palace to investigate after Meghan accused of bullying staff

LONDON (AP) — Buckingham Palace said Wednesday it was launching an investigation after a newspaper reported that a former aide had made a bullying allegation against the Duchess of Sussex.

The Times of London reported allegations that the duchess drove out two personal assistants and left

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staff feeling "humiliated." It said an official complaint was made by Jason Knauf, then the communications secretary to Meghan and her husband, Prince Harry. He now works for Harry's elder brother, Prince William.

The palace said it was "clearly very concerned" about the allegations.

It said in a statement that the palace human resources team "will look into the circumstances outlined in the article" and would seek to speak to current and former staff.

"The Royal Household has had a Dignity at Work policy in place for a number of years and does not and will not tolerate bullying or harassment in the workplace," it said.

American actress Meghan Markle, a former star of the TV legal drama "Suits," married Harry, a grandson of Queen Elizabeth II, at Windsor Castle in May 2018. Their son, Archie, was born the following year.

In early 2020, Meghan and Harry announced they were quitting royal duties and moving to North America, citing what they said were the unbearable intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media. They recently bought a house in Santa Barbara, California, and are expecting a second child.

The bullying allegations were reported four days before the scheduled broadcast of an Oprah Winfrey interview with Meghan, which is anticipated to draw a huge audience. It also comes less than two weeks after the palace announced that the couple's split from official duties would be final.

A spokesman for the duchess said she was "saddened by this latest attack on her character, particularly as someone who has been the target of bullying herself and is deeply committed to supporting those who have experienced pain and trauma."

In a 30-second clip released by CBS Wednesday night, Winfrey asks Meghan how she feels about the palace "hearing you speak your truth today?"

"I don't know how they could expect that after all of this time we would still just be silent if there was an active role that the firm is playing in perpetuating falsehoods about us," Markle says. "And if that comes with risk of losing things, I mean, there's been a lot that's been lost already."

Virus surge forces Sao Paulo to shut as Buenos Aires reopens

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DEBORA REY Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — A swell of COVID-19 cases is halting samba steps in Brazil's biggest metropolis while Argentina's capital tiptoes its way back to the tango floor.

The two biggest cities in each of the neighboring South American countries are headed in opposite directions, reflecting how those that loosen restrictions despite warnings from scientists see a spike in the pandemic while others that keep social distancing measures in place are able to reopen their economies sooner.

Sao Paulo, home to almost 12 million people, is bracing for the worst two weeks yet in the pandemic and the growing risk that its once-resilient health care system will collapse, Gov. João Doria told reporters Wednesday. More than 75% of the city's intensive-care beds are occupied by COVID-19 patients and some wards — like those of the private Albert Einstein hospital — are full for the first time.

Doria announced that the entire state, where 46 million people reside, on Saturday will face the highest level of restrictions to arrest the virus' spread. That means closure of all bars, restaurants, shopping malls and any other establishment deemed non-essential until at least March 19.

Meanwhile, the nearly 3 million residents of Buenos Aires are enjoying an easing of their restrictions, with authorization to attend movie theaters taking effect this week. On Wednesday, official figures showed just 26% of intensive-care beds were occupied by COVID-19 patients. The low hospitalization rate also enabled local authorities in mid-February to reopen bars and restaurants until 2 a.m. -- something long sought in a city famous for its all-hours culture.

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"The pandemic is not over yet. We must keep discipline to preserve lives until many people have taken the vaccine," the three-time World Cup winner said. "When you go out please don't forget your mask and maintain social distance."

His plea is important -- even one year after the pandemic began -- as Bolsonaro continues to cast doubt on the effectiveness of masks.

The distance between the two nations has seemingly widened during the pandemic, with Bolsonaro and Argentina's Alberto Fernández adopting opposite tacks in their handling of the crisis. The former downplayed the disease's risks and has insisted on keeping the economy churning, while the latter has taken a more cautious approach.

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Over the past week, Brazil has recorded 35 COVID-19 deaths per million residents, almost triple that of Argentina.

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___ Rey reported from Buenos Aires.

Cuomo addresses harassment claims, vows to stay in office

By MARINA VILLENEUVE and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Wednesday rejected calls for his resignation in the face of sexual harassment allegations that have threatened his hold on power and damaged his national political standing.

The Democrat, speaking somberly in his first public appearance since three women accused him of inappropriate touching and offensive remarks, apologized and said that he "learned an important lesson" about his behavior around women.

"I now understand that I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable," Cuomo said. "It was unintentional and I truly and deeply apologize for it."

Asked about calls for him to step aside, the third-term governor said: "I wasn't elected by politicians, I was elected by the people of the state of New York. I'm not going to resign."

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Cuomo acknowledged "sensitivities have changed and behavior has changed" and that what he considers his "customary greeting" — an old-world approach that often involves kisses and hugs — is not acceptable.

But the allegations against the governor go beyond aggressive greetings.

Former aide Lindsey Boylan accuses Cuomo of having harassed her throughout her employment and said he once suggested a game of strip poker aboard his state-owned jet. Another former aide, Charlotte Bennett, said Cuomo once asked her if she ever had sex with older men.

Both women rejected Cuomo's latest apology, doubling down on their disgust after he issued a statement Sunday attempting to excuse his behavior as his way of being "playful."

"How can New Yorkers trust you @NYGovCuomo to lead our state if you 'don't know' when you've been inappropriate with your own staff?" Boylan tweeted.

Cuomo said he will "fully cooperate" with an investigation into the allegations overseen by the state's independently elected attorney general. Attorney General Letitia James, also a Democrat, is selecting an outside law firm to conduct the probe and document its findings in a public report.

Cuomo addressed the allegations during a news conference that otherwise focused on the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic, the kind of briefings that made him a daily fixture on TV and a national star among Democrats. Before that, Cuomo last spoke to reporters during a conference call on Feb. 22. His last briefing on camera was Feb. 19.

Two of the women accusing Cuomo worked in his administration. The other was a guest at a wedding that he officiated.

Bennett, 25, said Cuomo quizzed her about her sex life, asked if she felt age made a difference in relationships and said he was fine dating "anyone above the age of 22." Bennett said she believed he was gauging her interest in an affair. Cuomo has denied making advances on Bennett.

Boylan, 36, said Cuomo commented on her appearance inappropriately, kissed her without her consent and went out of his way to touch her on her lower back, arms and legs. Cuomo has denied Boylan's allegations.

Anna Ruch told The New York Times that Cuomo put his hands on her face and asked if he could kiss her just moments after they met at a September 2019 wedding in Manhattan.

Cuomo didn't answer directly when asked by a reporter if he could assure the public that there were no other former aides who would come forward.

"The facts will come out" in the attorney general's investigation, he said, reiterating his position that he "never knew at the time" that he was making anyone feel uncomfortable.

Bennett's lawyer, Debra Katz, said the governor's news conference "was full of falsehoods and inaccurate information."

She said Cuomo's claim that he was unaware he had made women uncomfortable was disingenuous, considering that Bennett had reported his behavior to her boss and one of Cuomo's lawyers.

"We are confident that they made him aware of her complaint and we fully expect that the Attorney General's investigation will demonstrate that Cuomo administration officials failed to act on Ms. Bennett's serious allegations or to ensure that corrective measures were taken, in violation of their legal requirements," Katz said.

The harassment allegations follow accusations that Cuomo covered up the true COVID-19 death toll on nursing home residents. Cuomo's support has plummeted amid the one-two punch of scandals, and even some Democrats have called on him to step aside.

"I don't think it's in his DNA to resign or back down," said Queens Assembly member Ron Kim, a Democrat who accused Cuomo of bullying him over the nursing home issue. "I think he will do whatever it takes to fight this."

Cuomo said he inherited his gregarious way of greeting people from his father, the late former Gov. Mario Cuomo, and that he intended to be welcoming and make people feel comfortable.

Speaking about the allegations, Cuomo initially said he was apologizing to "people" who were uncomfortable with his conduct, but he didn't make clear as he continued which of the women he was referring to.

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At one point, he said he was apologizing to "the young woman who worked here who said that I made her feel uncomfortable in the workplace." That description could apply to both Boylan and Bennett.

Asked what he was saying to New Yorkers, Cuomo said: "I'm embarrassed by what happened... I'm embarrassed that someone felt that way in my administration. I'm embarrassed and hurt and I apologize that somebody who interacted with me felt that way."

The governor, who has touted a law requiring all workers in New York to receive sexual harassment training, said he felt at the time that his behavior was innocuous but now acknowledges that sexual harassment centers on how the victim is impacted — not the offender's intent.

"If a person feels uncomfortable, if a person feels pain, if a person is offended, I feel very badly about that and I apologize for it. There's no but — it's, 'I'm sorry,'" Cuomo said.

This story has been updated to correct the day of the press briefing. It was on Wednesday, not Tuesday.

Sisak reported from New York. Associated Press reporter David Bauder contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: What to look for at China's annual Congress

BEIJING (AP) — China's legislature begins its annual meeting this week with economic growth, climate and a crackdown on political opponents in Hong Kong expected to be on the agenda.

COMMUNIST PARTY FIRMLY IN CHARGE WHILE XI REIGNS SUPREME

The gathering of the National People's Congress and its advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, brings handpicked delegates from across the country to discuss governing priorities and receive instructions from the ruling Communist Party leadership. Comprising roughly 3,000 members, the NPC is under complete party control and rubberstamps decisions made in advance but also offers the leadership feedback on pressing national concerns.

The party rejects any role for opposition parties or a separation of executive, judicial and legislative powers. Party leader and head of state Xi Jinping has eliminated limits on his term, potentially putting him in control for life. This year marks the centenary of the party's founding, and leaders will likely repeat a much-ballyhooed though difficult to qualify claim that no parts of the vast country of 1.4 billion people remain mired in extreme poverty.

ECONOMY TAKES CENTER STAGE

The state of the world's second-largest economy takes precedence among the myriad issues presented by Premier Li Keqiang in his address at the NPC's opening session on Friday. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, no target for economic growth was issued last year, but China has since shrugged off the impact and is expected to begin shifting its focus back to longer-term efforts to make the country a tech power less reliant on trade. This year will see the start of the 14th five-year plan, a vestige of the planned economy that speaks to the enduring role of state-owned businesses from banks to shipyards. After last year's multidecade-low 2.3% growth, forecasters say it would be easy to hit 7% as manufacturing and spending rebound.

CLOSING DOWN HONG KONG OPPOSITION

In the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong, China is moving to eliminate the possibility of opposition politicians gaining office, saying only patriots loyal to the Communist Party can have a role in government. That could prompt the NPC to reassign votes in the 1,200-member committee that selects the city's leader to deprive a small number of elected local district counselors from taking part. A sweeping national security law endorsed by the NPC last year has had a chilling effect on free speech and opposition political activity in Hong Kong. China says the city needs stability after months of anti-government protests in 2019, while critics say Beijing has largely abandoned its pledge to allow the former British colony to maintain its own legal, economic and social institutions until 2047.

FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Expectations are high that the 14th five-year plan will align domestic policies with international pledges

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on climate change. Xi made a surprise pledge at a United Nations meeting in September that China would go carbon neutral by 2060. He has also pledged that China, currently the world's largest emitter of climate change-causing emissions, would hit its carbon peak by 2030. China has been a world leader in adding solar and wind power to its energy supply, while continuing to build new coal plants, including overseas under its "Belt and Road Initiative." To meet its climate goals, China will need to drastically reduce its reliance on coal, with the heavy smog blanketing Beijing this week illustrating the continuing challenge. With the United States rejoining the Paris climate agreement, Washington and others will be seeking evidence that Beijing is making good on its commitments.

US-CHINA RELATIONS AND THE MILITARY

This year's meeting comes as China and the U.S. are attempting to soften the caustic tone in relations that prevailed during the Trump administration. While President Joe Biden is maintaining pressure over trade and technology, he has shown a willingness to restore dialogue. However, China has not shown any willingness to budge in the face of U.S. support for Beijing-claimed Taiwan and criticism of Chinese policies in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang. China is also continuing its military buildup and recently passed a law authorizing its coast guard to use force to remove any foreign presence in what it considers Chinese waters and islands. In his speech to the opening session, Li will announce the military budget, whose 6.6% increase last year was the lowest in recent memory, a reflection both of the economic headwinds then facing the country and the massive improvements made during years of double-digit percentage increases that have put China's defense spending second in the world behind only the United States.

HEIGHTENED SECURITY AND ANTI-VIRUS MEASURES

China has largely controlled local transmission of the coronavirus, but is taking no chances while vaccination levels remain relatively low. As was the case last year, the two meetings are being held on a truncated schedule with reporters covering the proceedings from a remote media center. While China last year postponed the meetings until May, it has reverted to holding them in March this year in what the official Xinhua News Agency portrayed as a sign of confidence. "The arrangement reconfirms that China's political, economic and social life is returning to normal," Xinhua said in a commentary Wednesday. As usual, security has been tightened in the capital with paramilitary troops patrolling near the Great Hall of the People where the meetings are held and standing guard at subway stations.

Police uncover 'possible plot' by militia to breach Capitol

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Capitol Police say they have uncovered intelligence of a "possible plot" by a militia group to breach the U.S. Capitol on Thursday, nearly two months after a mob of supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the iconic building to try to stop Congress from certifying now-President Joe Biden's victory.

The threat appears to be connected to a far-right conspiracy theory, mainly promoted by supporters of QAnon, that Trump will rise again to power on March 4. That was the original presidential inauguration day until 1933, when it was moved to Jan. 20.

Online chatter identified by authorities included discussions among members of the Three Percenters, an anti-government militia group, concerning possible plots against the Capitol on Thursday, according to two law enforcement officials who were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. Members of the Three Percenters were among the extremists who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6.

The announcement comes as the Capitol police and other law enforcement agencies are taking heat from Congress in contentious hearings this week on their handling of the Jan. 6 riot. Police were ill-prepared for the mass of Trump supporters in tactical gear, some armed, and it took hours for National Guard reinforcements to come. By then, rioters had broken and smashed their way into the building and roamed the halls for hours, stalling Congress' certification effort temporarily and sending lawmakers into hiding.

"The United States Capitol Police Department is aware of and prepared for any potential threats towards members of Congress or towards the Capitol complex," the agency said in a statement. "We have obtained

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intelligence that shows a possible plot to breach the Capitol by an identified militia group on Thursday, March 4." Police did not identify the militia group in the statement.

The U.S. House was abruptly wrapping its work for the week Wednesday night given the threat of violence.

An advisory sent earlier this week to members of Congress by Timothy Blodgett, the acting House sergeant-at-arms, said that the Capitol Police had "no indication that groups will travel to Washington D.C. to protest or commit acts of violence."

But that advisory was updated in a note to lawmakers Wednesday morning. Blodgett wrote that the Capitol Police had received "new and concerning information and intelligence indicating additional interest in the Capitol for the dates of March 4th – 6th by a militia group."

In her testimony to the House panel, acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said her investigators had collected "some concerning intelligence," but declined to provide any details publicly, saying that it was "law enforcement sensitive" and that she would provide a private briefing for the subcommittee members.

Lawmakers, congressional staffers and law enforcement officials are still on edge after the attack last month, even as the security posture around the Capitol remains at an unprecedented level.

On Wednesday, federal agents were seeking to determine whether there was an increase in the number of hotel rooms being rented in Washington, as well as monitoring flights to the area, car rental reservations and any buses being chartered to bring groups into the capital, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. The person could not publicly discuss details of the security planning and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The FBI and Department of Homeland Security also sent a joint intelligence bulletin to local law enforcement officials Tuesday warning that a group of militia extremists had discussed trying to take control of the Capitol on March 4 and encouraging thousands of people to come to D.C. to try to remove Democrats from power.

There has been a noticeable decline in online activity on some social media platforms surrounding efforts on March 4, and there was already considerably less online chatter than during the lead-up to Jan. 6, a day that Trump repeatedly had promoted for a his rally and encouraged thousands to come to the nation's capital.

Several QAnon groups still operating on the social media messaging platform Telegram warned followers to stay away from any events on March 4, claiming it was a setup for Trump supporters.

"If there are groups out there planning and advertising events on or around March 4 anywhere in the country (DC included) we strongly urge everyone to avoid them entirely," one Telegram user wrote late last month in a QAnon group that has more than 65,000 followers.

There's also a very large fence in place around the U.S. Capitol that blocks off all avenues of entry including on the streets around the building, which was put in place after Jan. 6.

Also, thousands of accounts that promoted the Jan. 6 event that led to a violent storming of the U.S. Capitol have since been suspended by major tech companies like Facebook and Twitter, making it far more difficult for QAnon and far-right groups to organize a repeat of the mass gathering on Thursday.

Twitter banned more than 70,000 accounts after the riots, while Facebook and Instagram removed posts mentioning "stop the steal," a pro-Trump rallying cry used to mobilize his supporters in January. And the conservative social media platform Parler, which many of Trump's supporters joined to promote false election fraud conspiracy theories and encourage friends to "storm" the Capitol on Jan. 6, was booted off the internet following the siege.

Capitol Police say that they have stepped up security around the Capitol complex since January's insurrection, adding physical security measures such as the fencing topped with razor wire around the Capitol and members of the National Guard who remain at the complex. The statement said the agency was "taking the intelligence seriously" but provided no other specific details on the threat.

"I think they are definitely prepared for any threats that may come our way in the next couple days," said Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-Va., who was one of several lawmakers briefed privately by the police. Wexton added that she still questioned the long-term security plan for the Capitol and said Pittman, the acting chief, "has not come up with proactive ways to fix the issues that they had."

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So far, about 300 people have been charged with federal crimes for their roles in the riot. Five people, including a Capitol Police officer, died.

Since his defeat, Trump has been promoting lies that the election was stolen from him through mass voter fraud, even though such claims have been rejected by judges, Republican state officials and Trump's own administration. He was impeached by the House after the Jan. 6 riot on a charge of incitement of insurrection but was acquitted by the Senate.

Associated Press writers Nomaan Merchant in Houston; Colleen Long, Alan Fram, and Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington; and Amanda Seitz in Chicago contributed to this report.

Texas schools, stores divided on masks as mandate ends

By JAKE BLEIBERG and PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The end of Texas' mask mandate is giving Lucy Alanis second thoughts about one of her occasional indulgences during the coronavirus pandemic: dining in at restaurants.

"I guess I'm a little scared," said Alanis, 27, a florist in Dallas.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's repeal of most COVID-19 restrictions — saying it was "time to open Texas 100%" — reverberated across the state and to the White House on Wednesday, a day after one of the country's most dramatic rollbacks of rules intended to slow the spread of the virus.

Businesses in Texas shed rules, city leaders plotted new safeguards and the state's 5 million schoolchildren largely remained under orders to keep wearing masks, at least for now. The pushback to Abbott's decision included one of his own pandemic advisers, who said he was not consulted ahead of time.

Texas has another week before the mandates end, but what daily life will look like after that remains unsettled after Abbott made the state the largest in the U.S. to no longer require masks, which health experts say is among the most effective ways to curb the spread of the virus.

President Joe Biden reacted to America's second-largest state winding down virus restrictions for nearly 30 million people, calling it "Neanderthal thinking."

The mask mandate, which has been in place since July, and occupancy limits on restaurants and retail stores end March 10. Already, some stores announced they still won't allow maskless customers, while social media users began tracking evolving policies on crowdsourced spreadsheets.

Shopping at Target? Masks are still required. Going to Texas' largest grocery chain, H-E-B? Face coverings are encouraged but no longer mandated.

It's yet another test for businesses that have struggled to strike a balance between safety and survival over the past year.

Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo said his officers will continue wearing masks. He blasted Abbott over the repeal and worries about more aggressive encounters like one in December, when a customer confronted over a mask at a Houston bar smashed a glass over an employee's head.

"We can see conflict coming, sadly," Acevedo said. "And I think that a lot of this is going to be self-inflicted."

Abbott said "personal vigilance" among Texans remained essential but that mandates were no longer needed, emphasizing the increasing availability of vaccines. On Wednesday, Texas health officials announced that teachers and child care workers were now eligible to be vaccinated.

The virus has killed more than 43,000 people in Texas, behind only California and New York. Like most of the country, new cases and hospitalizations statewide have fallen rapidly in recent weeks from record levels in January. But the toll still remains significant, including nearly 300 newly reported deaths Wednesday.

Still, federal health officials warn that the pandemic is far from over and that states should not let their guard down. Even one of Abbott's own pandemic advisers disagreed with the move.

"I don't think this is the right time," said Dr. Mark McClellan, former head of the Food and Drug Administration, who also told The Associated Press in an email that he was not consulted before the repeals were announced. "Texas has been making some real progress but it's too soon for full reopening and to stop masking around others."

State education officials on Wednesday gave local school boards the ability to set their own rules.

Immediately after Abbott made his announcement Tuesday, the tiny Rogers school district about 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of Austin said its 850 students would no longer need to wear masks or undergo temperature checks. But by Wednesday morning, Superintendent Joe Craig backpedaled, saying he needed to explain the ramifications to parents.

Under the district's current protocols, if everyone is wearing a mask, a positive test doesn't trigger an automatic quarantine of everyone in the same classroom.

"If we go to a no mask thing, that part of it changes," Craig said. Most parents would probably not want masks, he said, "but they're missing a piece of information they're not considering."

Outside a spin workout studio in Dallas, manager Nicky Cecala said he was inundated with text messages from people who knew "all the struggle and perseverance we've had to endure" to keep the business running over the last year.

He said whether his studio changes protocols will partially depend on what customers want, but he welcomes being able to now make the choice himself.

"I don't think the government has a place to tell individuals what to do," he said. "I think they can suggest it, but it becomes kinda tyrannical to force people to do something against their will."

Weber reported from Austin. Associated Press writer Jim Vertuno in Austin contributed to this report.

Water crisis continues in Mississippi, weeks after cold snap

By JEFF MARTIN, LEAH WILLINGHAM and EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi's largest city is still struggling with water problems more than two weeks after winter storms and freezing weather ravaged the system in Jackson, knocking out water for drinking and making it impossible for many to even flush their toilets.

Residents in the city of 160,000 are still being warned to boil any water that does come out of the faucets.

"I pray it comes back on," Jackson resident Nita Smith said. "I'm not sure how much more of this we can take."

Smith has had no water at home for nearly three weeks.

Smith is concerned about her mother who has diabetes. Her mother and most of the other older people on her street don't drive, so Smith has been helping them get water to clean themselves and flush their toilets.

A key focus of city crews is filling the system's water tanks to an optimal level. But, public works director Charles Williams said Wednesday that fish, tree limbs and other debris have clogged screens where water moves from a reservoir into a treatment plant. That caused pressure to drop for the entire water system.

"Today was not a good day for us," Williams said.

He said about a fourth of Jackson's customers remained without running water. That is more than 10,000 connections, with most serving multiple people.

City officials on Wednesday continued distributing water for flushing toilets at several pick-up points. But they're giving no specific timeline for resolving problems. Workers continue to fix dozens of water main breaks and leaks.

The crisis has taken a toll on businesses. Jeff Good is co-owner of three Jackson restaurants, and two of them remained closed Wednesday. In a Facebook update, Good said the businesses have insurance, but he's concerned about his employees.

"We will not be financially ruined," Good wrote. "The spirits of our team members are my biggest concern. A true malaise and depression is setting in."

Mississippi's capital city is not alone in water problems. More than two weeks have passed since the cold wave shut down the main power grid in Texas, leaving millions in freezing homes, causing about 50 deaths and disabling thousands of public water systems serving those millions.

Four public water systems in Texas remained out of commission Wednesday, affecting 456 customers, and 225 systems still have 135,299 customers boiling their tap water, according to the Texas Commission

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on Environmental Quality. Also, 208 of the state's 254 counties are still reporting public water system issues. Bonnie Bishop, 68, and her husband, Mike, 63, have been without water at their Jackson home for 14 days. Both have health problems.

She's recovering after months in the hospital with the coronavirus. She's home but still in therapy to learn how to walk again and deals with neuropathy in her hands and feet.

She has not been able to soak her feet in warm water, something that usually provides relief for the neuropathy, or to help her husband gather water to boil for cooking for cleaning.

Mike Bishop just had elbow surgery. The first week the couple was without water, he still had staples in his arm and was hauling 5-gallon containers from his truck, his wife said. Bonnie Bishop said she told him not to strain himself, but he wouldn't listen. They feel they have no choice.

On Monday, the couple drove 25 miles (40 kilometers) to Mike's mother's house to do laundry.

Jackson's water system has not been able to provide a sustainable flow of water throughout the city since the mid-February storms, city officials say.

The system "basically crashed like a computer and now we're trying to rebuild it," Williams said at a recent briefing.

The city's water mains are more than a century old, and its infrastructure needs went unaddressed for decades, Democratic Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba has said.

"We more than likely have more than a \$2 billion issue with our infrastructure," he said.

Jackson voters in 2014 approved a 1-cent local sales tax to pay for improvements to roads and water and sewer systems. On Tuesday, the city council voted to seek legislative approval for another election to double that local tax to 2 cents a dollar.

Republican Gov. Tate Reeves would have to agree to letting Jackson have the tax election.

"I do think it's really important that the city of Jackson start collecting their water bill payments before they start going and asking everyone else to pony up more money," Reeves said Tuesday.

Jackson has had problems for years with its water billing system and with the quality of water.

Melanie Deaver Hanlin, who was without water for 14 days, has been flushing toilets with pool water and showering at friends' homes. She said Jackson's water system "needs to be fixed, not patched."

"That's the issue now — poor maintenance for far too long," Hanlin said. "And Jackson residents are paying the price."

Associated Press writer Terry Wallace contributed from Dallas. Martin reported from Marietta, Georgia.

Video: Myanmar police hold AP journalist in chokehold

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — A video of the arrest of Associated Press journalist Thein Zaw as he was photographing Myanmar security forces charging at anti-coup protesters shows him being quickly surrounded and held in a chokehold as handcuffs are placed on him.

Authorities have charged 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.

The video starts with Thein Zaw standing by the side of a road on Saturday photographing dozens of security forces as they run at a group of protesters in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city.

Several police run at him, and he tries to escape. At least seven surround him as he is placed in a chokehold. He is pushed and shoved and quickly handcuffed. A policeman with a bullhorn then uses the handcuffs to pull him away.

Many of the police are carrying truncheons, while some have what appear to be guns and automatic weapons.

"The Associated Press calls for the immediate release of AP journalist Thein Zaw, who has been charged with a crime in Myanmar for simply doing his job," Ian Phillips, AP vice president for international news, said Wednesday. "Independent journalists must be allowed to freely and safely report the news without fear of retribution. AP condemns the charge against Thein Zaw and his arbitrary detention."

The military ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in a Feb. 1 coup. Protesters have dem-

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onstrated peacefully against the coup even as security forces have dramatically escalated their crackdown. On Wednesday, at least 34 protesters were killed in several cities, according to accounts on social media and local news reports compiled by a data analyst.

Authorities have also arrested people en masse.

Lawyer Tin Zar Oo, who represents Thein Zaw, said his client was one of six journalists who 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.

The group includes journalists working for Myanmar Now, Myanmar Photo Agency, 7Day News, Zee Kwet online news and a freelancer.

The U.S. said it was concerned about the increasing attacks on and arrests of journalists by Myanmar security forces. "We call on the military to immediately release these individuals and to cease intimidation and harassment of the media and others unjustly detained merely for doing their jobs for exercising their universal rights," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said to reporters in Washington.

Rights and press freedom groups also have demanded the journalists' release.

"AAJA-Asia stands in full support of Burmese journalists, and urges all Myanmar authorities to uphold press freedom and allow the media to report on the news without fear of reprisal," the Asian American Journalists Association's Asia Chapter said in a statement. "We call for an immediate end to the violence, censorship and persecution."

Thein Zaw, 32, is reported to be held in Insein Prison in northern Yangon, notorious for housing political prisoners under previous military regimes.

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.

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.

Germany extends lockdown but paves way to relax more rules

By FRANK JORDANS and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany is extending its coronavirus shutdown by three weeks until March 28, but easing some restrictions to allow nonessential stores and other businesses to reopen in areas with relatively low infection rates.

After about nine hours of talks, Chancellor Angela Merkel and the governors of the country's 16 states agreed Wednesday to measures aimed at balancing concern over the impact of more contagious coronavirus variants with a growing clamor for a return to a more normal life.

The first moves have already been made: many elementary students returned to school last week. And on Monday, hairdressers opened after a 2 1/2-month break. Current lockdown rules were set to run through Sunday.

On Wednesday, Merkel and the state governors -- who in highly decentralized Germany have the power to impose and lift restrictions -- set out a phased plan that allows for a gradual, if limited, relaxation of restrictions.

"These should be steps toward opening but at the same time steps that do not set us back," Merkel told reporters in Berlin. "There are a great many examples in Europe of a dramatic third wave."

She pledged that "spring 2021 will be different from spring a year ago."

Regions where infection rates are relatively low, though not as low as previously envisioned, will be able to open nonessential stores, museums and other facilities on a limited basis.

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Most stores have been closed nationwide since Dec. 16. Restaurants, bars, sports and leisure facilities have been closed since Nov. 2 and hotels are allowed only to accommodate business travelers.

When they last conferred on Feb. 10, Merkel and the governors set a target of 35 weekly new cases per 100,000 inhabitants before letting small stores, museums and other businesses reopen. The aim is to enable reliable contact-tracing.

But reaching that target soon appeared increasingly unrealistic as cases of the more contagious variant first detected in Britain increased, with overall infections creeping slightly higher. The cases-per-week number, which peaked at nearly 200 per 100,000 inhabitants just before Christmas, has been stalled above 60 in recent days.

Wednesday's decisions opened up the possibility of reopening more businesses at various stages above the 35 target, though they included an "emergency brake" mechanism that would see the restrictions now in place reimposed if the weekly infection level exceeds 100 per 100,000 residents on three consecutive days.

Regions can open nonessential shops next Monday if weekly infections are below 50 per 100,000 residents, and at least allow people to collect pre-ordered goods and to visit museums and zoos with appointments above that level.

If infections are "stable" below the 50 mark two weeks later, regions will be allowed to open theaters, cinemas, outdoor areas of restaurants and allow some indoor sports. After another two weeks, they can allow outdoor events with up to 50 participants and contact sports indoors.

That will be accompanied by an increase in tests, which will be required in some places depending on infection figures. Everyone will be offered at least one free rapid test per week.

Germany has seen the number of deaths from COVID-19 and people in intensive care decline in recent weeks.

But it has been struggling to ramp up its vaccination drive, which has drawn widespread criticism for being too slow, even as the supply of vaccines improves. German lawmakers have ditched plans for hefty fines for people who skip the vaccine queue.

On Wednesday, the country's leaders agreed to change the rulebook to speed up vaccinations. Merkel said that they "want to use all flexibility" — extending the length of time between first and second shots as far as possible, allowing more people to get the initial dose.

After Germany initially limited the AstraZeneca vaccine — one of three cleared for use in the European Union — to people under 65, an independent expert committee is likely to recommend lifting that restrictions, Merkel said.

As of Tuesday, 5.3% of the population had been given a first vaccine dose and 2.7% had received two doses.

On Wednesday, the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's national disease control center, said an analysis of nearly 25,000 samples found that the British variant accounted for about 46% of cases last week — up from 22% two weeks earlier.

The disease control center said Wednesday that 9,019 new coronavirus cases were reported over the past 24 hours, bringing the total so far to 2.46 million. There were another 418 deaths in the nation of 83 million, raising Germany's death toll to 70,881.

Merkel and the governors will confer again on March 22 to discuss further possible steps toward opening up public life.

SUV in crash where 13 died came through hole in border fence

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

HOLTVILLE, Calif. (AP) — The 13 people killed in one of the deadliest highway crashes involving migrants sneaking into the U.S. had entered California through a section of border fence with Mexico that was cut away, apparently by smugglers, immigration officials said Wednesday.

Surveillance video showed a Ford Expedition and Chevrolet Suburban drive through the opening early

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Tuesday, said Gregory Bovino, the Border Patrol's El Centro sector chief. The video has not been publicly released because it's part of an ongoing investigation.

The Suburban carried 19 people, and it caught fire for unknown reasons on a nearby interstate after entering the U.S. All escaped the vehicle and were taken into custody by Border Patrol agents.

The Expedition crammed with 25 people continued on, and a tractor-trailer struck it a short time later. Ten of the 13 killed in that crash have been identified as Mexican citizens. The Border Patrol said its agents were not pursuing the vehicle before the wreck.

The opening in the fence was about 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of the crash in the heart of California's Imperial Valley, a major farming region now at the height of a harvest that provides much of the lettuce, onions, broccoli and winter vegetables to U.S. supermarkets.

It was made of steel bollards that were built before former President Donald Trump blanketed much of the border with taller barriers that go deeper into the ground. Photos show a panel of eight steel poles was lifted out and left on the ground in the desert next to an old tire and other debris.

"Human smugglers have proven time and again they have little regard for human life," Bovino said. "Those who may be contemplating crossing the border illegally should pause to think of the dangers that all too often end in tragedy, tragedies our Border Patrol Agents and first responders are unfortunately very familiar with."

The breach occurred in a busy area for illegal crossings near the Imperial Sand Dunes where migrants often climb over an aging barrier and wait for drivers to pick them up, hoping to avoid the scrutiny of Border Patrol agents at checkpoints on highways leading to Los Angeles, San Diego and Phoenix.

A pandemic-related measure that allows the Border Patrol to expel people without an opportunity to seek asylum potentially leads some to try to evade authorities instead of surrendering, sometimes with fatal consequences. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention introduced expulsion powers nearly a year ago under Trump, and the Biden administration has signaled no plans to lift them anytime soon.

The cause of Tuesday's collision wasn't yet known, authorities said. The Expedition is built to hold eight people safely, but smugglers are known to pack people into vehicles in extremely unsafe conditions to maximize their profits.

Seats in the SUV had been removed except for those for the driver and front passenger, said Omar Watson, chief of the California Highway Patrol's border division.

The crash happened in an area that became a major route for illegal border crossings in the late 1990s after heightened enforcement in San Diego pushed migrants to more remote areas.

Barely a mile from the crash, there is a cemetery with rows of unmarked bricks that is a burial ground for migrants who died crossing the border.

In 2001, John Hunter founded Water Station, a volunteer group that leaves jugs of water in giant plastic drums for dehydrated migrants.

"I was trying to figure out how to stop the deaths," said Hunter, whose brother Duncan strongly advocated for border wall construction as a congressman.

Illegal crossings in the area fell sharply in the mid-2000s but the area has remained a draw for migrants and was a priority for wall construction under Trump. His administration's first wall project was in Calexico.

When police arrived Tuesday at the crash site about 125 miles (200 kilometers) east of San Diego, some passengers were trying to crawl out of the crumpled SUV. Others were wandering around the nearby fields. The big rig's front end was pushed into the SUV's left side and two empty trailers were jackknifed behind it.

The men and women in the SUV ranged in age from 15 to 53, and those who survived had injuries that were minor to severe, including fractures and head trauma, officials said. The driver was from Mexicali, Mexico, just across the border, and was among those killed.

The 68-year-old driver of the big rig, who is from the nearby California community of El Centro, suffered moderate injuries.

The crash occurred around 6:15 a.m. under a clear, sunny sky at an intersection just outside the community of Holtville, about 11 miles (18 kilometers) north of the border. Authorities said the tractor-trailer

was heading north on a highway when the SUV pulled in front of it from a road with a stop sign.

It's not clear if the SUV ran the stop sign or had stopped before entering the highway. How fast both vehicles were going also wasn't yet known.

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, taxing the brakes and making it tougher to steer the vehicle, 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 overreaction to any type of high-speed lane change," said Borris, who now runs a safety consulting business.

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.

States rapidly expanding vaccine access as supplies surge

By MARK PRATT and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Buoyed by a surge in vaccine shipments, states and cities are rapidly expanding eligibility for COVID-19 shots to teachers, Americans 50 and over and others as the U.S. races to beat back the virus and reopen businesses and schools.

Indiana and Michigan will begin vaccinating those 50 and over, while Arizona and Connecticut have thrown open the line to those who are at least 55. Pennsylvania and Wisconsin are reserving the first doses of the new one-shot vaccine from Johnson & Johnson for teachers. And in Detroit, factory workers can get vaccinated starting this week, regardless of age.

Giving the vaccine to teachers and other school staff "will help protect our communities," Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf said. "It's going to take burdens off our parents and families. It's going to make our schools get back to the business of teaching our kids."

Until now, the vaccination campaign against the outbreak that's killed over a half-million Americans has concentrated mostly on health workers and senior citizens.

Around the U.S., politicians and school administrators have been pushing hard in recent weeks to reopen classrooms to stop students from falling behind and enable more parents to go back to work. But teachers have resisted returning without getting vaccinated.

The Department of Health and Human Services has ordered all states to make teachers, school staff, bus drivers and child care workers eligible for shots. That's a major shift for the Biden administration, which controls access to COVID-19 vaccines but previously allowed states to set their own guidelines.

Jody Mackey, 46, a middle-school digital media and history teacher in Traverse City, Michigan — where students have attended mostly in-person since September — received her second dose nearly two weeks ago after teachers in her district were designated essential workers.

Before that, she kept her classroom windows open and used space heaters.

"If you want schools to be successful and safe and you want your teachers to have their heads in the game, get them the vaccination," she said. "Putting teachers in a situation where they feel scared all the time, where they're going to want to avoid their kids, how is that good for kids or teachers?"

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey on Wednesday ordered students and teachers to return to school this month, saying many teachers have already received their second dose.

"The science is clear: It's time all kids have the option to return to school so they can get back on track and we can close the achievement gap," Ducey said in a statement.

The U.S. has administered over 80 million shots in a vaccination drive now hitting its stride, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 20% of the nation's adults, or close to 52 million people, have received at least one dose, and 10% have been fully inoculated.

President Joe Biden said Tuesday that the U.S. expects to have enough vaccine by the end of May for all adults — two months earlier than anticipated — though it is likely to take longer than that to adminis-

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ter those shots. He also pushed states to give at least one shot to teachers by month's end and said the government will provide the doses through its pharmacy program.

In Wisconsin, teachers will get priority when the state receives its first shipment of about 48,000 doses of the J&J vaccine, health authorities said. Pennsylvania teachers will likewise be first in line when an expected 94,000 doses of that formula arrive this week.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced this week that educators, school staff and child care workers can now get shots. In Texas, where teachers have been battling to gain access to shots, state officials on Wednesday ordered vaccine providers to begin administering shots to school workers.

And in Massachusetts, about 400,000 teachers, child care workers and school staff can register for vaccinations starting March 11, Gov. Charlie Baker said, though he warned it could take time to book appointments because supplies remain limited.

Tennessee will open vaccinations Monday to an estimated 1 million people over 16 who have high-risk health conditions and those in households with medically fragile children.

The rush to vaccinate comes as many states ease restrictions on people and businesses, despite repeated warnings from health officials that the U.S. is risking another lethal wave. Biden called out the Republican governors of Texas and Mississippi for lifting mask rules.

"We are on the cusp of being able to fundamentally change the nature of this disease," the president said Wednesday. "The last thing we need is Neanderthal thinking that in the meantime, everything's fine, take off your mask, forget it. It still matters."

Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves snapped back on Twitter. "Mississippians don't need handlers. As numbers drop, they can assess their choices and listen to experts," he said. "I guess I just think we should trust Americans, not insult them."

While deaths and newly confirmed infections have plummeted from their peaks in January, they're still running at high levels. The U.S. is averaging close to 2,000 deaths and 66,000 cases per day.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky encouraged Americans to "do the right thing" even if states lift their restrictions.

Vaccinations are seen as key to getting people back to work and revitalizing the battered economy.

"The more people we can get the safe and effective vaccine, the faster we can return to a sense of normalcy," Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said in a statement Wednesday announcing that people 50 to 64 can start getting vaccinations March 22.

Cindy Estrada, a vice president at the United Auto Workers, said there have been illnesses and deaths among factory workers, so Detroit's decision to offer them shots "is incredibly important."

"It's going to give them some peace of mind," she said, baring her arm for a shot.

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Dems tighten relief benefits, firm up support for virus bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Democrats agreed to tighten eligibility limits for stimulus checks Wednesday, bowing to party moderates as leaders prepared to move their \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill through the Senate.

At the same time, the White House and top Democrats stood by progressives and agreed that the Senate package would retain the \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefits included in the House-passed pandemic legislation. Moderates have wanted to trim those payments to \$300 after Republicans have called the bill so heedlessly generous that it would prompt some people to not return to work.

The deal-making underscored the balancing act Democrats face as they try squeezing the massive relief

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measure through the evenly divided, 50-50 Senate. The package, Biden's signature legislative priority, is his attempt to stomp out the year-old pandemic, revive an economy that's shed 10 million jobs and bring some semblance of normality to countless upended lives.

Democrats have no choice but to broker compromises among themselves, thanks to their mere 10-vote House margin and a Senate they control only with Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote. The party's moderate and progressive factions are competing to use their leverage, but without going so far as to scuttle an effort they all support.

"He's pleased with the progress that is being made with the rescue plan," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said of Biden, reflecting the flexibility he and all Democrats will need to prevail. "He's always said he's open to good ideas."

So far, Republicans have presented a unified front against the bill. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said he wants unanimous GOP opposition.

But Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, didn't rule out breaking ranks and supporting the measure. She told reporters her state's tourism industry has been walloped by the pandemic and said she's talked to administration officials about "how this helps a state like Alaska."

The Senate could begin debating the bill Thursday, but Democrats faced mountains of GOP amendments and other delays that could take days to plow through. The House will have to approve the Senate's version before shipping it to Biden, which Democrats want to do before the last round of emergency jobless benefits run dry March 14.

"I would expect a very long night into the next day and keep going on," said Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., describing GOP plans to force votes.

Under the legislation, individuals earning up to \$75,000, and couples up to \$150,000, would get \$1,400 checks per person. The House-approved version would gradually phase down that amount, with individuals making \$100,000 and couples earning \$200,000 receiving nothing.

Under Wednesday's agreement, the Senate bill would instead halt the payments completely for individuals making \$80,000 and couples earning \$160,000, said a Democratic official, who described the agreement only on condition of anonymity.

That means some people who received the last round of \$600 relief checks approved in December wouldn't get anything this time. The liberal Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy estimated that the pared-down Senate eligibility levels means 280 million adults and children would receive stimulus checks, compared to 297 million people under the House plan.

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the chamber's most conservative Democrat, has favored lowering the relief check eligibility limits and opposed the House bill's minimum wage increase. He suggested Wednesday he'd back the emerging Senate legislation, saying it "really does have enough good stuff that we should be able to make this work."

In a swipe at moderates, Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., a leader of his chamber's progressives, called the new phase-out of relief checks a "silly and stupid" effort to appease "the one or two people who can hold things up."

Yet asked if the change could threaten the overall bill, Pocan said, "Let's hope they don't screw too many things up. We need to get this done."

Liberals were already angry after Senate Democrats jettisoned the House bill's minimum wage increase to \$15 by 2025. They did so after the Senate parliamentarian said the chamber's rules wouldn't allow the boost in the bill and as Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., said they'd oppose its inclusion, sealing its fate.

The House version of the relief checks would cost \$422 billion, making them the package's single most expensive item.

The two chambers' bills are largely similar, with both bearing money for state and municipal governments, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, schools, health care subsidies and tax breaks for children and lower-earning people.

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Republicans continued lashing the measure as an overpriced Democratic wish list of liberal causes that lavishes help on many who don't really need it.

"Democrats had a choice," McConnell said. "They chose to go it alone, tack to the left, leave families' top priorities on the cutting room floor."

"This is not a liberal wish list," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "This is an American wish list. When people want checks to help them get out of the morass, that's not a liberal wish list. That's what the American people want."

Slowly, the Senate bill's contours were taking shape.

Senate Democrats were removing \$1.5 million for a bridge between New York state and Canada and around \$140 million for a rapid transit project south of San Francisco after Republicans cast both as pet projects for Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Aides to both Democratic leaders said the projects weren't new and had been supported by the Trump administration.

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.

AP reporter Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

In Mississippi, small-town bluesman keeps aging music alive

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press/Report for America

BENTONIA, Miss. (AP) — With callused hands, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes plucks an old acoustic guitar at the juke joint his parents started more than 70 years ago. He checks the cafe's inventory: jars of pickled eggs, beef jerky, pork hocks. He tends to the wood-burning stove, made from an oil-field pipe. And every morning, he eventually settles in on a stool behind the counter, waiting — hoping — that someone who wants to hear him play will drop in.

Holmes, 73, is the last Bentonia bluesman, the carrier of a dying musical and oral storytelling tradition born in this Mississippi town of less than 500 people. And now, he's a Grammy-nominated artist, with a recent nod in the Best Traditional Blues Album category for Cypress Grove, a record he hopes will help preserve the Bentonia blues long after he's gone.

The world has changed around Holmes and his Blue Front Café, the country's oldest surviving juke joint. Across the South, the venues — historically owned and frequented by African Americans — have shuttered as owners pass away. Blues experts believe Holmes is the only American running a juke joint owned by his parents.

It's quiet outside the Blue Front, a small building with cinder block walls off a dusty rural Mississippi road. Across the street are the railroad tracks that run through Bentonia; next door sits an old cotton gin.

It's here, at the Blue Front, that Holmes will watch the March 14 ceremony and learn whether he won the Grammy. He can't go in person because of the coronavirus pandemic, and that suits him just fine. He'll be surrounded by musicians from across Mississippi who want to play with him.

"I'll be here in this hole in the wall every day, for as long as I can, so that people don't forget," Holmes said. "We're trying to make sure it doesn't die."

When the Blue Front opened in 1948, it was the first African American-owned retail business in Bentonia, then a majority-Black farming community. Holmes was just a baby. His parents, Carey and Mary, were sharecroppers.

Mary ran the Blue Front during the day while Holmes worked with his father in the fields. By age 9, Holmes was operating a tractor by himself.

The Holmeses' business was a community gathering place. People came to have their laundry pressed, get a haircut, or pick up salt, pepper and other nonperishables.

And they came for the blues. Musicians lined up outside to play the Blue Front, with guitars strapped to

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their backs and harmonicas in their pockets.

During cotton-picking season, the Blue Front was open 24 hours a day to accommodate farmworkers, who came in for a hot plate of Mary's famous buffalo fish. On weekends, people stayed all night drinking moonshine, dancing and playing music.

The town was never home to more than 600 residents, but its location on the Illinois Central Railway drew visitors. Later, the only roadway from Memphis to Jackson passed directly through Bentonia, furthering its popularity.

Historians traveling through Mississippi to document blues musicians discovered Bentonia's style. It's described as haunting and eerie; its minor tonality isn't found in the better-known blues styles of Delta and hill country.

Growing up, Holmes learned from his neighbor, "the father of the Bentonia blues." Henry Stuckey, an aging World War I veteran, played to entertain Holmes and his 13 siblings on their porch.

The style is passed from one musician to the next — it can't be learned using sheet music.

"The old-timers I learned from couldn't read, and they couldn't read sheet music," Holmes said — he doesn't read music, either. "They didn't know what a count was, didn't know about minors or sharps or open or closed tuning. They was just playing. They had no idea there was a musical language to what they were doing."

Dan Auerbach, producer of Cypress Grove and a member of the band the Black Keys, said the beauty of Holmes' music is the improvisation. Holmes never plays the same song twice. Each performance is a snapshot in time.

"Those songs, they're like a living organism, almost. They're changing daily," he said. "You can feel the realness and the immediacy of the music. It's very idiosyncratic, and that's what makes it so special.

"Now, in this day and age, it's like everything's homogenized and we're all on the same server. Jimmy 'Duck' Holmes lives in a world that time forgot — it hasn't changed."

Today, a four-lane highway diverts traffic away from Bentonia. Businesses of Holmes' youth have shuttered; buildings are torn down. More than a quarter of residents live under the poverty line.

The train passes through town daily but doesn't stop.

"People my age was tired of going to the cotton fields," Holmes said. "As soon as they got a chance, they got away from Bentonia, to Chicago, California, New York. There wasn't nothing here."

Holmes never imagined leaving. He lives on the same farm where he was raised, about a mile from the Blue Front.

His presence has become Bentonia's biggest draw. Visitors come from all over the world and the music industry to see him, to hear the music, and to learn the tradition.

Before the pandemic, Mississippi musicians performed at the Blue Front every other Friday, sometimes more, playing different blues styles. In 1972, Holmes started an annual blues festival, now the longest-running in Mississippi.

He holds Bentonia Blues workshops. And every day that he sits behind the counter at the Blue Front, he's willing to teach anyone who walks in.

Some fans are surprised he's so accessible, said Robert Connely Farr, a Mississippi native who's been visiting Holmes for years for guitar tips, all the way from Vancouver. But for those who know Holmes, it makes perfect sense.

"His whole goal in life is to give that sound away, is to perpetuate or further the Bentonia sound," Farr said. "I think it's important to Jimmy, that his place is open and that it constantly has music. He wants there to be life in that building."

Holmes has performed in Europe, South America and across the U.S. He opened for the Black Keys in the nation's capital in 2019. But he always comes back home.

"I would hate if someone took time out of their day to come see me, and I wasn't here," he said. "I appreciate it, that people want to travel from Asia and Europe because they want to know about the blues."

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I like to be here when they come.”

Two large portraits at his juke joint pay homage to his mentors, Stuckey and Jack Owens. Owens continued to teach Holmes after Stuckey died in 1966.

“It was a blessed gift they gave to us,” Holmes said. “And they were so generous with it. What they gave us changed the world.”

Holmes laments that no young people in Bentonina want to learn. They say it’s too complicated. People don’t appreciate how the blues influenced popular music today, how every genre has roots dating back to it, Holmes said.

But he keeps spare guitars around the Blue Front, just in case someone wants to play.

“It will survive somehow,” Holmes said one gray morning in his empty juke joint. “I learned enough that I was able to carry it on, and probably once I’m gone, somebody will be sitting around here playing, someone who picked up the things that I was doing. I have to hope. I have to hope.”

Leah Willingham is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Review: ‘Raya and the Last Dragon’ is a dazzling adventure

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Contrary to what “Game of Thrones” might have you believe, not all dragons are agents of destruction. In the newest offering from Walt Disney Animation, “Raya and the Last Dragon,” they are kind, full of magic and, when needed, the saviors of humanity.

Five hundred years ago, we’re told in a prologue, dragons sacrificed themselves for humans when a mystical evil called the Druun passed through the lands of Kumandra and turned many to stone. The kingdom splintered into factions — Tail, Talon, Heart, Fang and Spine — who perpetually teeter on the edge of war. Sisu, the only remaining dragon, hasn’t been seen in five centuries.

Raya (voiced by “Star Wars” Kelly Marie Tran) is the young Princess of Heart. Her father (voiced by Daniel Dae Kim) is the Chief who hopes to unite all the territories. It doesn’t go as planned, he’s turned to stone, and Raya is set on a dangerous quest to track down the dragon who she believes is their last hope.

The film comes from the odd but inspired pairing of co-directors Carlos López Estrada (who made the Sundance breakout “Blindspotting”) and Disney veteran Don Hall (“Big Hero 6”) and was co-written by Vietnamese playwright Qui Nguyen and “Crazy Rich Asians” co-writer Adele Lim. The result is a sweet-natured and wonderfully imaginative fantasy adventure that has shades of “Indiana Jones” and is suitable for the whole family.

“Raya” gets off to a bit of a slow start but stick with it. Once she sets out on her mission, things pick up considerably thanks in no small part to the introduction of Sisu, played by Awkwafina, who doesn’t try to disguise her wonderfully distinctive voice. Raya discovers Sisu is not quite the hero she is looking for, but that’s just part of the journey. Along the way their brood grows with others displaced and orphaned by the Druun and Raya must confront her main foe, a Princess from another land, Namaari (Gemma Chan) who is part of the reason things went awry in the first place.

The animation is both stunning and very computer generated. Sometimes extended shots of the humans talking can start to feel like the uncanny valley and it makes you miss the hand drawn elements of the form. But hand drawn animation also wouldn’t be able to create the stunning vistas and astoundingly lifelike water. It’s a compromise and “Raya” is undoubtedly a visual feast.

It’s also the best kind of feminist film in that it’s one that doesn’t clobber you with the message. Raya is allowed to be awesome without the script shouting about it all the time and it’s better for it. It does however hammer home a message about trust, which, you know, is fair enough. And it has chosen to have yet another middle-aged semi-dystopian female leader bedecked in all white with a severe gray haircut (Namaari’s mom, voiced by Sandra Oh). It’s not that it’s inherently bad, it’s just a lazy choice for a film

that is otherwise so inventive.

"Raya" is also notable for the simple fact that it features predominately Asian American voice actors — a first for Disney Animation. The animated "Mulan" had a fair amount too, but a lot were white actors voicing Chinese roles. Will that make a difference to the kids watching? Probably not at the moment, but down the line the authenticity will be appreciated.

"Raya and the Last Dragon," a Walt Disney Pictures release, in theaters and on Disney+ Friday, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association of America for "Some violence, action and thematic elements." Running time: 114 minutes. Three stars out of four.

MPAA Definition of PG: Parental guidance suggested.

Follow AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ldbahr

Man injures 8 with ax in Sweden before being shot, arrested

STOCKHOLM (AP) — A man armed with an ax attacked and injured eight people in a southern Swedish town Wednesday before being shot and arrested, police said.

Prime Minister Stefan Lofven said a possible terrorist motive was being investigated.

"In the light of what has emerged so far in the police investigation, prosecutors have initiated a preliminary investigation into terrorist crimes," he said but didn't elaborate.

Shortly after his statement, investigators at a police press conference said they had started a preliminary investigation into attempted murder, with details "that make us investigate any terrorist motives."

"But at the moment I cannot go into details," regional police chief Malena Grann said.

Police said the man in his 20s attacked people in the small town of Vetlanda, about 190 kilometers (118 miles) southeast of Goteborg, Sweden's second largest city. His motive was not immediately known.

The man was shot by police, who said the condition of those attacked and of the perpetrator was not immediately known. Officials did not provide the identity of the suspect, who was taken to hospital.

Local police chief Jonas Lindell said "it seems that the injuries are not life-threatening" but could not give further details.

The events took place in downtown Vetlanda with police saying they got calls just after 1400 GMT about a man assaulting people with an ax. Police also said that there are five crime scenes in this town of roughly 13,000.

Lofven condemned "this terrible act," and added that Sweden's domestic security agency SAPO was also working on the case.

"They continuously assess whether there are reasons to take security-enhancing measures and are prepared to do so if necessary," he said in a statement.

Police: Live pipe bomb found at polling place in Iowa

ANKENY, Iowa (AP) — The discovery of a live pipe bomb at a central Iowa polling place as voters were casting ballots in a special election forced an evacuation of the building, police said.

Officers called to the Lakeside Center in Ankeny around 9:30 a.m. Tuesday found a device that looked like a pipe bomb in grass near the center. Police later confirmed in a news release that the device was a pipe bomb.

The banquet hall was being used as a polling place for an Ankeny school district special election. Police evacuated the building, and the State Fire Marshal and agents with the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were called in. Technicians safely detonated the device, and the center was reopened around 12:30 p.m. — about three hours after the device was discovered, police said. No one was injured.

Polk County Auditor Jamie Fitzgerald described the device as a metal piece with two end caps, and said

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in a Twitter post that a couple walking their dog Tuesday morning had discovered the device.

"I want to also add that there is no way of knowing how long this device had been at the Lakeside Center," Fitzgerald said in a tweet, saying officials don't know whether the pipe bomb was related to the election.

Fitzgerald and police said other polling places in Ankeny were checked and no other bombs or suspicious devices were found.

An investigation into who left the device is continuing, police said.

Fed survey finds modest gains in the US economy in February

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Federal Reserve survey of business conditions across the United States has found that economic activity was expanding at a modest pace in February.

The Fed survey released Wednesday shows that the central bank's business contacts were expressing optimism last month about a stronger rebound as more COVID-19 vaccines are distributed.

Reports on consumer spending and auto sales were mixed, while overall manufacturing showed moderate gains despite supply-side constraints, according to the Fed survey.

The report, known as the beige book, is based on surveys conducted by the Fed's 12 regional banks. It will form the basis for discussions when central bank officials meet on March 16-17 to mull their future moves on monetary policy.

The expectation is that the Fed will keep its benchmark short-term rate at a record low of zero to 0.25%. The central bank is also expected to again signal that rates will not rise for the foreseeable future and the current pace of \$120 billion per month in bond purchases will also continue.

Most of the Fed's 12 regions reported the economy was growing in February at a modest pace although the Dallas region said activity had been disrupted by a severe winter storm that knocked out electricity to millions of residents for a time.

"Unprecedented winter storms and widespread power outages in mid-February severely disrupted economic activity, although the impact is mostly expected to be transitory," the Fed's Dallas regional bank reported.

The New York Fed was one of the few regions that reported a decline in activity last month, pointing to "particular weakness" in the service sector.

The beige book survey found that demand for labor varied considerably by industry and skill levels. Many businesses noted continued difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified workers, with lack of child care and a variety of other constraints still being imposed by the pandemic.

"Wage increases for many districts are expected to persist or to pick up somewhat over the next several months," the report said.

Overall manufacturing activity in most districts showed modest increases despite challenges from supply-chain disruptions.

Input costs rose modestly last month but with higher price increases seen for steel and lumber, the report said.

"In many districts, the rise in costs was widely attributed to supply chain disruptions and to strong overall demand," the beige book said, noting that transportation costs had been rising due to increases in energy costs.

Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial Services Group, said that the beige book findings were in line with his own economic forecast that expects moderate GDP growth in the current quarter but an acceleration for the rest of the year.

"Businesses are expecting demand to pick up in the spring and beyond as vaccine distribution continues, better weather allows for more outdoor activity and stimulus efforts support consumer spending," Faucher said.

Pandemic puts 1 in 3 nonprofits in financial jeopardy

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By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — More than one-third of U.S. nonprofits are in jeopardy of closing within two years because of the financial harm inflicted by the viral pandemic, according to a study being released Wednesday by the philanthropy research group Candid and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy.

The study's findings underscore the perils for nonprofits and charities whose financial needs have escalated over the past year, well in excess of the donations that most have received from individuals and foundations. The researchers analyzed how roughly 300,000 nonprofits would fare under 20 scenarios of varying severity. The worst-case scenario led to the closings of 38% of the nonprofits. Even the scenarios seen as more realistic resulted in closures well into double digit percentages.

Officials of Candid, which includes the philanthropic information resources GuideStar and Foundation Center, and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, which analyzes charitable giving during crises, said the most dire scenarios could be avoided if donations were to increase substantially — from the government as well as from private contributors.

"If you are a donor who cares about an organization that is rooted in place and relies on revenue from in-person services, now is the time probably to give more," said Jacob Harold, Candid's executive vice president.

Among the most vulnerable nonprofits, the study said, are those involved in arts and entertainment, which depend on ticket sales for most of their revenue, cannot significantly reduce expenses and don't typically hold much cash.

Other studies have concluded that smaller arts and culture groups, in particular, are at serious risk. Californians for the Arts, for example, surveyed arts and culture nonprofits in the state and found that about 64% had shrunk their workforces. Roughly 25% of them had slashed 90% or more of their staffs. And a report last week from New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli found that employment in New York City's arts, entertainment and recreation sector tumbled 66% during 2020.

"It really has been devastating," said Kristina Newman-Scott, president of BRIC, a Brooklyn arts institution best-known for its community TV channel and Celebrate Brooklyn! concert series. "We have a lot of empathy for our colleagues and friends in the arts space who, based on their model, see things that are just not going to be the same for them. They will be navigating a very different financial pathway."

Newman-Scott said BRIC has been helping sustain smaller arts nonprofits and offering artists unrestricted \$10,000 grants through its Colene Brown Art Prize.

"We are anxious to get back to in-person events," she said. "But we want to do it as part of a community. We don't want to be the only one. We want other organizations that are and have been doing extraordinary work, especially the smaller folks who have it harder because they just don't have as many resources. We want them to be around us also."

Harold, the Candid executive, said that while arts and entertainment groups may be at particular risk, nonprofits from all sectors are in danger. According to the study, the District of Columbia was expected to lose the most nonprofits per capita, followed by Vermont and North Dakota.

The most vulnerable nonprofits may try to reduce costs this year by narrowing their focus or by furloughing workers. Some may seek a merger or an acquisition to bolster their financial viability, Harold noted, although doing so would still mean that fewer nonprofits would survive.

"A lot of nonprofit boards were able to say, 'Oh, this is going to end soon' and 'We're fine for a year,'" Harold said. "But they might not be fine for two years. So if they dragged their feet last year, they may find themselves really having to scramble this year to make the structural changes now."

The perils that nonprofits face are similar to the economic damage from the pandemic that forced so many restaurants to either close or operate at deep losses over the past year. An estimated 110,000 restaurants — roughly one in six — closed in 2020 and, according to the National Restaurant Association, the pandemic could force 500,000 more to shut down.

President Joe Biden last week ordered the Small Business Administration to prioritize businesses and nonprofits with fewer than 20 employees in the awarding of loans through the Paycheck Protection Program.

"Since the beginning of this pandemic, 400,000 small businesses have closed — 400,000 — and millions

more are hanging by a thread," Biden said. "It's hurting black, Latino and Asian American communities the hardest."

Harold said that while the federal government's focus on small businesses and small nonprofits will help some of them survive, "it's not going to have a huge impact."

The Candid/Center for Disaster Philanthropy study found that \$20.2 billion was donated to combat COVID-19 in 2020, with 44% of it coming from corporations. It was one of many notable shifts in philanthropy during the pandemic.

"We were definitely seeing more grants for flexible operating expenses and general support," said Grace Sato, Candid's director of research. "More grants were explicitly designated for vulnerable communities, communities most impacted by the pandemic."

The pandemic also made some major foundations recognize how burdensome their grant process has been and finally took steps to simplify it, Harold said.

"One of the dominant emotional dynamics is guilt," he said. "They finally crossed the threshold. We saw that with hundreds and hundreds of foundations."

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Biden stands by May timeline for vaccines for all US adults

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.

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, but even as he expressed optimism, Biden quickly tempered the outlook.

"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 Biden administration has 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.

More than 800,000 doses of the J&J vaccine will 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 bet-

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ter 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 child care 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 use on Saturday. 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.

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.

Psaki said 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.

White House adviser Andy Slavitt said Wednesday that Biden was preparing for all contingencies to speed the vaccine supply, and that the new May timeframe was achievable.

"We are not in the habit of overpromising," he 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.

The White House said the first doses produced with Merck's assistance would be available beginning in May. Federal officials have cautioned that setting up the highly specialized manufacturing lines to produce vaccines would take months.

Compared with 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.

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 drugmakers 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 its 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.

Now, with a 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.

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

Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee to honor civil rights icons

By KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Bernard Lafayette Jr. was a young activist emerging from the 1961 sit-ins and Freedom Rides that fought for Black civil rights and an end to racial segregation when he received his next assignment.

It was one that would help change the course of American history.

"I looked on the blackboard and they had an 'X' through Selma," Lafayette, now 80, recalled in an interview with The Associated Press, referring to the Alabama city that would become emblematic of the fight to secure Black voting rights and the 1965 marches that were a turning point in that struggle.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the youth civil rights arm, had sent two teams to scout out the city.

"Both teams came back and said 'No, we're not going to Selma,'" Lafayette said. "And they gave the same reason: 'The white folks were too mean and the Black folks were too scared.'"

"But I was determined," said Lafayette, who at 22 was painfully aware of the risk after being badly beaten by a white mob in Montgomery, Alabama, while taking part in Freedom Ride protests there against segregated bus terminals.

"I'll go to Selma," he recalled saying — words that would place him in the middle of the movement to register Black voters and eventually the 1965 Selma marches.

Sunday marks the 56th anniversary of those marches and "Bloody Sunday," when more than 500 demonstrators gathered on March 7, 1965, to demand the right to vote and cross Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. They were met by dozens of state troopers and many were severely beaten.

The attack, broadcast on national television, captured the attention of millions and became a symbol of the brutal racism Black Americans endured across the South. Two weeks later, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of civil rights protesters marched the 49 miles from Selma to the state capital, Montgomery — an event that prompted Congress to eventually pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This year's Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee will be the first without the towering presence of civil rights icons Congressman John Lewis, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, the Rev. C.T. Vivian and attorney Bruce Boynton, who all died in 2020.

It will also be largely virtual because of the coronavirus pandemic, and comes at a time when the nation is still reckoning with the convergence of three crises that have disparately impacted Black Americans — the pandemic, its ensuing economic fallout and the racial injustice movement.

Organizers, activists and civil rights leaders say this year's event, to be held Friday through Sunday, will honor the memory of civil rights legends and marchers and serve as a rallying cry and reminder that the fight for racial equity must continue.

"Our young people must continue the movement and you've got to keep moving in order to bring about that change," Lafayette said.

This year's theme, "Beyond the Bridge: People Power, Political Power, Economic Power," will also provide live workshops and training to help the next generation of organizers, said Drew Glover, the jubilee's principal coordinator.

It will feature performances and events honoring civil rights legends and also the "foot soldiers," whose names are lesser known. It will culminate in a virtual bridge crossing, featuring local and national leaders.

"The issues that we're dealing with today, with voter suppression, white supremacy, intimidation, the Capitol insurrection — these are all issues that our ancestors have been organizing for, for generations," Glover said.

"We're binding that connection between the struggles of 1965 and before, and where we are now in 2021, so that we can activate the next generation of people to pass that torch."

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House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, a member of the jubilee's honorary committee, believes one way to honor that struggle is to enact the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, to strengthen protections granted under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and protect against racial discrimination and voter suppression.

Separately, the House of Representatives is poised to vote on sweeping voting and ethics legislation, House Resolution 1, that if enacted would usher in the biggest overhaul of U.S. elections law in a generation.

It would touch virtually every aspect of the electoral process — striking down hurdles to voting erected in the name of election security, curbing partisan gerrymandering and curtailing the influence of big money in politics.

Acting on former President Donald Trump's repeated false claims of a stolen election, dozens of Republican-controlled state legislatures are pushing bills that would make it more difficult to vote. Democrats and activists argue this would disproportionately impact voters of color and low-income voters.

"If we do believe in what John Lewis stood for, of what Joe Lowery or C.T. Vivian fought for, then if that's what we believe, then we will restore the efficacy of their efforts," Clyburn said.

The Selma commemoration is also a way for other people of color and allies to support the civil rights movement. Dolores Huerta, a co-founder of the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez, is a slated speaker.

"This is not a once-in-a-while type of work that we have to do; our commitment to social and racial justice has to be one of a lifetime," the 90-year-old Huerta told the AP.

"The Pettus Bridge is a very symbolic moment in time and history and shows us that we have to continue to march and not give up — even when we're beaten or knocked down."

Chase Iron Eyes, lead counsel for the Lakota People's Law Project and a key organizer for the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines, will deliver a special invocation, a reminder that the civil rights struggle is interwoven among people of color, including Indigenous communities.

"It's just been metastasizing in this country, it's never gone away," Iron Eyes said, of the nation's legacy of racism and oppression.

"This country was founded on genocide and slavery. We call it the civil rights struggle but it's also just a struggle to draft a new social contract, to change the way that we live with each other in this country."

The Rev. William Barber II, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, a multiracial coalition working to lift millions out of poverty and oppression, notes the intersection of the fight for voting rights and economic justice.

"We have to talk about what is our Selma today. And today our Selma is to expand voting rights, restore the Voting Rights Act fully, raise the minimum wage to a living wage and pass universal health care for all," Barber said.

"Every generation has it's Selma and these are the things that make up our Selma today."

Stafford is an investigative reporter on The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at https://twitter.com/kat__stafford.

California clinics: More vaccines going to rich than at-risk

By AMY TAXIN and JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Teresa Parada is exactly the kind of person equity-minded California officials say they want to vaccinate: She's a retired factory worker who speaks little English and lives in a hard-hit part of Los Angeles County.

But Parada, 70, has waited weeks while others her age flock to Dodger Stadium or get the coronavirus shot through large hospital networks. The place where she normally gets medical care, AltaMed, is just now receiving enough supply to vaccinate her later this month.

Parada said TV reports show people lining up to get shots, but "I see only vaccines going to Anglos."

"It's rare that I see a Latino there for the vaccine. When will it be our turn?" she said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has repeatedly called equity his "North Star" for vaccinating a diverse state of nearly 40 million. He partnered with the federal government to set up mass vaccination sites in working-class

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neighborhoods in Oakland and Los Angeles. And it's a big part of why he tasked insurer Blue Shield with centralizing California's patchwork vaccine system, asking the hospital chain Kaiser Permanente to assist.

Yet officials at community health centers that serve as the safety net for the poor in the U.S., focused on health equity, say they are not receiving enough doses for their patients — the very at-risk residents the state needs to vaccinate.

In California, nearly 1,400 such centers offer free or low-cost services to about 7 million people, many in communities with a higher concentration of low-income families and few providers who take Medicaid, which is known in California as Medi-Cal. Many of their clients speak a language other than English, work long hours, lack transportation and want to go to the medical care professionals they trust.

Dr. Efrain Talamantes, chief operating officer for AltaMed Health Services, said it was disheartening to watch initial doses go elsewhere while his patients continued to test positive for the virus.

"There is a clear disparity every single time there's a resource that's limited," he said.

Most states are grasping for ways to distribute limited vaccine supply, resulting in a hodgepodge of methods in the absence of a federal plan. Tennessee is among the states dispensing doses based on county populations, while California allocates them by eligible groups including teachers and farmworkers. The free-for-all has allowed people with the most resources to score scarce vaccinations.

Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, chair of the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the University of California, San Francisco, said it seems obvious that the best strategy to get vaccines to hard-hit communities is to turn to the places where residents already get care. But big-box administrators tend to think of community health centers as less efficient because of their smaller size, she said.

"We're not very imaginative in the way we deliver vaccine efficiently. Our only creative solutions are to build mass vaccination sites, and maybe give people preferential access to those sites," she said.

As California has ramped up vaccination efforts through mobile and pop-up clinics at churches, work sites and schools, state data show how relatively few shots have gone to Latinos and Blacks compared to their populations.

African Americans have received 3% of vaccine doses while they make up 6% of the state. Latinos, who make up 39% of the state, have received 17% of doses.

Blue Shield officials say they plan to keep open health centers that are already administering vaccines, but the clinics worry they won't get enough doses.

State vaccine spokesman Darrel Ng said the governor's plan for equitable vaccination includes setting aside vaccines for "disproportionately impacted communities and ensuring that providers who serve these communities are part of the network." He said in a statement that it includes sending mobile clinics to places like Black churches.

Andie Martinez Patterson, vice president of government affairs at the California Primary Care Association, said while large-scale health systems can vaccinate people quickly, they likely won't reach the targeted residents.

Community health centers have worked hard to persuade their patients to take the shot, said Alexander Rossel, chief executive of Families Together of Orange County, adding his center has inoculated 95 percent of its patients age 65 and over.

Health centers watched in dismay as vaccine for health care workers initially went to larger hospitals in December. Then they watched as more affluent, internet-savvy English speakers with time to navigate web portals and drive long distances for appointments flocked to inoculation arenas.

When Orange County started opening large-scale vaccination sites in mid-January, community health centers asked for doses too, said Isabel Becerra, chief executive of the Coalition of Orange County Community Health Centers.

"We don't have transportation. We don't speak English. We don't understand the technology you're asking us to use to register and get in line. So, can we vaccinate the 65 and older population in the comfort of their own facilities?" she said.

Jodie Wingo, interim president of the community health association for Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said member clinics were scaling up to inoculate more of their 500,000 patients. But now they're

receiving only a few dozen doses at a time.

"Everybody is working toward equity, yet it doesn't look equitable. At all," she said.

AltaMed, in Los Angeles and Orange counties, recently started receiving 3,000 doses a week from the two counties. The supply should allow clients like Parada, who is originally from Mexico, to receive her vaccine this month.

AltaMed will send a vehicle to take her to a clinic for the shot that will protect her when she heads out, double-masked, to shop for the family.

"I'm the one who has to go out. I have to protect myself," she said.

Far-right party draws scrutiny from Germany's intel agency

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's domestic intelligence agency has put the Alternative for Germany party under observation due to suspicions of extreme-right sympathies, German media reported Wednesday, a move against the biggest opposition party in parliament that comes only six months before a national election.

Alternative for Germany, or AfD, has been fighting in court against such measures, arguing that the publicity surrounding such a move so close to Sept. 26 election would damage the party's electoral chances.

Once the news was reported by the German news agency dpa, Der Spiegel, ARD public television and other media, AfD co-chairman Tino Chrupalla accused the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, known by the initials BfV, of intentionally leaking the information in an attempt to influence public opinion about the party.

The BfV's behavior is "scandalous," he told dpa.

Interior Ministry spokesman Steve Alter would neither confirm nor deny the reports and would not comment due to "ongoing proceedings." The BfV also refused comment.

AfD parliamentary leaders Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel said being put under observation was "completely unjustified and has no basis."

"It is no coincidence that this information was leaked to the press in the year of a federal election and only a few days before two important state elections," they wrote in a statement. "A targeted attempt is being made here to reduce the AfD's chances with the help of the domestic intelligence agency."

AfD entered Germany's national parliament as the third-biggest party in the 2017 election, benefiting from a backlash at the time against the influx of more than 1 million asylum-seekers. It is currently the largest of four opposition parties in the national parliament and has lawmakers in all 16 state assemblies.

The party has moved steadily to the right since it was founded in 2013 for critics of the shared euro currency. Several senior figures have quit in recent years, warning that the party was being taken over by far-right extremists.

Recent polls have shown support for AfD, which won 12.6% of the vote in 2017, at between 9% and 11%.

The new move to put the party as a whole under observation came more than two years after the BfV announced it was examining public comments by party members and its links to extremist groups more closely.

In January 2019, the agency put the the youth wing of the party, as well as a party faction linked to a prominent leader in eastern Germany, Bjoern Hoecke, under covert surveillance over extremism allegations.

At the time, the BfV cited the youth organization's stated goal of creating an ethnically pure country and efforts by Hoecke's faction — known as "The Wing" — to downplay Germany's Nazi past.

The Wing — now officially dissolved, although its representatives remain in the party — also suggested it might pursue "revolutionary" means to achieve its political aims, warranting scrutiny from the BfV.

Germany's Central Council of Jews applauded the move to classify the entire party as a "suspected case" of extremism and put it under surveillance.

The moves "confirm the danger posed by the AfD," said its president, Josef Schuster. "It tried to create a respectable façade, but that couldn't hide its radicalism."

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.

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.

Al-Sistani is also notoriously reclusive and has not left his Najaf home in years. He does not make public appearances and his sermons are delivered by representatives. He rarely receives foreign dignitaries.

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.

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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 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.

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 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 has been to underpromise and overdeliver, 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 expectations and then beat them. His initial goal to administer 100 million 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.

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.

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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 to 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 about 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.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 4, the 63rd day of 2021. There are 302 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as America’s 32nd president.

On this date:

In 1789, the Constitution of the United States went into effect as the first Federal Congress met in New York. (The lawmakers then adjourned for lack of a quorum.)

In 1797, John Adams was inaugurated the second president of the United States.

In 1863, the Idaho Territory was created.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term of office; with the end of the Civil War in sight, Lincoln declared: “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”

In 1964, Teamsters president James Hoffa and three co-defendants were found guilty by a federal court in Chattanooga, Tennessee, of jury tampering.

In 1974, the first issue of People magazine, then called People Weekly, was published by Time-Life Inc.;

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on the cover was actor Mia Farrow.

In 1981, a jury in Salt Lake City convicted Joseph Paul Franklin, an avowed racist and serial killer, of violating the civil rights of two Black men, Ted Fields and David Martin, who'd been shot to death. (Franklin received two life sentences for this crime; he was executed in 2013 for the 1977 murder of a Jewish man, Gerald Gordon.)

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan addressed the nation on the Iran-Contra affair, acknowledging that his overtures to Iran had "deteriorated" into an arms-for-hostages deal.

In 1994, in New York, four extremists were convicted of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that killed six people and injured more than a thousand. Actor-comedian John Candy died in Durango, Mexico, at age 43.

In 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sexual harassment at work can be illegal even when the offender and victim are of the same gender.

In 2015, the Justice Department cleared Darren Wilson, a white former Ferguson, Missouri, police officer, in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, a Black 18-year-old, but also issued a scathing report calling for sweeping changes in city law enforcement practices.

In 2018, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter were found unconscious on a bench in the southwestern English city of Salisbury; both survived what British authorities said was a murder attempt using a nerve agent.

Ten years ago: Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's regime struck back at its opponents with a powerful attack on Zawiya (ZOW'-ee-yuh), the closest opposition-held city to Tripoli, and a barrage of tear gas and live ammunition to smother new protests in the capital. NASA launched its Glory satellite from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California on what was supposed to have been a three-year mission to analyze how airborne particles affect Earth's climate; however, the rocket carrying Glory plummeted into the southern Pacific several minutes after liftoff.

Five years ago: The U.S. Supreme Court blocked enforcement of a Louisiana clinic regulation law placing new restrictions on abortion. Bud Collins, the tennis historian and American voice of the sport in print and on TV for decades, died in Brookline, Massachusetts, at age 86. Pat Conroy, author of "The Great Santini" and "The Prince of Tides," died in Beaufort, South Carolina, at age 70.

One year ago: The House easily passed an \$8.3 billion measure aimed at speeding the development of coronavirus vaccines, paying for containment operations and beefing up preparedness. Federal health officials investigated a suburban Seattle nursing home at the center of a coronavirus outbreak. Italy closed all schools and universities and barred fans from sporting events. The Dow Jones Industrial Average soared more than 1,100 points as governments and central banks around the globe took more aggressive measures to deal with the virus and its effects on the economy. After spending more than \$500 million of his own fortune in a bid for the presidency, former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg dropped out of the Democratic race, but pledged to keep spending in an effort to defeat President Donald Trump. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the United Nations secretary-general who brokered a historic cease-fire between Iran and Iraq in 1988, died at the age of 100.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Paula Prentiss is 83. Movie director Adrian Lyne is 80. Singer Shakin' Stevens is 73. Author James Ellroy is 73. Former Energy Secretary Rick Perry is 71. Singer Chris Rea is 70. Actor/rock singer-musician Ronn Moss is 69. Actor Kay Lenz is 68. Musician Emilio Estefan is 68. Movie director Scott Hicks is 68. Actor Catherine O'Hara is 67. Actor Mykelti (MY'-kul-tee) Williamson is 64. Actor Patricia Heaton is 63. Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn., is 63. Actor Steven Weber is 60. Rock musician Jason Newsted is 58. Actor Stacy Edwards is 56. Rapper Grand Puba is 55. Rock singer Evan Dando (Lemonheads) is 54. Actor Patsy Kensit is 53. Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., is 53. Gay rights activist Chaz Bono is 52. Actor Andrea Bendewald is 51. Actor Nick Stabile (stah-BEEL') is 51. Country singer Jason Sellers is 50. Jazz musician Jason Marsalis is 44. Actor Jessica Heap is 38. Actor Scott Michael Foster is 36. TV personality Whitney Port is 36. Actor Audrey Esparza is 35. Actor Margo Harshman is 35. Actor Josh Bowman is 33. Actor Andrea Bowen is 31. Actor Jenna Boyd is 28.