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Bates Township Road Right of Way Notice

Bates Township Board of Supervisors reminds all landowners and tenants that the road right-of-way extends 33 feet from the center of the township road. This ditch is to be maintained and mowed. Any crops planted in the road right-of-way will be mowed and expenses charged to the landowner.

Landowner is responsible for spraying all noxious weeds.

Bates Township Board of Supervisors

Betty Geist

Township Clerk

Published twice at the total approximate cost of \$12.93. 19835



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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Sunne resigns as electric superintendent

The Groton City Council accepted the resignation of Daniel Sunne as Electric Superintendent. Sunne has taken a new job at Watertown.

With city hall moving to the Wells Fargo Building, the library will be expanded and the city will apply for a \$5,000 grant from Heartland Consumer Power Economic Development.

The Groton American Legion Post #39 raised the \$5,000 to add a flag to the water tower. Councilman Karyn Babcock said, "It all looks perfect."

The election board for the April 13 election was selected. The school picked Anita Lowary, Julie Hinds and Connie Stauch while the city picked Rebecca Hunter and Melanie Sombke. It will be joint election with the school board and Groton City Ward 1. The school will bill the city for half of the cost of the Ward 1 expense.

The summer help was hired as follows:

Cemetery Maintenance: Brian Gravatt

Lifeguards: Jackson Cogley, Tessa Erdmann, Madeline Flihs, Shallyn Foertsch, Carly Guthmiller, Kaycie Hawkins, Aspen Johnson, Trista Keith, Kaden Kurtz, Jacob Lewandowski, Allyssa Locke, Lydia Meier, Emma Schinkel, Jasmine Schinkel, Marlee Tollifson, Gracie Traphagen, Grace Wambach.

Lifeguard/WSI Instructor: Tanae Lipp, Cody Swanson.

Lifeguard/Aerobics Instructor: Kelli Hanson.

Lifeguard/Swim Lesson Instructor: Alexis Hanten

Pool Manager/WSI Instructor/Lifeguard: Tricia Keith

Pool Manager: Kami Lipp, Karla Pasteur

Public Works: Aaron Severson

Assistant Legion Baseball Coach: Seth Erickson

U12 Softball Coach: Susan Fjeldheim

Baseball Gatekeeper: Elizabeth Flihs

Baseball Coach: Dalton Locke

Baseball/Softball Coordinator/Legion Coach: Matt Locke

Baseball Concession: Rebecca Padfield

13/14 Baseball Coach: Aaron Severson

Softball Coach: Allyssa Thayler

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Groton City Financial Report

February 2021

Dacotah Bank Checking Acct	\$ 2,602,185.19
General Cash	\$ 300.00
SD FIT Acct	\$ 1,452,200.65
Dacotah Bank Water CD	\$ 84,912.52
SD FIT CD	\$ 102,514.21
Cemetery Perp Care CD	\$ 32,876.69
Total	\$ 4,274,989.26

Invested In		
Cash	\$ 300.00	0.01%
Dacotah Bank	\$ 2,719,974.40	63.63%
SD Fit	\$ 1,554,714.86	36.37%
Total	\$ 4,274,989.26	100.00%

	Beginning	Receipts	Expenditures	Transfers	Ending
	Cash Balance				Cash Balance
General	\$ 874,851.31	\$ 42,967.30	\$ 56,427.65		\$ 861,390.96
Bed, Board, Booze Tax	\$ 85,251.60	\$ 2,225.62			\$ 87,477.22
Baseball Uniforms	\$ 1,710.20				\$ 1,710.20
Airport	\$ 6,351.99	\$ -			\$ 6,351.99
**Debt Service	\$ 157,130.93				\$ 157,130.93
Cemetery Perpetual Care	\$ 34,756.69	\$ -			\$ 34,756.69
Water Tower	\$ 180,000.00				\$ 180,000.00
Water	\$ 248,837.60	\$ 144,606.61	\$ 142,306.29		\$ 251,137.92
Electric	\$ 2,019,270.97	\$ 154,865.95	\$ 83,360.55		\$ 2,090,776.37
Wastewater	\$ 363,644.72	\$ 17,043.66	\$ 200.32		\$ 380,488.06
Solid Waste	\$ 28,076.24	\$ 8,964.51	\$ 49.56		\$ 36,991.19
Family Crisis	\$ 8,582.79	\$ -	\$ -		\$ 8,582.79
Sales Tax	\$ 19,747.40	\$ 9,870.29	\$ 10,025.83		\$ 19,591.86
Employment	\$ (4,103.74)	\$ 1,200.00	\$ 300.82		\$ (3,204.56)
Utility Prepayments	\$ 81,963.44	\$ (1,995.09)	\$ 158.33		\$ 79,810.02
Utility Deposits	\$ 80,793.01	\$ 1,000.00	\$ -		\$ 81,793.01
Other	\$ 204.61	\$ -	\$ -		\$ 204.61
Totals	\$ 4,187,069.76	\$ 380,748.85	\$ 292,829.35	\$ -	\$ 4,274,989.26

**Debt to be Paid			
**2015 Refinance	3E	\$ 2,418,062.49	by 12/1/2035
**West Sewer	12	\$ 64,668.43	by 10/15/2022
**RR Sewer Crossing		\$ 35,883.11	by 7/15/22
Total Debt		\$ 2,518,614.03	

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No. 2 Wolves Drop OT Central Region Championship Heartbreaker

Aberdeen, S.D. – The No. 2 Northern State University men’s basketball team closed out their 2021 campaign Tuesday evening from Wachs Arena, falling to No. 4 Northwest Missouri State in overtime. A physical game resulted in 11 lead changes and an all-out battled in front of a rowdy Wachs Arena crowd.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 86, NWMSU 91 (OT)

Records: NSU 19-2, NWMSU 25-2

Attendance: 1750

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State hit the ground running in the first half, taking a 20-9 lead through the first ten minutes of action
- Northwest Missouri State battled, tying things up as the half dwindled away; Northern however entered the locker room with a 1-point lead
- The back and forth, lead trading continued through the first ten minutes of the second, with neither team sitting on top by more than five
- The Wolves gained an 11-point lead with three minutes to play, however foul trouble plagued NSU as the half closed out and Northwest tied things up with just seconds to play
- By the 2-minute mark of the overtime period, four of the Wolves five starters had fouled out and the NSU bench fought to keep the team’s postseason hopes alive
- The Bearcats grabbed the lead with 1:42 to play and held on, winning the Central Region Championship and a trip to Evansville
- Northern shot 46.7% from the floor, 32.0% from the 3-point line, and 71.0% from the foul line
- Each team tallied 30 rebounds in the game, however the Bearcats edged the Wolves in second chance points, scoring 16 to NSU’s 11
- The Wolves tallied 16 assists, seven blocks, and four steals in the game, with three players scoring in double figures
- Northern tallied 36 points in the paint, 12 points off the bench, ten points off turnovers, and nine fast break points
- Parker Fox and Tommy Chatman led the team with 34 and 15 points apiece, and were honored for their efforts as members of the Central Region All-Tournament team
- The Wolves finish the year 19-2 after winning their fourth straight NSIC North Division and NSIC/Sanford Health Basketball Tournament Championships
- In addition, NSU broke the school record for continuous wins with 24 and Parker Fox and Mason Stark became members of the 1,000 points club in just their junior campaign

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Parker Fox: 34 points, 77.8 FG%, 12 rebounds, 2 blocks
- Tommy Chatman: 15 points, 50.0 FG%, 4 assists
- Andrew Kallman: 14 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists

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#387 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Much like yesterday, only with more deaths. There were 56,600 new cases reported today, bringing us up to 29,573,100, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. Looks very much like we will, indeed, hit 30 million on my watch. Worryingly, we have 15 states with at least 10 percent increases in cases in the last week, even though overall cases in the country are down. Minnesota and Michigan are up by more than 40 percent, which is a big concern. These might just be temporary upticks; I'd like to see a couple of weeks' data before I get too excited. Nonetheless, I don't like the look of it, not with all the warnings we've had. Hospitalizations are down again. There are 40,052 people in the hospital in the US with Covid-19 today. Deaths are up to 536,472 in the US, 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 1192 deaths reported today.

On March 16, 2020, one year ago today, the US was at 4389 cases in 49 states, the District of Columbia and three US territories, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands. Same percentage increase as in recent days, but of course, because we were starting from a higher base, the raw numbers kept growing. Case numbers were doubling every three days. There were now 10 states over 100 cases, seven with 50 to 99, 24 with 10 to 49, and eight in single digits. Things were getting worse fast. There had been 86 deaths in 16 states; 29 of those deaths were in a single nursing home in Washington where things started, but other parts of the country were rushing to catch up.

The first death occurred in a Veterans Affairs facility on this day. I suggested it was "time to pull out all the stops in an attempt to slow this train down." The WHO encouraged more testing, saying we were missing many cases; but because we were so behind the curve on testing, I mentioned one expert's analogy which said this is like seeing starlight and realizing what we see is light from many years ago: We don't know anything about the star back when that light was emitted. We had fully absorbed the lesson that asymptomatic individuals were capable of spreading the virus and how serious this matter was.

I mentioned the crisis in testing and expressed hope this would improve in coming days. I discussed the possibilities for hydroxychloroquine and a combination drug therapy originally developed for HIV, lopinavir and ritonavir, also noting "[i]t's too early to get overly excited before an appropriate controlled study is completed." Good thing I issued that caution; neither of them came to anything. The Moderna vaccine was in phase 1 clinical trials in 45 volunteers; these trials were intended to establish dosage effects, side effects, and the quality of the immune response. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was also mentioned as ready to begin trials in a month or so, and I explained there were many others in development as well. The WHO and the FDA approved running animal trials simultaneously with these phase 1 trials to speed the process, something that took a at least couple of months off the development process. We saw this sort of red-tape cutting throughout the process, which turned out to be a boon. I said we were 12 to 18 months out from a production vaccine. I could not have guessed back then how quickly we were going to move on these—never happier to be wrong.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in the White House briefing, "It will always seem that the best way to address it would be to be doing something that looks like it might be an overreaction. It isn't an overreaction." Right again, Fauci.

This was the first day the number of cases outside China exceeded the number of cases within. There were more than 169,000 cases worldwide with 6400 deaths. Italy had 3223 new cases reported in 24 hours, bringing their total to 27,980 with 2158 deaths, an increase of 249 in a day. There were more hot spots than fingers to count them on.

We were starting to hear about social distancing, a new concept at this time; I know I had to look it up. Many countries were closing borders in an attempt to stop spread, probably too late, but valiant attempts nonetheless. Prisons were beginning to release inmates to slow spread inside their facilities. We had recognized that children's symptoms and disease were generally less severe than in adults. We had also recognized that there were additional risks to pregnant people. The Bay Area ordered its seven million residents to shelter in place, and a number of other jurisdictions in California followed suit. Boeing asked employees to work from home. Mr. Trump suggested states should acquire needed supplies of medical

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equipment on their own. The Tokyo Olympics flame handover ceremony was scaled down to just a few participants and spectators. Cruise ships were stranded at sea outside various ports in the world. The US was finally scaling up some drive-through testing sites.

Cancellations and closures: Social Security offices; UFC events; bars, restaurants, and other public places in Minnesota, Louisiana, Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky, and Los Angeles; schools in Georgia, New Jersey, Tennessee, and New York; all NASCAR races; production on Saturday Night Live; seating areas in McDonald's and Chick-fil-a nationwide; SoulCycle and FlyWheel studios; the May SAT tests; all events and shops in Switzerland; liquor stores in Pennsylvania Sudan, Russia, Hungary, and Spain; family and social gatherings in France; the Statue of Liberty; opening day for Major League Baseball; boxing qualifiers for the Olympics; Renault and Fiat Chrysler; large gatherings in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey; Howard University's commencement; the Women's tennis tour; trading on the New York Stock Exchange for 15 minutes in response to plunging stocks; the border between Spain and Portugal and the border between Russia and Belarus; all parks and gardens in Paris; immigration hearings across the country; Mar-a-Lago; all Peace Corps operations; all Disney stores and hotels; Peru.

Today, I am looking at Europe and feeling a little *déjà vu*. What we're seeing right now—the new lockdowns and the new waves of infection, and the runs on hospitals—are eerily reminiscent of the scenes I've described above of last spring. And I remember all too well what came next in the spring when we followed them right down the path to disaster. Apparently, this time around we're getting serious about a potential surge in cases here in the US in upcoming weeks, and this time we might just be ready for it. The federal government is putting large sums of money into preparedness, accelerating vaccinations and providing information to governors. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been put into surveillance testing and assuring a reliable supply of tests; \$200 million have been spent on genomic sequencing so we can track the growth in variants and see where that growth is occurring. The recent bill passed by Congress contains another almost \$50 billion for testing and nearly eight billion dollars to hire public health workers for vaccination and contact tracing. There's a plan to surge vaccines to hotspots as they turn up and to target the people at highest risk, for example, workers in meat packing plants or public-facing occupations. The federal authorities can leverage the retail pharmacy program to funnel additional doses to places where they are most needed without disrupting states' regular supplies and also have a plan for setting up federally run or supported vaccination centers as needed. There's also been consideration of a plan to establish a pipeline of monoclonal antibody treatments as prophylaxis to these same locales as we identify them. They're analyzing data in an attempt to catch these spots as they emerge and putting together plans for a rapid, coordinated response. I've heard clear, consistent messaging from all parts of the federal government, from those who work in the administration to the CDC and other scientific agencies; these folks have been all over the airwaves, all saying the same things: that there is a real danger of another wave and that we must employ the proven mitigation measures—masking, distancing, and such. An official told CNN, "Everything we do is with the thought in mind that there might be another surge." I don't know if we can head this thing off; but I know we can't do it if we don't try and I believe that we can blunt the effect if we respond quickly. I did not want—nobody wanted—another wave; but I feel heartened that, if it comes, we've done what we can to be prepared. Please do your part in mitigation, and then we'll all hunker down and hope it's enough.

Dr. Anne Schuchat, the principal deputy director of the CDC, said, "I think we need to be very humble with this virus. While many indicators are going in the right direction and more and more people are being vaccinated every day, we need to be ready for wild cards and worsening. Are we ready? I guess we'll see.

There have now been 111 million doses of vaccine administered in the US. Close to a quarter of us have received at least one dose, and something like 12 percent are fully vaccinated. All 50 states have now fully vaccinated at least 10 percent of their adults. More than one-third of over-65 people are fully-vaccinated, and two-thirds have received at least one dose; this age group accounts for 80 percent of deaths, so that alone is an enormous advantage. The shipping information is looking like we'll be distributing 22 million doses per week, which means we're unconstrained by supply from putting three million doses per day into arms. I hope we can execute administering it that fast.

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Despite the looming threat, we broke air travel records again last weekend with 6.5 million people traveling between Thursday and yesterday, the biggest five days since the pandemic began. I am very concerned about the financial health of airlines—big fan of air travel here; but this is very concerning. We really do need a few more weeks to get out of the woods. I don't know if we're going to get it, but I do know that all this flying from place to place is dangerous at this moment. I am still urging people to put off travel for just a while longer. If you insist, despite all the warnings, please exercise every precaution. The safety of all depends on that.

Apple Maps, an app found on Apple products, now includes a feature that shows vaccination sites. The app uses information from the CDC and Prevention's Vaccine Finder to help users find these sites. You can ask Siri, "Where can I get a Covid-19 vaccination?" and get answers on the map. Testing site information is also included. Facebook also has a vaccine locator tool, so those who do not use Apple devices can find a site that way. Every little bit helps. I wonder how Google responds to the same question, but I haven't checked yet.

Several European Union countries are suspending administration of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine due to concerns about possible blood clots. We talked about this just a few days ago and also talked about the fact that I am not in a position to say whether these concerns are warranted. I'm leaning toward trusting the experts who are saying the benefit outweighs the risk. Multiple of those folks have pointed out the numbers of people with these thromboembolic events are tiny and not greater than the background rate in the population, which means the rate of these events is not higher among vaccinated people than it is in the general population. That does seem to argue that the events are not linked to the vaccine. John Gibbons, director of the Institute for Cardiovascular and Metabolic Research at the University of Reading, England, told CNN that thrombosis (clotting) is quite common, seen in one to two in 1000 people with the risk increasing with age and certain medical conditions. That means the sorts of people receiving most of the vaccines are the sorts of people who are more likely to have abnormal blood clotting. It appears, according to Gibbons, "From what we've seen from the millions of doses of AstraZeneca, serious side effects are quite literally the proverbial one in a million." There is general agreement these cases need to be investigated, but not the kind of alarm we're seeing among the folks who are suspending vaccinations. I have cause to wonder whether a scientific non-problem is attaining the dimensions of a political problem.

And there's an additional factor on which I read some expert opinion today: the risks of pausing all those vaccinations in the face of a highly-transmissible variant sweeping across Europe and soon the US. For starters, we would do well to remember the disease this vaccine is effectively preventing is itself a significant cause of life-threatening blood clots. Stephen Griffin, head of the Antivirals & Viral Oncology research group at Leeds University, also in England, also told CNN, "I would argue that it's far more beneficial to vaccinate people against Covid than it is to pause the vaccine because of a very, very, very unlikely association with clotting disorders. The risks of Covid in the population are far, far higher than any possible side effects of any vaccines." An additional concern is how this whole incident—and frankly, the way it's been handled—may well reduce people's willingness to be vaccinated. Michael Head, senior research fellow in Global Health at the University of Southampton, England, told CNN, "A scare like this has the potential to increase vaccine hesitancy. What we don't want is people to say, I'm going to wait for another vaccine. Not enough people will be protected, it will hinder the rollout, and there'll be more cases of Covid-19 than there need to be."

Pediatric trials for vaccines are rolling right along. Moderna began trials in children 12 to 18 years early this year; they have enrolled all 3000 planned participants. Today, they began administering vaccine or placebo to the first of 6750 children from six months to 12 years in eight states. They will be giving three different doses to determine which is most appropriate and best tolerated in this age group and to have a look at efficacy. This is a phase 2/3 trial expected to yield results by mid-year. Pfizer is testing its vaccine in children 12 to 16; this is the vaccine now authorized for people 16 and older. They expect findings on about the same timeline; they have not yet begun a trial in younger children.

Pearl Willis was a teen mom; she dropped out of school at 16 when she had a baby and didn't get back to get her diploma until she was 32. Then in 1991, while she was working in a printing company, living

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on a block in Chicago known for high-traffic drug houses, and working on a degree in nuclear medicine, her daughter came home from high school one day and asked her to help out a friend who had also had a baby while still in school. The friend needed child care so she could finish her term and graduate. "Ms. Pearl," as she came to be known in the community, agreed and told Chicago's WGN 9, "She told another one, and another one, and before I knew it my small apartment with my three kids had a bunch of babies in there from high school moms trying to get their high school diploma." She told Kelly Clarkson, I realized how easy it gets when you miss a day and you miss another day and it becomes more and more easier for you to just miss a day, and eventually you're not going at all."

She felt like this was a calling for her, and she decided to provide free child care for any high school mom, any college mom, and any other young mother in need. Willis says she does this to give these mothers the chance she never had; but she realized she needed more room. There was an abandoned building in the neighborhood, all "raggely" as she described it; Ms. Pearl took her entire savings of \$500 and placed a bid of \$13,000 on the building. She had 30 days to come up with the rest of the money. Gulp.

She did what she could, but the clock was running. When time was running out, she received a call from a foundation willing to bet \$5000 on her dream. That prompted three other members of a church she was attending to give the remaining money. And they bought themselves a building. She's been doing it ever since—more than 30 years at Roseland Community Good News Day Care. There are three day cares now serving 83 children, still at no cost to the parents. In just over 30 years, the Good News Day Care has served 500 children of 200 mothers. Forty-eight moms have graduated from high school, eight have received their GED, 32 have graduated from college, and 63 have been gainfully employed. What an impact on a community from just one woman with a mission!

Funding comes from donations and Chicago's Childcare Initiative. Moms tell how Ms. Pearl has pushed them, encouraged them, helped them through the hard times. One told WGN, "If I hadn't connected with her . . . I know for sure I wouldn't have pursued my dreams."

Another said, "I was working at the time, but Ms. Pearl encouraged me to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse. And so I enrolled into an accelerated LPN program. Not only did I graduate on time, but I graduated with honors, thanks to Ms. Pearl encouraging me and pushing me."

Still another said, "She accepted our children, and she encouraged me to go back to school. And it wasn't just her encouragement; she did things intentionally to help me carry that out. Some days I would pick up the children, and she would have a full-course meal already prepared, dinner rolls included, for my whole family so that when I left—when I got home—I could study. Or she would give me a quiet place to study, even after hours. Because of Ms. Pearl, I am even now pursuing a masters' degree in accounting. And I stopped going to school in '97, so this was truly a dream come true for me." She added that Ms. Pearl gave her a second chance, an opportunity to become "someone valuable in society" and an example to her children. Who doesn't need to feel valuable? That's a gift.

Covid-19 brought new challenges to her community. She told Clarkson, "Our community—it really scared our community. And people were full of fear; they were scared. You know, a lot of people in our community died of Covid, including my sister. So it hit home. But the high school and the college moms were no longer in school, and so we filled those slots with essential workers' children—police officers, workers from the hospital. We got the word out, and we said, 'We're here. We can provide a safe, clean environment, you know, for your children while you help others.'"

Willis isn't finished. Her latest venture is a coffee shop built into the lower level of one of her buildings to give moms a place to study plus a library for the children and a computer lab for after-school kids and e-learning kids. They're also planning to help GED moms to prepare for their tests. They're working with literacy. The rooms have just been finished, and she's working on funding for computers, furniture, and the other accoutrements to make this center work. I'd bet on her anytime.

She told WGN, "I've raised a lot of these kids and they're adults now and I love my community. I love my community and I think they love me. It's an honor for me to be part of their journey." I'm just going to guess the community feels honored by her presence too. We need more of this sort of thing.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
▲						
Aurora	454	432	883	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2827	2701	5984	39	Substantial	14.9%
Bennett	383	371	1185	9	Minimal	3.1%
Bon Homme	1510	1479	2105	26	Minimal	1.5%
Brookings	3665	3551	12201	37	Substantial	3.7%
Brown	5212	5050	12912	89	Moderate	6.2%
Brule	699	682	1892	9	Minimal	3.2%
Buffalo	421	407	902	13	Minimal	8.3%
Butte	990	957	3259	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	259	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1321	1254	3988	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	378	364	960	5	Minimal	16.7%
Clay	1824	1785	5469	15	Substantial	6.2%
Codington	4102	3907	9781	77	Substantial	21.6%
Corson	473	458	1004	12	Minimal	9.1%
Custer	768	743	2753	12	Moderate	3.5%
Davison	3007	2894	6654	64	Substantial	13.4%
Day	675	638	1807	29	Moderate	3.6%
Deuel	480	464	1151	8	Minimal	5.0%
Dewey	1435	1399	3871	26	Substantial	6.9%
Douglas	437	424	925	9	Minimal	6.5%
Edmunds	488	467	1073	13	Minimal	14.8%
Fall River	553	528	2661	15	Substantial	4.5%
Faulk	362	348	705	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	989	929	2279	39	Moderate	5.0%
Gregory	557	514	1311	30	Moderate	4.0%
Haakon	258	243	544	10	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	730	672	1801	38	Moderate	4.3%
Hand	352	333	830	6	Moderate	9.1%
Hanson	371	360	736	4	Moderate	13.6%
Harding	92	91	186	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2335	2272	6678	36	Moderate	2.2%
Hutchinson	796	758	2412	26	Moderate	0.0%

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Hyde	139	138	413	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	282	264	919	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	275	253	561	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	86	86	229	0	None	0.0%
Kingsbury	656	630	1699	14	Moderate	2.4%
Lake	1238	1175	3404	18	Substantial	12.7%
Lawrence	2841	2776	8612	45	Moderate	2.0%
Lincoln	7957	7703	20606	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	607	590	1883	10	Moderate	6.5%
Marshall	349	322	1215	6	Substantial	10.0%
McCook	766	719	1657	24	Substantial	19.4%
McPherson	240	234	561	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2646	2564	7799	31	Moderate	7.4%
Mellette	256	248	743	2	Moderate	0.0%
Miner	277	255	583	9	Minimal	10.0%
Minnehaha	28717	27787	79480	337	Substantial	9.4%
Moody	621	600	1779	17	Minimal	0.0%
Oglala Lakota	2076	2001	6681	49	Moderate	9.2%
Pennington	13079	12721	39895	190	Moderate	6.2%
Perkins	348	331	826	14	Minimal	0.0%
Potter	384	368	842	4	Moderate	13.8%
Roberts	1264	1173	4203	36	Substantial	18.7%
Sanborn	335	324	698	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	814	770	2159	26	Moderate	9.4%
Stanley	338	333	947	2	Minimal	4.3%
Sully	137	134	319	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1188	4173	29	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	722	682	1508	16	Substantial	11.9%
Turner	1096	1016	2751	53	Substantial	20.8%
Union	2038	1944	6383	40	Substantial	11.3%
Walworth	734	706	1840	15	Moderate	12.8%
Yankton	2841	2772	9440	28	Moderate	9.0%
Ziebach	337	326	871	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1784	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	4680	0
10-19 years	13055	0
20-29 years	20287	7
30-39 years	18892	18
40-49 years	16410	37
50-59 years	16169	114
60-69 years	13170	253
70-79 years	6983	437
80+ years	5145	1046

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59727	900
Male	55064	1012

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Brown County

New Confirmed Cases

0

New Probable Cases

5

Active Cases

73

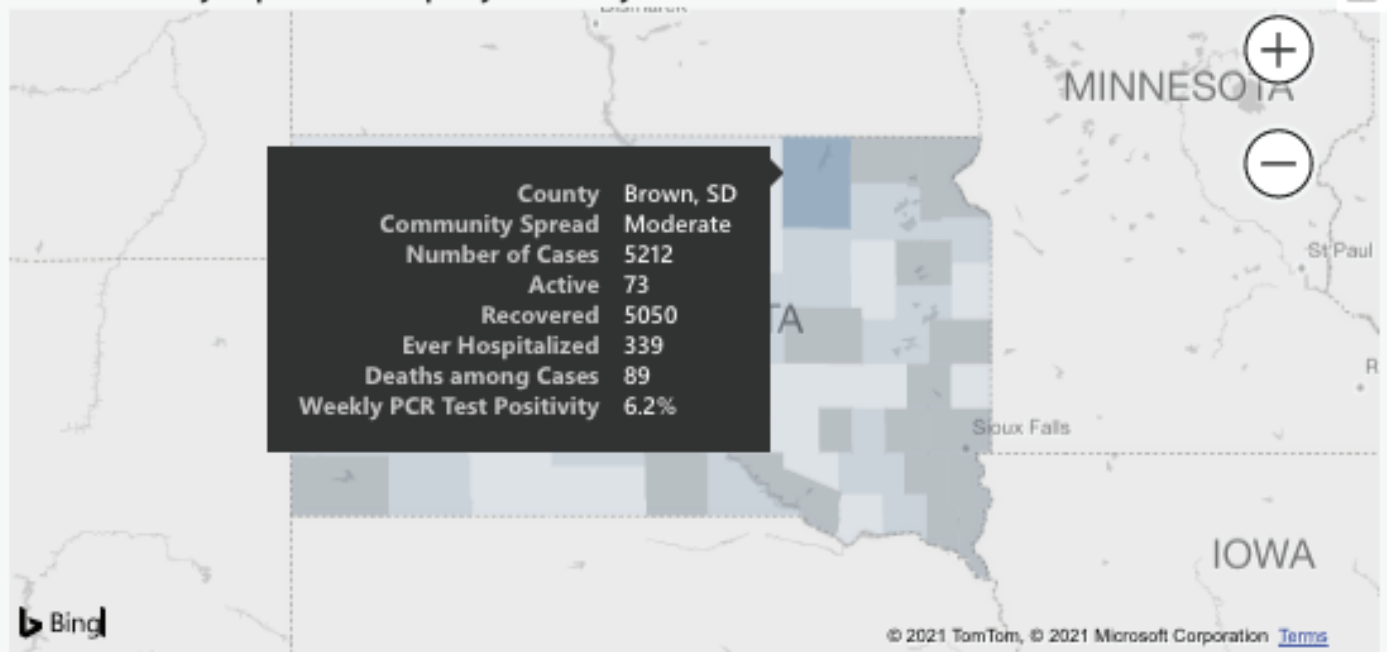
Recovered Cases

5,050

Currently Hospitalized

69

Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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

Total Confirmed Cases

4,637

Total Probable Cases

575

PCR Test Positivity Rate, Last 1 Day

5.6%

Total Persons Tested

18,124

Total Tests

49,764

Ever Hospitalized

339

Deaths Among Cases

89

% Progress (January Goal: 44233 Tests)

241%

% Progress (February Goal: 44233 Tests)

216%

% Progress (March Goal: 44233 Tests)

103%

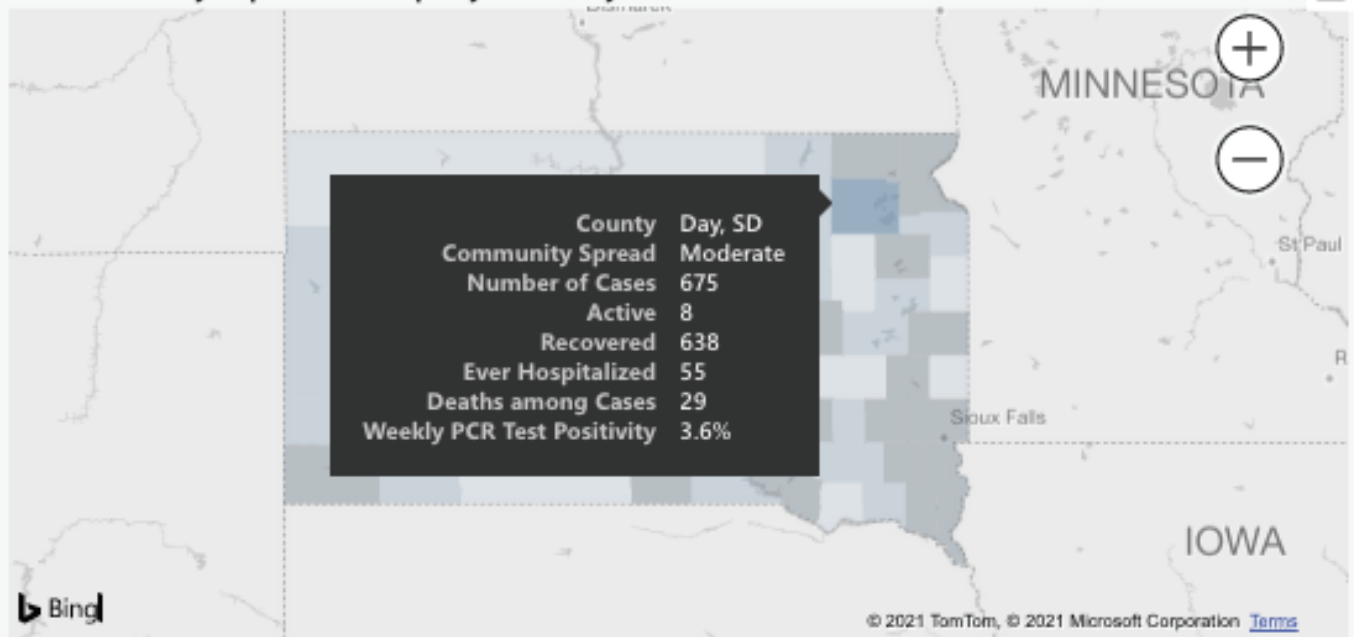
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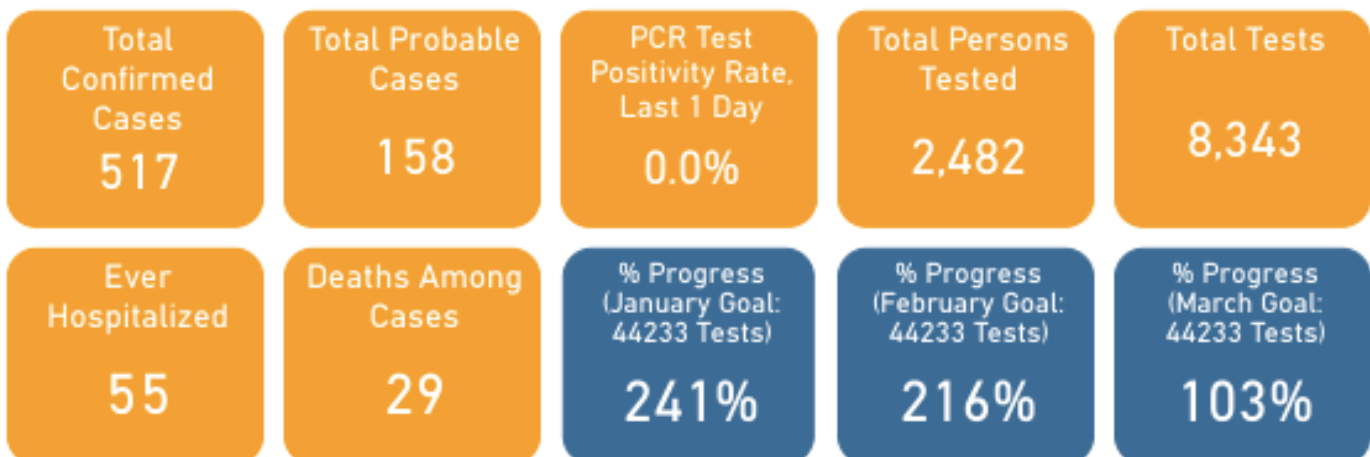
Day County



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

308,091

State Allocation

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

198,434

State Allocation

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

34%

State & Federal Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	3,362
Moderna	150,595
Pfizer	154,134

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	3,362
Moderna - 1 dose	44,129
Moderna - Series Complete	53,233
Pfizer - 1 dose	41,303
Pfizer - Series Complete	56,415

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	34.25%
Series Complete	19.66%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	875	315	280	595
Beadle	6174	2,021	2,076	4,097
Bennett*	476	132	172	304
Bon Homme*	3532	1,124	1,204	2,328
Brookings	9816	4,140	2,838	6,978
Brown	14788	4,154	5,317	9,471
Brule*	1816	538	639	1,177
Buffalo*	126	80	23	103
Butte	2117	875	621	1,496
Campbell	965	271	347	618
Charles Mix*	3164	1,146	1,009	2,155
Clark	1216	400	408	808
Clay	5000	1,760	1,620	3,380
Codington*	9577	3,229	3,174	6,403
Corson*	294	90	102	192
Custer*	2767	901	933	1,834
Davison	7421	2,197	2,612	4,809
Day*	2496	890	803	1,693
Deuel	1458	546	456	1,002
Dewey*	370	74	148	222
Douglas*	1168	370	399	769
Edmunds	1363	459	452	911
Fall River*	2489	781	854	1,635
Faulk	1007	297	355	652
Grant*	2705	1,201	752	1,953
Gregory*	1718	612	553	1,165
Haakon*	530	156	187	343

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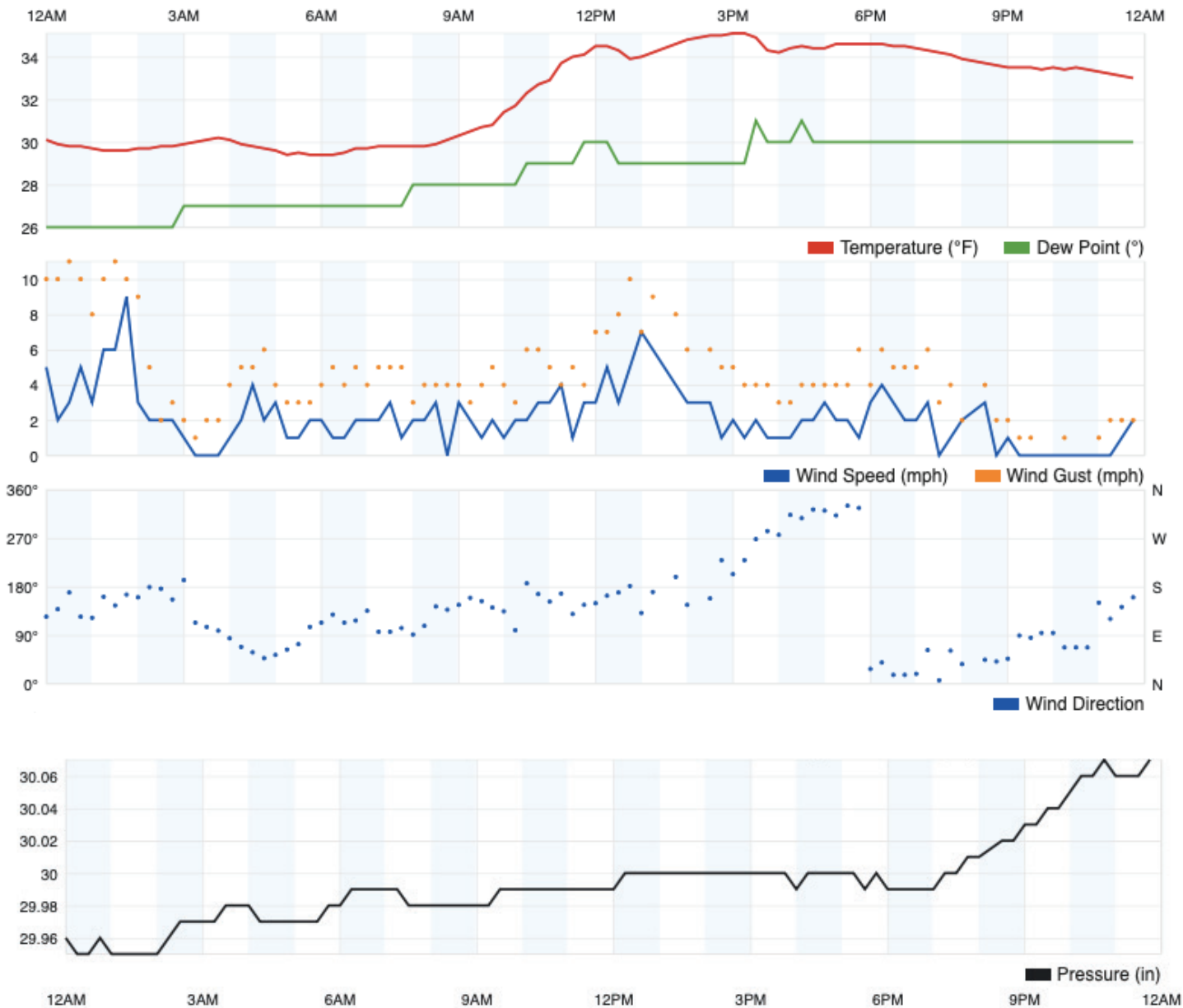
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Hamlin	1673	533	570	1,103
Hand	1362	450	456	906
Hanson	482	170	156	326
Harding	100	52	24	76
Hughes*	7672	1,622	3,025	4,647
Hutchinson*	3322	1,035	1,143	2,178
Hyde*	526	142	192	334
Jackson*	382	114	134	248
Jerauld	819	339	240	579
Jones*	618	158	230	388
Kingsbury	2381	925	728	1,653
Lake	3961	1,523	1,219	2,742
Lawrence	7959	3,077	2,441	5,518
Lincoln	25199	5,730	9,734	15,464
Lyman*	783	269	257	526
Marshall*	1741	569	586	1,155
McCook	2202	618	792	1,410
McPherson	240	78	81	159
Meade*	6203	1,969	2,117	4,086
Mellette*	42	18	12	30
Miner	861	249	306	555
Minnehaha*	78757	19,300	29,726	49,026
Moody*	1748	649	549	1,198
Oglala Lakota*	172	56	58	114
Pennington*	36451	9,499	13,476	22,975
Perkins*	662	300	181	481
Potter	850	304	273	577
Roberts*	4366	1,272	1,547	2,819
Sanborn	954	304	325	629
Spink	2800	884	958	1,842
Stanley*	1174	240	467	707
Sully	357	73	142	215
Todd*	156	48	54	102
Tripp*	1944	574	685	1,259
Turner	3362	948	1,207	2,155
Union	2856	1,138	859	1,997
Walworth*	1842	516	663	1,179
Yankton	9806	2,614	3,596	6,210
Ziebach*	55	15	20	35
Other	5823	1,653	2,085	3,738

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs







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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Patchy Fog then Sunny	Clear	Sunny then Sunny and Breezy
High: 42 °F	Low: 25 °F	High: 48 °F	Low: 26 °F	High: 53 °F

Warming Up Moving Toward The Weekend

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
 <i>FOG</i>		
<i>Areas of fog this morning</i>	<i>Patchy morning fog</i>	<i>Breezy</i>
<i>Isolated Snow Showers Possible</i>		
Highs: 38-46	Highs: 42-52	Highs: 52-60

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

GRAPHIC CREATED:
3/17/2021 4:16 AM

Some light precipitation will be possible today with little accumulation expected, and then dry conditions the remainder of the week. The region will also see a warming trend back up to the 50s and 60s by the weekend.

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Today in Weather History

March 17, 1997: High winds of 30 to 50 mph, gusting to over 60 mph, occurred over much of northeast South Dakota through the morning and into the early afternoon hours. Several homes and businesses sustained some roof damage. In Aberdeen, the high winds tore a large piece of the roof off the bowling alley and also ripped a part of a roof off an appliance store. The winds damaged some power lines and connections in Aberdeen, including some traffic lights. In Aberdeen, the power was out for 2500 customers for a few hours in the morning. The wind also damaged two old farm buildings west of Aberdeen. One barn lost 75 percent of its roof. The second barn was pushed six inches off of its foundation, suffering minor structural damage. The Edmunds County Highway Department Shop, under construction east of Ipswich, suffered much damage as many rafters came down, and the sidewall frame shifted. Finally, much small to medium-sized branches were brought down by the high winds. Some peak wind gusts across the area included 58 mph in Aberdeen and 63 mph in Watertown.

1892: A winter storm in southwestern and central Tennessee produced 26.3 inches of snow at Riddleton and 18.5 inches at Memphis. It was the deepest snow on record for those areas.

1906: The temperature at Snake River Wyoming dipped to 50 degrees below zero, a record for the U.S. for March.

1906: A magnitude 7.1 earthquake caused significant damage in Taiwan. According to the Central Weather Bureau in China, this earthquake caused 1,258 deaths, 2,385 injuries, and destroyed over 6,000 homes.

1952: The ban on using the word "tornado" issued in 1886 ended on this date. In the 1880s, John P. Finley of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, then handling weather forecasting for the U.S., developed generalized forecasts on days tornadoes were most likely. But in 1886, the Army ended Finley's program and banned the word "tornado" from forecasts because the harm done by a tornado prediction would eventually be greater than that which results from the tornado itself. The thinking was that people would be trampled in the panic if they heard a tornado was possible. The ban stayed in place after the Weather Bureau; now, the National Weather Service took over forecasting from the Army. A tornado that wrecked 52 large aircraft at Tinker Air Force Base, OK, on 3/20/1948, spurred Air Force meteorologists to begin working on ways to forecast tornadoes. The Weather Bureau also began looking for ways to improve tornado forecasting and established the Severe Local Storm Warning Center, which is now the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, OK. The ban on the word "tornado" fell on this date when the new center issued its first Tornado Watch.

1990: Showers and thunderstorms associated with a slow-moving cold front produced torrential rains across parts of the southeastern U.S. over two days. Flooding claimed the lives of at least 22 persons, including thirteen in Alabama. Up to 16 inches of rain deluged southern Alabama with 10.63 inches reported at Mobile AL in 24 hours. The town of Elba, AL, was flooded with 6 to 12 feet of water causing more than 25 million dollars damage, and total flood damage across Alabama exceeded 100 million dollars. Twenty-six counties in the state were declared disaster areas.

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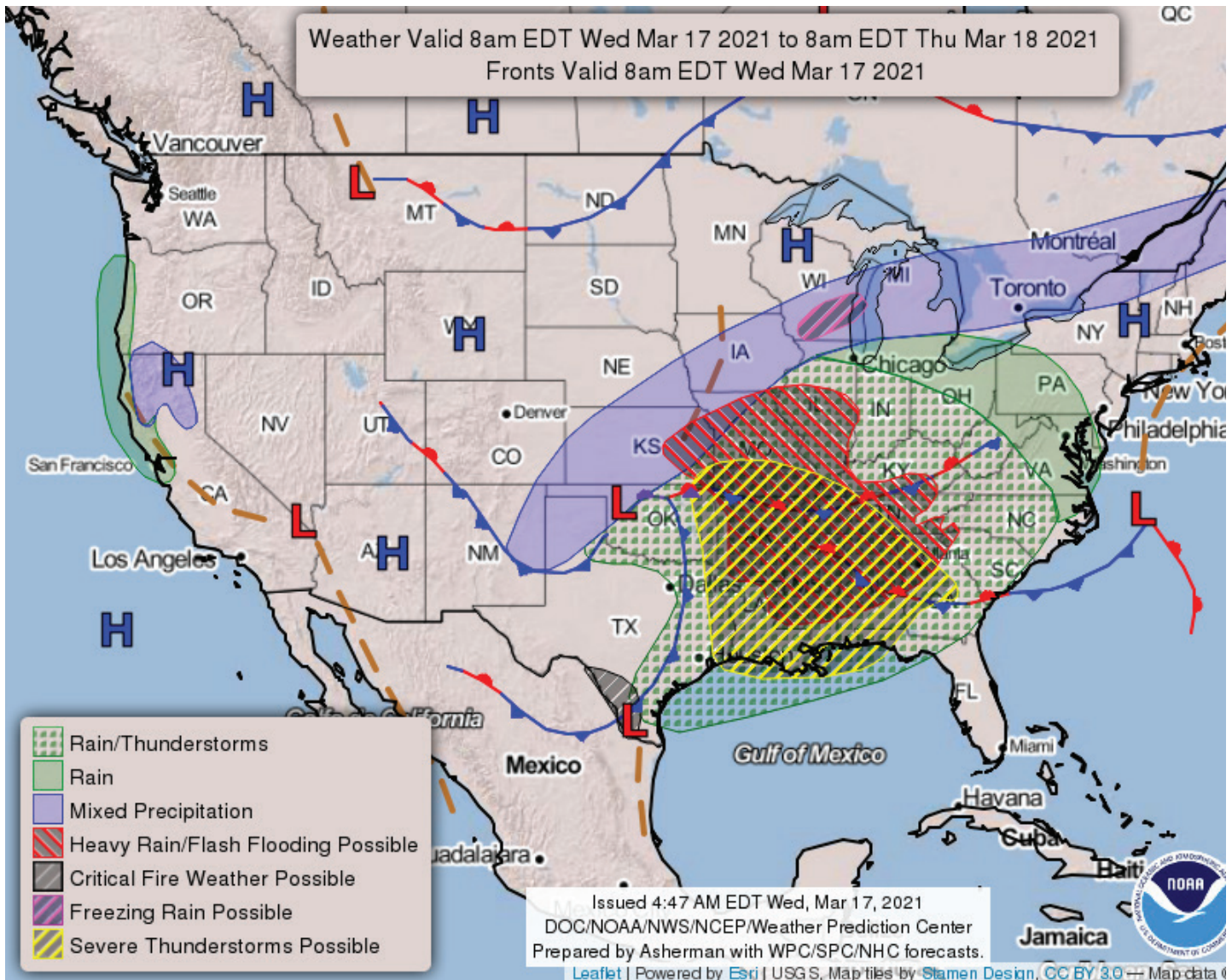
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 35 °F at 2:50 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 5:44 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 1:32 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 77° in 2012
Record Low: -10° in 1906
Average High: 40°F
Average Low: 20°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.51
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.53
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:43 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40 a.m.



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CHALLENGING GOD

Knowledge is one thing. Knowing is quite another. We may know about someone and yet not know that one as a person. We may know the "vital statistics" about a person and never know the "hidden stories" kept deep inside. To get to know someone usually involves the other person disclosing some personal, sensitive, and previously unknown things.

David wanted to know God. Really know Him. So he prayed: "Show me, teach me, and lead me." He knew of God but wanted to understand what it meant for Him to be the Lord of his life. Notice what he did.

First, he said: "Show me!" Here he is asking God to "reveal" Himself so David could actually see what He was like. If we, like David, want to see a true representation of what God is like we need to look deeply into His Word and spend time with His Son. It is impossible to know God apart from mastering the content of His Word – His Son, Jesus.

Secondly, he said, "Teach me!" If we have truly repented, we will want God to teach us His ways so we can understand His will for our lives and become obedient to His teachings and commandments. And God will show us His way if and when we truly desire it. But, only then.

Finally David courageously said, "Lead me in Your Truth." He realized that he could not be successful in his walk with God if he was not willing to completely surrender his life to Him. He didn't ask God to "be there when I need you," or "answer when I call." No! He wanted God to open His eyes to His eternal truth and then he would willingly follow Him. God will "show" us and "teach" and "lead" if we follow David's examples.

Prayer: Father, may we willingly open our minds and hearts to Your truth, to learn from You and then show Your love to others by following You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Scripture For Today: Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Psalm 25:4

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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 Princess Prom (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
06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
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
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 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
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
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
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 Tuesday:

Mega Millions

10-41-46-52-69, Mega Ball: 8, Megaplier: 2

(ten, forty-one, forty-six, fifty-two, sixty-nine; Mega Ball: eight; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$93 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$184 million

GOP attorneys general question stimulus barring tax cuts

By CUNEYT DIL Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Republican attorneys general from 21 states are questioning a provision in the \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue plan that bars states from using its funds to offset tax cuts.

In a letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Monday, they said the prohibition is “unclear, but potentially breathtaking” — airing concerns that any tax cut could be construed as taking advantage of the pandemic relief funds.

The attorneys general list over a dozen instances of states currently considering new tax credits or cuts that they believe could be jeopardized simply because of the relief funds.

“We ask that you confirm that the American Rescue Plan Act does not prohibit States from generally providing tax relief,” wrote the coalition, led by Georgia, Arizona and West Virginia.

The aid plan, approved by Congress in close party-line votes and signed by President Joe Biden last week, includes \$195 billion for states, plus separate funds for local governments and schools.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that Biden expects the relief funds to not go toward decreasing taxes.

“The original purpose of the state and local funding was to keep cops, firefighters, other essential employees at work and employed, and it wasn’t intended to cut taxes,” she said at a briefing.

The Treasury Department did not immediately return an email requesting comment.

In West Virginia, Republican Gov. Jim Justice has applauded Congress for passing a massive stimulus but railed against the provision amid his push to cut the state personal income tax.

“Congress may not micromanage a state’s fiscal policies in violation of anti-commandeering principles nor coerce a state into forfeiting one of its core constitutional functions in exchange for a large check from the federal government,” Republican West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey said in a statement.

Signing on to the letter were Arizona, Georgia, West Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah and Wyoming.

Three Republican members of the U.S. Senate introduced a long-shot bill on Tuesday to eliminate the provision.

“If a state like Idaho wants to provide tax relief in the interest of economic recovery, and to help people return to earning their livelihoods, the American Rescue Plan says it will be financially punished by the federal government,” Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho said in a statement.

Lawmakers fear turning 144 cities into “micropolitan” areas

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

A bipartisan group of U.S. senators and congressmen is urging the federal government not to approve

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recommendations to remove 144 cities from the designation of metropolitan statistical areas. Reclassifying them as "micropolitan" would put key federal funding at risk, they said.

The request comes after The Associated Press reported this month that the federal government is contemplating raising the population criteria for core cities in metro areas from 50,000 residents to 100,000 residents. Doing so would reclassify more than a third of the current 392 metro areas as micropolitan statistical areas.

Officials in some of the affected cities worry that the change could have adverse implications for federal funding and economic development, since some housing, transportation and Medicare reimbursement programs are directed specifically to metropolitan statistical areas.

"Adhering to this recommendation has the potential to harm communities across the nation, which we hope you take into account while considering these recommendations," said the letter sent last week by eight U.S. senators and two U.S. representatives to the Office of Management and Budget.

The letter was signed by senators John Thune and Mike Rounds of South Dakota, Kevin Cramer and John Hoeven of North Dakota, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming and Deb Fischer of Nebraska, all Republicans, along with Arizona's two Democratic senators, Kyrsten Sinema and Mark Kelly. Also signing were Republican Reps. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota and Adrian Smith of Nebraska.

In a separate letter to the Office of Management and Budget, Hoeven said the proposal also would hurt micropolitan areas that were on the cusp of becoming metro areas. If approved, it wouldn't take effect until 2023.

Statisticians who recommended changing the definition of a metro area say it's long overdue, given that the U.S. population has more than doubled since the 50,000-person threshold was introduced in 1950. Back then, about half of U.S. residents lived in metros; now, 86% do.

Scores of city leaders and rural researchers also have written, urging the Office of Management and Budget to reject the proposal.

The city manager of Mankato, Minnesota estimated that her community would lose directly \$400,000 in funding that goes toward homeless shelters, affordable housing and medical care to the uninsured. This federal funding also leverages other low-income housing projects, said Susan Arntz.

"The City of Mankato, Minnesota is very troubled by the proposal to modify the standards," Arntz said in a letter.

Another concern for many metros areas at risk of being reclassified is that they will have less name recognition outside their region, George Hammond, a University of Arizona economist, said Tuesday during an online seminar about the topic sponsored by the National Association for Business Economics and the Association for University Business and Economic Research.

"This is a big concern for local policymakers and economic developers," Hammond said. "If a metropolitan statistical area is redefined as a micropolitan area, it may fall out of the conversation. There is less buzz. There's less knowledge that the NSA exists nationwide."

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Former IHS doctor sentenced for sex abuse loses pension

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Indian Health Services officials said Tuesday that a former pediatrician sentenced for sexually abusing boys on two reservations has been stripped of his estimated \$100,000-a-year pension.

Stanley Weber was convicted in Montana and South Dakota on numerous charges, including aggravated sexual abuse, for incidents that happened three decades ago on the Blackfeet and Pine Ridge reservations. He is serving life without parole at a federal prison.

Two congressmen, Rep. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota and Rep. Greg Gianforte of Montana, asked the IHS last summer to review Weber's record, Johnson said in a statement. Johnson said he's grateful the IHS and the Department of Health and Human Services took the request seriously and revoked the pension.

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"There's not much solace to offer in a situation like this, but I hope everyone rests easier knowing this monster isn't receiving a government check every month and is behind bars where he belongs," Johnson said. "A little more justice was served today."

Weber's appeals were rejected by Montana last year and by South Dakota last month.

Universities look forward to normal operations this fall

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Board of Regents says the state's six public universities and two special schools are planning for a return to more normal operations this fall.

"Our goal is to return campus life this fall to a setting that looks much like it was before the COVID-19 pandemic," said Brian L. Maher, executive director for the board. "With vaccines available now in higher education and K-12 settings, we can all look forward to more normal operations ahead."

Maher said South Dakota's success in vaccine distribution, as well as local efforts to manage and keep positive infection rates low, will guide the universities' and schools' planning for the 2021 fall semester, the Yankton Press & Dakotan reported.

The Board of Regents is the governing body for Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, South Dakota State University, University of South Dakota, South Dakota School for the Blind & Visually Impaired, and South Dakota School for the Deaf.

University of South Dakota President Sheila Gestring welcomed the return to a normal school life.

"Students can expect to return to USD's campus this fall and experience the full spectrum of student life, including in-person classes, activities, athletic events and more," Gestring said.

USD is planning for fall operations that do not include social distancing measures or mask mandates, provided local infection rates remain low.

US: Putin approved operations to help Trump against Biden

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized influence operations to help Donald Trump in last November's presidential election, according to a declassified intelligence assessment that found broad efforts by the Kremlin and Iran to shape the outcome of the race but ultimately no evidence that any foreign actor changed votes or otherwise disrupted the voting process.

The report released Tuesday from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence represents the most detailed assessment of the array of foreign threats to the 2020 election. These included efforts by Iran to undermine confidence in the vote and harm Trump's reelection prospects as well as Moscow operations that relied on Trump's allies to smear Joe Biden, the eventual winner.

Despite those threats, though, intelligence officials found "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to interfere in the 2020 US elections by altering any technical aspect of the voting process, including voter registration, ballot casting, vote tabulation, or reporting results."

The report is the latest official affirmation of the integrity of the election, even as Trump supporters continue to make false claims of interference, from foreign or domestic actors, and refuse to accept Biden's victory. Multiple courts and even Trump's own Justice Department refuted claims of widespread fraud. The document makes clear that even while Trump has cried foul about the legitimacy of the election, intelligence officials believe Russia sought to influence people close to Trump as a way to tip the election in his favor.

The report, rejected by Russia as "unsubstantiated," wades into the politically charged task of ferreting out which foreign adversaries supported which candidates during the 2020 election, an issue that dominated headlines last year. Trump, whose 2016 campaign benefited from hacking by Russian intelligence officers and a covert social media effort, seized on an intelligence assessment from August that said China preferred a Biden presidency — even though the same assessment also said Russia was working to boost Trump's own candidacy by disparaging Biden.

Tuesday's report, however, says China ultimately did not interfere on either side and "considered but

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did not deploy" influence operations intended to affect the outcome. U.S. officials say they believe Beijing prioritized a stable relationship with the U.S. and did not consider either election outcome as advantageous enough for it to risk the "blowback" that would ensue if it got caught with interfering.

The primary threats instead came from Russia and Iran, albeit with different intentions and through different means, according to intelligence officials.

In the case of Russia, the report says, Russia sought to undermine Biden's candidacy because it viewed his presidency as opposed to the Kremlin's interests, though it took some steps to prepare for a Democratic administration as the election neared.

The report also says Putin authorized influence operations aimed at denigrating Biden, boosting Trump, undermining confidence in the election and exacerbating social divisions in the U.S.

Central to that effort was reliance on proxies linked to Russian intelligence "to launder influence narratives" by using media organizations, U.S. officials and people close to Trump to push "misleading or unsubstantiated" allegations against Biden.

Intelligence officials did not single out any Trump ally in that effort. But longtime associate Rudy Giuliani met multiple times with Ukrainian lawmaker Andrii Derkach, who in 2020 released heavily edited recordings of Biden in an effort to link the Democratic nominee to unsubstantiated corruption allegations. U.S. officials have said they regard Derkach as an "active Russian agent," and Tuesday's report said Putin is believed to have "purview" over his activities.

Notably, though, Russia was not as aggressive as in past election cycles in trying to hack election infrastructure. The report says Russian cyber operations that targeted state and local government networks last year were probably not election-focused and were instead part of a broader effort to target U.S. and global entities.

The Kremlin on Wednesday rejected the allegations in the report.

"We disagree with this report's findings about our country," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on a conference call with reporters. "Russia didn't interfere with the previous election and didn't interfere with the 2020 election mentioned in the report."

He said Russia "has nothing to do with campaigns against any of the candidates," calling the report "unfounded and unsubstantiated." He expressed regret that "such materials, far from being of high quality," could be used as a pretext for new sanctions against Russia.

Iran, meanwhile, carried out its own influence campaign aimed at harming Trump's reelection bid, an effort U.S. officials say was probably approved by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

One "highly targeted operation" — the subject of an October news conference by then-Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe and FBI Director Christopher Wray — involved a flurry of emails to Democratic voters in battleground states that falsely purported to be from the far-right group Proud Boys and threatened the recipients if they didn't vote for Trump.

Iran's efforts, which officials say were more aggressive than in past elections and continued even after the contest was over, were focused on sowing discord in the U.S., likely because Tehran believed that would hurt Trump's re-election chances.

Though Iran sought to exploit vulnerabilities on state election websites, and did "compromise US entities associated with election infrastructure as a part of a broad targeting effort across multiple sectors worldwide," it did not attempt to manipulate votes or affect election infrastructure, the report concluded.

The 15-page document is a declassified version of an election interference report that was provided to Trump on Jan. 7, one day after a riot at the U.S. Capitol that occurred as Congress was gathering to certify the election results.

A separate document released Tuesday from the departments of Justice and Homeland Security reached a similar conclusion about the integrity of the election, saying there was no evidence any foreign actor had changed votes.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>.

China protests over Japan, US statement on human rights

BEIJING (AP) — China has protested to the United States and Japan over a joint statement it said “maliciously attacked” its foreign policy and seriously interfered in China’s internal affairs, the Foreign Ministry said Wednesday.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China was “strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed” to the statement.

His comments came a day before U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is due to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and top foreign policy adviser Yang Jiechi in Alaska.

The China-Japan statement expressed concern over threats to Taiwan, Beijing’s human rights violations in Xinjiang, its activities in the South China Sea and “unilateral action that seeks to change the status quo” over Japan-controlled East China Sea islands that China also claims.

The statement “maliciously attacked China’s foreign policy, seriously interfered in China’s internal affairs and tried to harm China’s interests,” Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing. “China is strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed to this, and we have made solemn representations to the United States and Japan respectively.”

There was no indication that the Alaska talks had been derailed and Zhao said China was prepared to discuss its policies on Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

“But the U.S. attempt to deliberately mislead public opinion before the meeting and exert pressure on China will not succeed,” Zhao said. “We urge the U.S. side to adhere to the basic norms of international relations and not to engage in things that endanger China’s core interests.”

Blinken and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi Tuesday, afterwards saying that democracy and human rights are being challenged and the United States will push with its partners for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Blinken said the Biden administration is committed to work with U.S. allies as they face challenges from China and its ally North Korea, which is pursuing an illicit nuclear weapons program.

“We will push back if necessary, when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way,” he said.

Blinken has said the Alaska meeting is part of an effort to introduce new clarity into the relationship between the world’s two biggest economies.

Biden to mark St. Patrick’s Day, praise Good Friday accord

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is marking St. Patrick’s Day as he recommits the U.S. to the Good Friday Agreement, which has come under increasing stress following the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union.

Biden, the latest president of Irish decent, is set for a virtual meeting Wednesday with Ireland’s prime minister, Taoiseach Micheál Martin.

The president is expected to attend Mass near his family home in Wilmington, Delaware, before returning to the White House to partake in St. Patrick’s Day celebrations toned down due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden and Martin’s virtual bilateral meeting — Biden’s third with a foreign leader since he took office eight weeks ago — will be followed by the presentation of an engraved bowl of shamrock, which has been sent ahead to Washington. It ensures that a tradition that began in 1952 will continue uninterrupted, if modified by COVID-19 concerns.

The White House said Biden will also drop in on Vice President Kamala Harris’ meeting with Northern Ireland’s First Minister Arlene Foster and Deputy First Minister Michelle O’Neill in a show of support for the Good Friday Agreement.

Signed in 1998, the Good Friday Agreement helped end sectarian violence that had raged for three decades over the issue of Northern Ireland unifying with Ireland or remaining part of the U.K.

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The U.K.'s Jan. 1 exit from the EU has created new tensions over trade and travel at the Irish border. Just Monday, the EU said it was starting legal action against the U.K., arguing that the former member does not respect the conditions of the Brexit withdrawal agreement and is violating international law by unilaterally extending a special trade system at the land border that was set up as part of the Brexit divorce deal.

The White House stressed that the U.S. continues to support the Good Friday Agreement and its implementation. It called the agreement "the bedrock of peace, stability, and prosperity for all the people of Northern Ireland."

Biden and Martin's meeting also will emphasize their commitment to addressing global challenges and combating the coronavirus, among other issues, the White House said.

"Our two countries are committed to working together to safely restore global travel, work within multilateral fora to prevent and respond to future outbreaks, and ensure a sustainable global economic recovery," the White House said in a statement.

US sanctions 24 China and Hong Kong officials ahead of talks

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — The U.S. sanctioned an additional 24 Chinese and Hong Kong officials over Beijing's ongoing crackdown on political freedoms in the semi-autonomous city, just ahead of the Biden administration's first face-to-face talks with China.

The step reflects Washington's "deep concern" about the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy following changes to its election system endorsed by China's ceremonial legislature last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement Wednesday.

Foreign financial institutions that deal with the 24 officials would be subject to U.S. sanctions, the State Department said.

The planned changes to Hong Kong's electoral law give a pro-Beijing committee power to appoint more of Hong Kong's lawmakers. The move will reduce the proportion of those directly elected and ensures that only those determined to be truly loyal to Beijing are allowed to run for office — effectively shutting opposition figures out of the political process.

The U.S. announcement was made during a visit by Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea, both of which are wary of China's growing economic, military and political heft.

The imposition of new sanctions "fully exposes the U.S. side's sinister intention to interfere in China's internal affairs, disrupt Hong Kong and obstruct China's stability and development," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters at a daily briefing Wednesday.

"China will take strong measures as appropriate to resolutely defend national sovereignty, security and development interests," Zhao said.

While in Tokyo, the Blinken and Austin delivered a joint statement with their Japanese counterparts expressing concern about Beijing's human rights violations in the western Xinjiang region against ethnic minorities and China's determination to alter the status of a group of uninhabited islands administered by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing. The two arrived in Seoul on Wednesday for talks.

On Thursday, Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan are scheduled to meet Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the foreign affairs chief of China's ruling Communist Party, Yang Jiechi, in Anchorage, Alaska.

The White House has set low expectations for the meeting. A senior official, who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity, said the two sides would not deliver a joint statement and no major announcements were expected.

The U.S. has said Thursday's meeting will be an initial opportunity to address intense disagreements over trade and human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang as well as the coronavirus pandemic.

While President Joe Biden has sought to ease the harsh tone his predecessor took with China, his administration appears committed to taking a tough line on those issues.

China has rejected all criticism of its policies toward Hong Kong, accusing foreign governments of inter-

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fering and saying political tightening was necessary following months of anti-government protests in 2019. Last June, Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on the city and Hong Kong authorities have arrested most of the prominent pro-democracy supporters and outspoken critics. Many others have fled abroad and renewed their calls this week for members of the Hong Kong diaspora to keep up the fight for freedoms promised to the city after the 1997 end of British colonial rule.

Among those included in the sanctions are Wang Chen, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's elite 25-member Politburo, and Tam Yiu-chung, the Hong Kong delegate to the Chinese parliament's standing committee, which drafted the national security law.

Several officers from Hong Kong's National Security Division were also sanctioned, including Li Kwai-wah, a senior superintendent, as well as Edwina Lau, a deputy commissioner of the Hong Kong police force and the head of the division.

Starting last October, the U.S. had already sanctioned 10 officials including Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam and Deputy Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office Zhang Xiaoming. Sanctions forbid their travel to the U.S. and block their dealings with American financial institutions.

Lam said in a television interview in November last year that the sanctions meant she receives her salary in cash and has "piles of cash" at home because she was cut off from banking services in Hong Kong.

Chinese officials have shrugged off the impact of sanctions, with some calling their designation a point of pride in what they view as an attempt to undermine Chinese control in Hong Kong and its rise as a competitor to the U.S.

Associated Press writer Amer Madhani in Washington contributed to this report.

Georgia massage parlor shootings leave 8 dead; man captured

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Shootings at two massage parlors in Atlanta and one in the suburbs Tuesday evening left eight people dead, many of them women of Asian descent, authorities said. A 21-year-old man suspected in the shootings was taken into custody in southwest Georgia hours later after a manhunt, police said.

The attacks began around 5 p.m., when five people were shot at Youngs Asian Massage Parlor in a strip mall near a rural area in Acworth, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Atlanta, Cherokee County Sheriff's Office spokesman Capt. Jay Baker said. Two people died at the scene and three were transported to a hospital where two of them also died, Baker said.

No one was arrested at the scene.

Around 5:50 p.m., police in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, responding to a call of a robbery in progress, found three women dead from apparent gunshot wounds at Gold Spa. While they were at that scene, they learned of a call reporting shots fired at another spa across the street, Aromatherapy Spa, and found a woman who appeared to have been shot dead inside the business.

"It appears that they may be Asian," Atlanta Police Chief Rodney Bryant said.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said in statement Wednesday that its diplomats in Atlanta have confirmed from police that four of the victims who died were women of Korean descent. The ministry said the office of its Consulate General in Atlanta is trying to confirm the nationality of the women.

The killings came amid a recent wave of attacks against Asian Americans that coincided with the spread of the coronavirus across the United States.

"Our entire family is praying for the victims of these horrific acts of violence," Gov. Brian Kemp said Tuesday evening on Twitter.

A man suspected in the Acworth shooting was captured by surveillance video pulling up to the business around 4:50 p.m. Tuesday, minutes before the attack, authorities said. Baker said the suspect, Robert Aaron Long, of Woodstock, was taken into custody in Crisp County, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of Atlanta.

Baker said they believe Long is also the suspect in the Atlanta shootings.

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Police said video footage showed the suspect's vehicle in the area of the Atlanta spas about the time of those attacks as well. That, as well as other video evidence, "suggests it is extremely likely our suspect is the same as Cherokee County's, who is in custody," Atlanta police said in a statement. Atlanta and Cherokee County authorities were working to confirm the cases are related.

FBI spokesman Kevin Rowson said the agency was assisting Atlanta and Cherokee County authorities in the investigation.

Crisp County Sheriff Billy Hancock said in a video posted on Facebook that his deputies and state troopers were notified around 8 p.m. that a murder suspect out of north Georgia was headed toward their county. Deputies and troopers set up along the interstate and "made contact with the suspect," who was driving a 2007 black Hyundai Tucson, around 8:30 p.m., he said.

A state trooper performed a PIT, or pursuit intervention technique, maneuver, "which caused the vehicle to spin out of control," Hancock said. Long was then taken into custody "without incident" and was being held in the Crisp County jail for Cherokee County authorities who were expected to arrive soon to continue their investigation.

Due to the shootings, Atlanta police said they dispatched officers to check nearby similar businesses and increased patrols in the area.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul contributed to the this story.

France's Sarkozy faces new trial over 2012 campaign finance

By SYLVIE CORBET and NICOLAS VAUX-MONTAGNY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French former President Nicolas Sarkozy is scheduled to go on trial Wednesday on charges that his unsuccessful reelection bid in 2012 was illegally financed.

The new case is scheduled to open two weeks after he was convicted of corruption and influence peddling in another case, a decision he has appealed.

However, the new trial is likely to be quickly suspended and postponed to a later date because one of the defense lawyers has been hospitalized with COVID-19.

The 66-year-old Sarkozy, who was president from 2007 to 2012, is facing allegations that he spent almost twice the maximum authorized amount — 22.5 million euros (\$26.8 million) — in his 2012 reelection bid, which he lost to Socialist Francois Hollande.

If found guilty, he faces up to one year in prison and a fine of 3,750 euros (\$4,470). He denied wrongdoing.

According to the judicial investigation, Sarkozy "indisputably benefited from fraud that allowed him to have, during his 2012 campaign, resources much superior to what the law was authorizing."

Since 1990 and following several scandals, French law provides for a number of rules strictly limiting campaign expenses.

The investigative magistrate concluded that Sarkozy and his close entourage decided to do "spectacular and expensive rallies." The campaign's total cost reached at least 42.8 million euros (\$51 million).

Yet the investigation didn't establish whether Sarkozy had himself ordered the fraud or if he was a participant in trying to cover up the overspending, which included forging invoices.

In addition to Sarkozy, 12 other people and the company in charge of organizing the rallies are facing trial on charges including forgery, breach of trust, fraud and complicity in illegal campaign financing.

Some during the investigation admitted their wrongdoing.

In 2014, Jerome Lavrilleux, the former deputy campaign director, revealed on national television a system of fake invoices that allegedly allowed the conservative party, then named UMP, to pay for the campaign rallies.

The scandal had prompted a destructive war between leaders of the conservative party who have pointed blame at each other.

Sarkozy has denied that the alleged illegal money ever financed his campaign. Speaking to investigative magistrates, he asked: "where is the money?," suggesting that some in his own party could have misused it.

Sarkozy retired from active politics in 2017, but still has a lot of influence within the conservative party, which has been renamed The Republicans. French media also report that he maintains regular contacts with centrist President Emmanuel Macron, whom he is said to be advising.

Two weeks ago, Sarkozy was convicted of corruption and influence peddling and sentenced to one year in prison and a two-year suspended sentence. Sarkozy denied wrongdoing and appealed the verdict, which he called "a deep injustice."

Multilingual team helps Berlin immigrants fight coronavirus

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Three times a week, Aliye Tuerkyilmaz hits the markets and busy shopping streets of Neukoelln to hand out informational flyers on the coronavirus pandemic to residents of the German capital's crowded immigrant neighborhood that's studded with minarets, kebab stores and hookah lounges.

The 48-year-old Turkish immigrant who speaks four languages is part of a team of five street workers enlisted to explain the dangers of COVID-19 to people often not reached through traditional channels in an area where infection numbers have regularly been among the highest in the city.

"Especially the older immigrants don't understand German, some are illiterate, and some are still not aware of the health risks and regulations regarding the pandemic," Tuerkyilmaz says as she roams through a Turkish market along the Landwehr canal where many had come to pick up fresh vegetables, chicken and bread.

There are a combination of factors that have made Neukoelln a virus hotspot in Berlin, where low incomes mean that living quarters are often cramped, public transport is frequently the only option, and jobs are commonly in high-risk areas such as the food service industry.

But it was the lack of information making it to the residents that prompted the formation of Tuerkyilmaz's "intercultural educational team," or IKAT, in September by the Berlin NGO Chance BJS in coordination with district officials.

The hope is that they will be able to break through the lack of communication, which not only has to do with language barriers but also a deep distrust of German authorities fed by a sense of nonacceptance, says Kazim Erdogan, a community leader with Turkish roots.

"If we can't create a sense of belonging together in normal times, if people are existing next to or even against each other, then it is not possible to create this sense of togetherness now," Erdogan says.

Around 35% of Berlin's 3.6 million residents have immigrant roots, primarily from Poland, Turkey, Arabic countries and the former Soviet Union. In Neukoelln, almost half have a foreign background.

The district's number of coronavirus cases per 100,000 residents is currently at 4,828, compared to a city-wide average figure of 3,575.

A study published by the Berlin state health authority in February indicated the hardest-hit districts were those with more unemployment, a greater share of welfare recipients and lower household income. The incidence of COVID-19 also rose in line with the percentage of people with a family history of migration and greater population density — factors that are linked to poverty.

"Migration is not the main reason for a higher risk of catching the virus, but it is an additional one," said Nico Dragano, a professor of medical sociology at the Heinrich-Heine University of Duesseldorf, who has been studying the disproportionately strong impact of the pandemic on underprivileged parts of society.

Lacking information early on in the pandemic, many immigrant communities stuck to cherished traditions like big weddings and extended family meals in their small homes, which helped contribute to clusters of outbreaks, said Erdogan, the Neukoelln community leader.

"Among my friends, there were also 20 people who got infected from one family," Erdogan said. "They were at a celebration and didn't take the challenges seriously — it came back to haunt them."

More than 135,000 people in Berlin have been reported to have caught the coronavirus, though the estimated number of unreported cases is higher, and about 3,000 people have died.

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While Neukoelln was one of the city's main virus hot spots last summer, its latest number of cases — 75.5 new infections weekly per 100,000 residents — is on par with the city's current average of 75.1.

It's too early to say how much initiatives like the multilingual street workers' team have contributed to bringing down the virus numbers, but district mayor Martin Hikel said that anecdotally, unconventional ways of communicating with Neukoelln's diverse immigrant communities have been important.

Hikel said many residents of his district don't read German papers or watch German television stations where constantly changing virus regulations, including lockdowns, school and store closures and reopenings, are reported daily.

Beyond the IKAT team, Neukoelln has sought to rectify that through other initiatives as well.

City workers have painted basic rules of conduct during the pandemic — such as mask regulations — directly on sidewalks in bold letters and different languages. They've also created short multilingual videos detailing the risks of COVID-19 that feature different community leaders — including Erdogan — which can easily be shared on Facebook or via messenger services on smartphones.

"We try to spread the word on social media, through social workers and local associations," Hikel said, adding that local authorities are often a step ahead of state and federal officials with their outreach methods because they are more aware of the reality on the ground.

Izabella Grajkowski, a 34-year-old IKAT member with Polish roots, said people have generally been open when she approaches them in the streets.

She attributes the success of IKAT's outreach work also to the fact that all members are immigrants themselves and can draw on that experience as they talk to people. They also help translate for those who have in-depth medical questions for a doctor who often joins IKAT outings and offers on-the-spot antigen tests for those who fear they've contracted the virus.

"We all have different cultural backgrounds ourselves and we connect well with the people of Neukoelln," she said.

Topics of most concern to people are the re-opening of schools, stores and restaurants, whether they are allowed to travel abroad to visit relatives, and when and how they'll be able to get vaccinated.

"The elderly have already been getting invitations for the vaccinations explaining how to register online," said Tuerkyilmaz. "But everything is in German only — they don't understand it and don't know what to do. It's difficult."

Frank Jordans contributed to this report.

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Court says Japan's ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court ruled Wednesday the government's ban on same-sex marriages is unconstitutional, recognizing the rights of same-sex couples for the first time in the only Group of Seven country that doesn't acknowledge their legal partnership.

Even though the court dismissed the plaintiffs' demand for government compensation, the precedent is a major victory for same-sex people and could affect similar lawsuits pending around the country.

The Sapporo District Court said sexuality, like race and gender, is not a matter of individual preference, therefore prohibiting same-sex couples from receiving benefits given to heterosexual couples cannot be justified.

"Legal benefits stemming from marriages should equally benefit both homosexuals and heterosexuals," the court said, according to a copy of the summary of the ruling.

Judge Tomoko Takebe said in the ruling that not allowing same-sex marriages violates Article 14 of the

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Japanese Constitution prohibiting discrimination “because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin.”

Under Japanese law, marriage should be based on “the mutual consent of both sexes,” which is currently interpreted as allowing marriage only between a man and a woman.

The ruling does not mean an immediate change to the government policy, but could influence decisions on other lawsuits pending and prompt calls for the government to change the law.

While awareness and support for LGBTQ people is rising in Japan, discrimination persists. Same-sex couples cannot inherit their partner’s houses, property and other assets, or have parental rights to any children. More municipalities have enacted “partnership” ordinances so same-sex couples can more easily rent apartments, but they are not legally binding.

In a society where pressure for conformity is strong, many gay people hide their sexuality, fearing prejudice at home, school or work. Transgender people also have difficulty in a society where gender identity is highly specific.

The movement for LGBTQ equal rights has lagged because people who don’t conform have been largely marginalized.

Even though Japan is the only G7 country that still refuses to legalize same-sex marriages, it’s not unusual in the region. Taiwan is the only place in Asia to have legalized same-sex marriage, with thousands of such couples marrying since the legislation passed in May 2019.

Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party holds ultra-conservative, paternalistic views on family makeup and its policies have hampered women’s advancement and acceptance of sexual diversity. Ruling lawmakers have repeatedly been criticized for making discriminatory remarks against sexual minorities for “lacking productivity.”

The Sapporo District Court dismissed the demand by six plaintiffs — two male couples and one female — that the Japanese government pay 1 million yen (\$9,100) each for the difficulties they had to suffer from not being able to legally marry.

But the Sapporo court’s ruling that the government’s ban was unconstitutional is seen as a major step forward for the plaintiffs and their supporters, setting a precedent for similar court cases and raising their hope for a legal change.

“I hope this ruling serves as a first step for Japan to change,” said one of the women, who only identified herself as “Plaintiff No. 5.”

Four other lawsuits are pending in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka.

Japan’s refusal to issue spouse visas to partners of same-sex couples legally married overseas has been a growing problem, forcing them to temporarily live separately.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Japan last year urged Japan to legalize same-sex marriages, saying talented LGBTQ people would choose to work elsewhere, making the country less competitive internationally.

Top US officials weigh North Korea options in talks in Seoul

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Fresh off a stop in Tokyo, President Joe Biden’s top diplomat and defense chief traveled to South Korea on Wednesday, a day after North Korea made sure it had their attention by warning the United States to “refrain from causing a stink” amid deadlocked nuclear negotiations.

How to get North Korea to return to talks will be a major focus when Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin meet South Korean officials this week.

It has been more than two years since nuclear talks stalled, and some experts say the United States and its allies should settle for a deal that would freeze North Korea’s nuclear program in return for relaxing sanctions — and possibly leave Pyongyang’s already manufactured nuclear weapons in place.

Austin and Blinken will meet their South Korean counterparts for separate talks Wednesday and a joint “two plus two” meeting Thursday, the first such contact between the two countries in five years.

South Korea is the second leg of their regional tour aimed at boosting America’s Asian alliances to better

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deal with growing challenges from China and North Korea. While in Tokyo on Tuesday, they joined forces with Japanese officials to criticize China's "coercion and aggression" and reaffirm their commitment to ridding North Korea of all its nuclear bombs.

U.S.-led diplomacy on that last topic has been in limbo since a February 2019 summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un collapsed over disputes on U.S.-led sanctions. Kim has since threatened to enlarge his nuclear arsenal in protest of what he called U.S. hostility.

On Tuesday, Kim's sister and a senior official in her own right, Kim Yo Jong, slammed the United States over its ongoing regular military drills with South Korea, which North Korea sees as an invasion rehearsal.

"We take this opportunity to warn the new U.S. administration," Kim Yo Jong said in a statement. "If it wants to sleep in peace for (the) coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step."

Some experts say Kim Yo Jong's statement is a pressure tactic and that Pyongyang may try to further raise animosities with weapons tests to boost its leverage in future negotiations with Washington.

Asked about Kim Yo Jong's statement during a news conference in Tokyo, Blinken said that he was familiar with the comments and was more interested in hearing from allies and partners.

Blinken said that Washington reached out to North Korea through several channels starting in mid-February, but it hasn't received any response. He said the Biden administration is looking forward to completing its policy review on North Korea in coming weeks and was looking both at possible "additional pressure measures" and "diplomatic paths."

Shim Beomchul, an analyst with the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, said he expects the Biden administration to pursue a deal with North Korea that resembles a 2015 accord that froze Iran's nuclear program in return for lifting sanctions. While the United States won't likely give up its long-term commitment to denuclearizing North Korea, rolling back the country's nuclear capabilities to zero is not a realistic near-term diplomatic goal, he said.

Trump blew up that 2015 Obama administration deal in favor of what he called maximum pressure against Iran, and the Biden government is trying to resurrect it.

In an op-ed in the New York Times in 2018, Blinken, then a managing director of the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, argued that the best deal the U.S. could reach with North Korea "more than likely will look like what Barack Obama achieved with Iran." He said that an interim agreement "would buy time to negotiate a more comprehensive deal, including a minutely sequenced road map that will require sustained diplomacy. That's the approach Mr. Obama took with Iran."

Other experts say an Iran-style deal won't work for North Korea. Iran hasn't built any bomb, but North Korea has already manufactured dozens. They say North Korea, which has a history of derailing agreements with its vehement rejection of verification processes, won't find any reason to denuclearize when some of the most painful sanctions are lifted.

"Everyone can say easily that (settling for) a nuclear freeze would allow North Korea to preserve its existing nukes. But I ask them what other options do they have" to realize North Korea's denuclearization, said Kim Yeol Soo, an analyst with South Korea's Korea Institute for Military Affairs.

Another possible topic during U.S.-South Korean talks is whether South Korea should actively participate in U.S.-led efforts to curb China's rising strength in the region.

South Korea is a longtime U.S. ally and hosts about 28,500 American troops. But its economy is heavily dependent on trade with China, making it difficult to take any step deemed provocative to its biggest trading partner. When South Korea allowed the United States to install anti-North Korea missile defense shield on its soil in 2017, it suffered economic retaliation from China, which sees the system's radar as a security threat.

South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook told lawmakers Tuesday that the U.S. hadn't formally proposed for South Korea to join an expanded format of the so-called "Quad" group that includes the United States, Japan, Australia and India, and that the Americans won't likely make such a proposal during this week's talks.

China has called the Quad an attempt to contain its ambitions.

Kim Yeol Soo said the allies will likely discuss Seoul joining an expanded Quad format, known as the Quad Plus, though they'll never publicly announce it to avoid angering China. Kim said it would be "wise" for South Korea to join the Quad Plus to voice its opinions clearly and avoid being sidelined on issues involving Seoul.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung contributed to this report.

White supremacist propaganda surged in 2020, report says

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — White supremacist propaganda reached alarming levels across the U.S. in 2020, according to a new report that the Anti-Defamation League provided to The Associated Press.

There were 5,125 cases of racist, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQ and other hateful messages spread through physical flyers, stickers, banners and posters, according to Wednesday's report. That's nearly double the 2,724 instances reported in 2019. Online propaganda is much harder to quantify, and it's likely those cases reached into the millions, the anti-hate organization said.

The ADL, which was founded more than a century ago, said that last year marked the highest level of white supremacist propaganda seen in at least a decade. Its report comes as federal authorities investigate and prosecute those who stormed the U.S. Capitol in January, some of whom are accused of having ties to or expressing support for hate groups and antigovernment militias.

"As we try to understand and put in perspective the past four years, we will always have these bookends of Charlottesville and Capitol Hill," group CEO Jonathan Greenblatt said.

"The reality is there's a lot of things that happened in between those moments that set the stage," he said.

Christian Piccolini, a former far-right extremist who founded the deradicalization group Free Radicals Project, said the surge in propaganda tracks with white supremacist and extremist recruiters seeing crises as periods of opportunity.

"They use the uncertainty and fear caused by crisis to win over new recruits to their 'us vs. them' narrative, painting the 'other' as the cause of their pain, grievances or loss," Piccolini told the AP. "The current uncertainty caused by the pandemic, job loss, a heated election, protest over extrajudicial police killings of Black Americans, and a national reckoning sparked by our country's long tradition of racism has created a perfect storm in which to recruit Americans who are fearful of change and progress."

Propaganda, often distributed with the intention of garnering media and online attention, helps white supremacists normalize their messaging and bolster recruitment efforts, the ADL said in its report. Language used in the propaganda is frequently veiled with a patriotic slant, making it seem benign to an untrained eye.

But some flyers, stickers and posters are explicitly racist and anti-Semitic. One piece of propaganda disseminated by the New Jersey European Heritage Association included the words "Black Crimes Matter," a derisive reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, along with cherry-picked crime statistics about attacks on white victims by Black assailants.

A neo-Nazi group known as Folks Front distributed stickers that include the words "White Lives Matter."

According to the report, at least 30 known white supremacist groups were behind hate propaganda. But three groups — NJEHA, Patriot Front and Nationalist Social Club — were responsible for 92% of the activity.

The propaganda appeared in every state except Hawaii. The highest levels were seen in Texas, Washington, California, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Virginia and Pennsylvania, according to the report.

Despite the overall increase, the ADL reported a steep decline in distribution of white supremacist propaganda at colleges and universities, due in large part to the coronavirus pandemic and the lack of students living and studying on campus. There were 303 reports of propaganda on college campuses in 2020, down from 630 in 2019.

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Greenblatt acknowledged that free speech rights allow for rhetoric that "we don't like and we detest." But when that speech spurs violence or creates conditions for normalizing extremism, it must be opposed, he said.

"There's no pixie dust that you can sprinkle on this, like it's all going to go away," Greenblatt said. "We need to recognize that the roots of this problem run deep."

Morrison is a member of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow him on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/aaronlmorrison>.

In war-torn Syria, uprising birthplace seethes 10 years on

By SARAH EL DEEB and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Daraa was an impoverished, neglected provincial city in the farmlands of Syria's south, an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim backwater far from the more cosmopolitan cities of the country's heartland.

But in March 2011 it became the first to explode against the rule of President Bashar Assad. Assad's decision to crush the initially peaceful protests propelled Syria into a civil war that has killed more than a half million people, driven half the population from their homes and sucked in foreign military interventions that have carved up the country.

On the 10th anniversary of the protests, The Associated Press spoke to activists from Daraa who set aside their lives to join the marches in the streets, then paid the price in torture and exile. Unable to return home, they continue from abroad to support a cause that they hope can still prevail, despite Assad's military victories.

After a decade of bloodshed, Daraa is back under Assad's rule, but only tenuously.

Boiling with resentments, battered by an economic crisis and rife with armed groups caught between Russia, Iran and the government, the uprising's birthplace still feels perched on the rim of an active volcano.

MARCH 18

Assad's security agencies were clearly nervous in early 2011 as Arab Spring uprisings felled leaders in Tunisia and Egypt.

In Daraa, officers summoned known activists and warned them not to try anything. Small initial protests were quickly pushed back by security.

Then graffiti appeared around the city. One caught everyone's attention: "Your Turn Has Come, Doctor," a reference to Assad, who was an ophthalmologist before inheriting rule from his father Hafez. When the boys who wrote the graffiti were arrested and tortured, Daraa's population erupted in anger.

On March 18, protesters marched from mosques, met by charging security vehicles. Outside the city's main Omari Mosque, security forces opened fire with live ammunition, killing two protesters and wounding at least 20 others.

They were the first to die in what would become a decade of death.

Ahmed al-Masalmeh, then 35 and the owner of an electronics shop, was at the Omari Mosque that bloody day. He was helping organize protests, bringing in people from neighboring villages. He kept at it as rallies spread and more "martyrs" fell. When security forces fired on protesters toppling the statue of Hafez Assad in Daraa's main square, he helped carry away the wounded. Eight died that day.

Al-Masalmeh had thought troops would just use tear gas and rubber bullets against the protests. In this age, he thought, Syria's rulers couldn't get away with what Hafez Assad had in 1982, killing thousands to crush a revolt in the city of Hama.

"We thought the world has become a small village, with social media and satellite stations," he told the AP. "We never expected the level of killing and brutality and hatred for the people to reach these levels."

From Damascus, university student Nedal al-Amari watched the March 18 mayhem in his home city on TV.

Al-Amari, who had just turned 18, was the son of a parliament member from Daraa; it was his father's connections that had got him a spot at the university in the capital, studying acting.

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Al-Amari jumped in a car, headed down the highway and arrived home to join in.

His father was not happy.

"If you think this regime will fall because of a scream or millions of screams, then you know nothing about this regime," his father told him. "It is ready to turn over every stone in this country to remain in power."

The teen dismissed his father's warning. It was the talk, he felt, of an older generation paralyzed by fear ever since Hafez Assad's ruthlessness in 1982.

The young would not be cowed.

CRACKDOWN

Al-Amari, who spoke some English, picked up a camera, set up two computers and together with friends created a media center. It was one of the first of many that sprang up around Syria, communicating the conflict to the world.

He filmed the marches and the deadly assaults against them by security forces. For the first time, he saw dead bodies. It changed him, he said, creating a sense of fearlessness bolstered by the camaraderie with his fellow activists.

That bravado would turn into trauma.

On April 25, 2011, the army stormed Daraa city. Assad's inner circle had abandoned any possible conciliation.

Within days, al-Amari and his colleagues were rounded up.

In detention, the first thing al-Amari was forced to do was kneel on the floor and kiss a picture of Assad. Then the daily routine of torture set in. Beatings and electrocutions from guards — but also, prisoners were forced to torture each other, to beat each other or ram metal objects into the anus.

"You'd be tortured while (they force you into) torturing others," al-Amari said.

For four months, his parents didn't know where he was, until al-Amari was beaten so badly he nearly lost his eyesight. He was taken to a military hospital and a cousin who worked there happened to see him. Soon after, he was released and dumped on the street.

Over the course of the war, more than 120,000 people have similarly disappeared into government detention. Under relentless torture, thousands are known to have died. Tens of thousands remain missing.

Al-Amari emerged a broken and tormented soul. He spent a month recovering at his family's half-bombed home, his mother sleeping beside him to keep him company.

Meanwhile, armed opposition groups were arising to fight back against the crackdown. Al-Amari's brother joined one.

Al-Amari picked his camera back up and covered the battles. He threw away caution, no longer hiding his name. Across the country, as the viciousness grew, so too did the sectarian fever between a largely Sunni Muslim rebellion and Assad's state centered on his Alawite minority.

"My fear turned into spite and hatred. I hated Shiites, I hated Alawites," al-Amari said.

When four of al-Amari's cousins in Damascus were detained, it became clear the family would pay the price for his activities. His father slapped him, angry and afraid, and told him it was time for him to go. The cousins have not been heard from since.

On Dec. 22, 2011, al-Amari left Syria. After several years in Lebanon, he reached Turkey. From there, he joined the massive wave of Syrians and other refugees and migrants who in 2015 by the hundreds of thousands crossed in small boats on dangerous sea trips from Turkey to Greece.

FULL CIRCLE

At its height in 2013 and 2014, the rebellion controlled most of Syria east of the Euphrates, parts of Daraa province and much of the north. It battled for all the major cities and even threatened Damascus from the surrounding countryside.

Assad's forces unleashed airstrikes, devastating barrel bombs and chemical attacks. The tide turned

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when his allies, Moscow and Tehran, stepped in directly, first Iran with military experts and allied Shiite militias, then Russia with its warplanes.

Sieges and military campaigns against opposition-held cities and towns flattened neighborhoods and starved populations into submission. When the government retook the northern city of Aleppo in 2016 — destroying nearly half of it — it spelled the end of the rebellion's military threat to Assad's rule.

In the northwest, the opposition became confined to a shrinking enclave centered on Idlib province, dominated by Islamic militants and surviving only because of Turkish protection.

In the south, government forces backed by Russia overwhelmed Daraa province in August 2018.

While recaptured, Daraa was far from controlled.

It has come under a unique arrangement mediated by Russia, partially because of pressure from Israel, which does not want Iranian militias on its doorstep, and from Jordan, which wants to keep its border crossings open.

In parts of Daraa province, rebel fighters who agreed to "reconcile" remained in charge of security. Some joined the 5th Corps, which is technically part of the Syrian Army but overseen by Russia. In these areas, state and municipal institutions have returned, but government forces stayed out.

Elsewhere, Russian and government troops are in charge together in a watered-down government authority. In the rest, the government is in outright control, and the Syrian army and Iranian-backed militias have deployed.

The organized opposition presence gives a margin for protests and open anti-government sentiment hard to find elsewhere. Some rebels rejected the deal with Russia and are waging a low-level insurgency.

A string of killings, mainly by insurgents, has left more than 600 dead since June 2019, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The dead include government troops, pro-Iranian militiamen, rebels who signed onto the Russia deals, and mayors and municipal workers considered loyal to the government.

The volatile mix paints a possible scenario for Syria's near future: A war that Assad can dominate but not outright win, foreign powers trying to patch together arrangements, and a population still boiling with dissent and drowning in an economic crisis.

To give a veneer of normalcy and placate foreign backers, Assad plans presidential elections this summer — in which he is the only candidate.

Assad's forces are too exhausted to deal with another revolution, said Hassan Alaswad, a prominent activist lawyer from Daraa who fled the country. Now in Germany, he remains involved in opposition activity in Syria.

Among Daraa's population, "there's no such thing as fear anymore," Alaswad said. In the town of Tafas, a Russian general met local notables and asked them if they will vote for Assad in the upcoming election. All of them said no, calling him a war criminal.

Daraa has seen frequent mass protests against the government and Iran, reflecting a growing concern over Tehran's expanding influence. Iranian-backed militias recruit young men attracted by a stable salary. Families loyal to the government or Iranian-backed fighters are reportedly settling in villages in the south. Traders linked to Assad and Iran have exploited the destitution in Daraa to buy up land, said al-Amari. Pro-Iranian militias are said to be encouraging local Sunni Muslims to convert to Shiism.

Still, the public is also exhausted by the economy's collapse across Syria. Inflation is spiraling, and there are few jobs. Trade and agriculture are broken down, and infrastructure wrecked.

"The young men still inside Syria are living in despair," said al-Masalmeh, who fled to Jordan in 2018 but remains involved with activists at home. "We will invest in the despair ... to relaunch the revolution again."

IN EXILE

Al-Amari now lives in Germany, learning the language and hoping to go to university. He gives talks on the Syria conflict and his experience with torture and works documenting crimes against civilians.

He's enjoying his freedom in Germany — he has more freedom as a refugee than most living under the Arab world's authoritarian regimes, he points out.

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He still wrestles with his trauma. "Sometimes the memories are so hard, when I remember how I was tortured, I hate everything that is Alawite on the face of the earth," he says — even as he also tells himself not every Alawite backed Assad. He worries about "shabiha," or regime loyalists, living among refugees in Europe, who dissidents fear are targeting them.

And he is inextricably tangled with home. Al-Amari has not seen his family for 10 years. He still breaks down in tears when he talks about home. Tattooed on his forearm is the date of the first protests, March 18. "We are living and not living," he said.

Georgia massage parlor shootings leave 8 dead; man captured

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Shootings at two massage parlors in Atlanta and one in the suburbs Tuesday evening left eight people dead, many of them women of Asian descent, authorities said. A 21-year-old man suspected in the shootings was taken into custody in southwest Georgia hours later after a manhunt, police said.

The attacks began around 5 p.m., when five people were shot at Youngs Asian Massage Parlor in a strip mall near a rural area in Acworth, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Atlanta, Cherokee County Sheriff's Office spokesman Capt. Jay Baker said. Two people died at the scene and three were transported to a hospital where two of them also died, Baker said.

No one was arrested at the scene.

Around 5:50 p.m., police in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, responding to a call of a robbery in progress, found three women dead from apparent gunshot wounds at Gold Spa. While they were at that scene, they learned of a call reporting shots fired at another spa across the street, Aromatherapy Spa, and found a woman who appeared to have been shot dead inside the business.

"It appears that they may be Asian," Atlanta Police Chief Rodney Bryant said.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said in statement Wednesday that its diplomats in Atlanta have confirmed from police that four of the victims who died were women of Korean descent. The ministry said the office of its Consulate General in Atlanta is trying to confirm the nationality of the women.

The killings came amid a recent wave of attacks against Asian Americans that coincided with the spread of the coronavirus across the United States.

"Our entire family is praying for the victims of these horrific acts of violence," Gov. Brian Kemp said Tuesday evening on Twitter.

A man suspected in the Acworth shooting was captured by surveillance video pulling up to the business around 4:50 p.m. Tuesday, minutes before the attack, authorities said. Baker said the suspect, Robert Aaron Long, of Woodstock, was taken into custody in Crisp County, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of Atlanta.

Baker said they believe Long is also the suspect in the Atlanta shootings.

Police said video footage showed the suspect's vehicle in the area of the Atlanta spas about the time of those attacks as well. That, as well as other video evidence, "suggests it is extremely likely our suspect is the same as Cherokee County's, who is in custody," Atlanta police said in a statement. Atlanta and Cherokee County authorities were working to confirm the cases are related.

FBI spokesman Kevin Rowson said the agency was assisting Atlanta and Cherokee County authorities in the investigation.

Crisp County Sheriff Billy Hancock said in a video posted on Facebook that his deputies and state troopers were notified around 8 p.m. that a murder suspect out of north Georgia was headed toward their county. Deputies and troopers set up along the interstate and "made contact with the suspect," who was driving a 2007 black Hyundai Tucson, around 8:30 p.m., he said.

A state trooper performed a PIT, or pursuit intervention technique, maneuver, "which caused the vehicle to spin out of control," Hancock said. Long was then taken into custody "without incident" and was being held in the Crisp County jail for Cherokee County authorities who were expected to arrive soon to continue their investigation.

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Due to the shootings, Atlanta police said they dispatched officers to check nearby similar businesses and increased patrols in the area.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul contributed to the this story.

St. Patrick's Day to be largely virtual in NYC for 2nd year

NEW YORK (AP) — A largely virtual St. Patrick's Day is planned for New York City on Wednesday, one year after the annual parade celebrating Irish heritage became one of the city's first coronavirus casualties.

Although the city's usual huge parade with floats and marching bands has been canceled, a few dozen people are expected to march at 6 a.m. to keep the tradition alive, a spokesperson for Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

Then at 8:30 a.m. there will be a live broadcast of the St. Patrick's Day Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, according to the parade organizers' website. A virtual parade featuring clips of marching groups from past years will follow at 10 a.m. and an hourlong show streaming on Facebook at 11 a.m. will include performances by singers Andy Cooney and Moya Brennan.

Multitudes of people usually line Fifth Avenue for New York's St. Patrick's Day parade, which traces its roots to the 1760s.

The city was just starting to shut down to halt the spread of the coronavirus on St. Patrick's Day 2020, and de Blasio waited until days before the parade to cancel it. A small group marched in the rain before 7 a.m.

St. Patrick's Day is also usually big business for the city's taverns and restaurants, and a major date on the calendar for tourism.

This year, thanks to COVID-19 restrictions, celebrations will be muted. Establishments that serve alcohol can only do so if they also serve food. Closing time is 11 p.m. Taverns and pubs, like all restaurants, can only fill 35% of their seats. That will rise to 50% two days after the holiday.

People staying home can take in a 5 p.m. program on the Catholic Faith Network featuring parade leaders and Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, and TV station WNBC will broadcast "St. Patrick's Day: A Celebration For All" at 7 p.m.

McConnell vows 'scorched earth' if Senate ends filibuster

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell warned ominously of a "scorched earth" landscape if Democrats use their new majority to bring an end to the Senate filibuster in hopes of muscling legislation supporting President Joe Biden's agenda past GOP opposition.

McConnell unleashed the dire forecast of a Senate that would all but cease to function, implying that Republicans would grind business to a halt by refusing to give consent for routine operations — from the start time for sessions, to the reading of long legislative texts, to quorum call votes.

"Let me say this very clearly for all 99 of my colleagues: Nobody serving in this chamber can even begin — can even begin to imagine — what a completely scorched earth Senate would look like," McConnell said Tuesday in a Senate speech.

McConnell said the partisan gridlock of the Trump and Obama eras would look like "child's play" compared to what's to come.

The GOP leader's stark remarks landed as the Biden administration is taking a victory lap over the just-passed \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the big COVID-19 relief package that was approved by Congress without a single Republican vote. Republicans acknowledged privately they are struggling to pry attention away from the bill, which appears to be popular among Americans benefitting from \$1,400 cash payments, vaccine distribution and other aid, as the GOP focuses on future battles.

With the Senate evenly divided, 50-50, the rest of Biden's priorities face a tougher climb in Congress. While the Democratic-controlled House is able to swiftly approve a long list of potentially popular bills — to

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expand voting rights, extend gun purchase background checks and other measures — the rules of the Senate are more cumbersome. It typically requires 60 votes to break a filibuster to advance most legislation.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer brushed off McConnell's remarks as a "diversion" and said he hopes to work with Republicans on the upcoming bills, but said all options for filibuster changes are on the table.

Biden told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos on Tuesday: "I don't think that you have to eliminate the filibuster, you have to do it what it used to be when I first got to the Senate back in the old days. You had to stand up and command the floor, you had to keep talking."

Senate Democrats are talking privately about changing the decades-old rules for the filibuster, which allows a single senator to block a bill by objecting. In earlier eras, senators would seize the floor, speaking for hours about their objections, as was done in the Hollywood movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." They also used it to stall civil rights legislation in the middle of the 20th century.

Supporters of the process say it protects the rights of the party not in power, but detractors argue it is being used to block popular bills.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Tuesday that nearly 65 years after South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond's record-setting 24-hour-plus filibuster over the 1957 Civil Rights Act, "the filibuster is still making a mockery of American democracy."

It takes 51 votes to change the Senate rules and do away with the filibuster, and Democrats do not appear to have support from within their ranks to do so, even with Vice President Kamala Harris serving as the tiebreaker. At least two Democratic senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have signaled their objections, but there may be more.

The Senate will be put to the test in the weeks ahead. As senators start considering the House-passed bills, Democrats will be testing Republican willingness to participate in the legislative process by amending the bills toward eventual passage.

If Republicans simply block the bills, Democrats are expected to lean in more forcefully to try to change the rules.

Some Democrats want to require senators who engage in filibusters to be forced to hold the floor, as Jimmy Stewart did in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." These days, senators can simply signal their filibuster, which Durbin derided as "Mr. Smith Phones it In."

"We must change the rules," Durbin said.

McConnell warned Democrats not to take the next step, unveiling the actions he could take in retribution.

"This is an institution that requires unanimous consent to turn the lights on before noon, to proceed with a garden-variety floor speech, to dispense with the reading of a lengthy legislative text, to schedule committee business, to move even non-controversial nominees at anything besides a snail's pace," he said.

Changes to the filibuster have been underway for a decade, an escalating procedural arms race alongside the nation's rising partisanship.

Democrats did away with the filibuster rules to overcome Republican stonewalling of President Barack Obama's executive branch nominations and some judicial nominees.

Republicans and McConnell then escalated the process by eliminating the filibuster for Supreme Court justices, smoothing confirmation of President Donald Trump's three high court nominees.

Child border crossings surging, straining US facilities

By BEN FOX and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A surge of migrants on the Southwest border has the Biden administration on the defensive, with the head of Homeland Security acknowledging the depth of the problem but insisting it's under control and saying he won't revive a Trump-era practice of immediately expelling teens and children.

The number of migrants being stopped at the U.S.-Mexico border has been rising since last April, and the administration is still rapidly expelling most single adults and families under a public health order issued by President Donald Trump at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. But it is allowing teens and children

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to stay, at least temporarily, and they have been coming in ever larger numbers.

More than 4,000 migrant children were being held by the Border Patrol as of Sunday, including at least 3,000 in custody longer than the 72-hour limit set by a court order, according to a U.S. official. The agency took in an additional 561 on Monday, twice the recent average, according to a second official. Both spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss figures not yet publicly released.

It has put President Joe Biden in a difficult spot, blasted by Republicans for what they view as encouragement to illegal border crossers and by some Democrats over the prolonged detention of minors. It's also a challenge to his effort to overhaul the broader Trump policies that sought to curtail both legal and illegal immigration.

"The situation at the southwest border is difficult," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas conceded Tuesday in his most extensive remarks to date on the subject. "We are working around the clock to manage it and we will continue to do so. That is our job."

The number of migrants attempting to cross the border is at the highest level since March 2019, with Mayorkas warning that it is on pace to hit a 20-year peak.

The number of children crossing by themselves, mostly from Central America, appears to be surging in particular in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The Border Patrol took in 280 there alone on Monday.

The total of 561 unaccompanied minors from Monday offers a snapshot of how quickly conditions have changed along the border. That was up 60% from the daily average in February, one of the officials said. In May 2019, during the last surge, the one-day peak was 370 teens and children.

Children and teens crossing by themselves rose 60% from this January to more than 9,400 in February, according to the most recent statistics released publicly by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The Health and Human Services Department plans to open shelter facilities at Moffett Federal Airfield near San Francisco and in Pecos, Texas, to handle the flow. It is also looking to expand a facility in Donna, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, to hold 2,000.

Also, the Dallas Convention Center is scheduled to begin holding children as early as Wednesday with plans to accommodate up to 3,000. Another makeshift holding center in Midland, Texas, that opened last weekend for 700 children had 485 on Monday.

Some of the increase in adults is due to people who are repeatedly caught after being expelled under the public health order issued last year to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Other factors include economic upheaval caused by the pandemic and recent hurricanes that worsened living conditions in Central America. Officials say it's also likely that smugglers have encouraged people to try to cross under the new administration.

Mayorkas said the a surge in the number of children is a challenge for the Border Patrol and other agencies amid the coronavirus pandemic. But he rejected a Trump-era policy of sending them immediately back to Mexico or other countries.

"They are vulnerable children and we have ended the prior administration's practice of expelling them," he said.

Though there have been previous migrant surges, including under Trump, Republicans in Congress say that Biden's support for new immigration legislation and his decision to allow people to make legal asylum claims have become a magnet for migrants.

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Tuesday, Sen. Jim Inhofe held up a photo of a small crowd of demonstrators in Tijuana, Mexico, wearing matching T-shirts with the words "Biden, Please Let us in" that circulated widely on social media in recent days.

"They're all coming across the border, they're coming fast, and they're wearing Biden T-shirts," said the Oklahoma Republican.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy led a delegation of a dozen Republican lawmakers on Monday to the border in Texas and blamed the Biden administration for driving an increase in migrants by actions that include halting border wall construction and supporting legislation in Congress that would provide a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented people now in the country.

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"The sad part about all of this is it didn't have to happen. This crisis was created by the presidential policies of this new administration," McCarthy said.

Biden pushed back in an interview Tuesday with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, noting previous surges under Trump and pointing out that his administration has been trying to discourage people from crossing while it works to restore an asylum system undermined by his predecessor. "I heard the other day that they're coming because they know I'm a nice guy. Yeah, well here's the deal. They're not."

Trump confronted a similar surge in 2019 even as he rushed to expand the border wall system along the border and forced people seeking asylum to do so in Central America or remain in Mexico. A year earlier, he forcibly separated migrant children from their families as part of a zero-tolerance campaign that became one of the most significant political challenges of his administration.

The Biden administration is allowing migrants who are under 18 years old and cross by themselves to remain in the country while the government decides whether they have a legal claim to residency, either under asylum law or for some other reason.

Mayorkas noted that 80% of the minors, most of whom are from the three Northern Triangle countries of Central America, have relatives in the U.S. and 40% have a parent. "These are children being reunited with their families who will care for them," he said.

The Biden administration last week ended a Trump policy that made relatives reluctant to contact HHS to retrieve children for fear of being deported themselves.

Besides setting up new temporary facilities to house migrant children, it is also backing aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to try to stem the flow of migrants at the source.

Mayorkas took swipes at the previous administration for dismantling an asylum system that would have enabled a more "orderly" immigration process, cutting aid to Central America and failing to vaccinate Border Patrol agents.

Also, he said the Biden administration is working to make the asylum process shorter and to make it possible to petition from an applicant's home country rather than make a dangerous and uncertain journey. "We have no illusions about how hard it is," he said, "and we know it will take time."

Spagat reported from San Diego. Associated Press writers Ron Nixon and Colleen Long contributed to this report.

In Pennsylvania, Biden showcases aid to small businesses

By JOSH BOAK, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

CHESTER, Pa. (AP) — President Joe Biden turned up at a minority-owned flooring business in suburban Philadelphia to highlight how his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package can help small businesses and to put a face on those who have struggled throughout the pandemic.

The visit Tuesday to Smith Flooring Inc. was Biden's first stop in a cross-country administration road-show — also involving his vice president and his wife — designed to publicize, and take credit for, the virus relief package.

It "took some loud, strong voices to get this done," Biden said, making a subtle dig at Republicans during his visit to the small union shop that will benefit from the relief. "And it's not like it passed with 100 votes. It was close."

While Biden was in Pennsylvania for his first stop on the "Help is Here" tour, Vice President Kamala Harris and husband Doug Emhoff were reinforcing the small business theme Tuesday with stops in Colorado.

With Harris and Emhoff taking notes during a business roundtable in Denver, Lorena Cantarovici, who began making empanadas in her garage after emigrating from Argentina, told of how her small shop grew over the years into three Maria Empanada locations but then was forced to lay off workers when the coronavirus struck.

She said 80% of her team came back through previous relief programs but it could take two years to get back to full capacity and "recover all this loss." Harris and Emhoff did their part by departing with

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empanadas in tow.

Gabriela Salazar, whose Colorado Artisans represents more than 100 artisans in Denver, estimated more than 90% of those artisans are unemployed or collecting unemployment. Salazar, a small business owner for 30 years, told Harris that help from the Small Business Administration has "kept me afloat but more is needed."

In Pennsylvania, meanwhile, Smith Flooring had 23 employees during peak times but currently is employing 12 workers. It is using the loan to help retain workers and upgrade technology. Borrowers are eligible for forgiveness if they meet certain requirements, including devoting at least 60% of the proceeds to payroll expenses.

In his chat with the owners of Smith Floors, Biden repeatedly asked "what else" they thought his administration should be doing to help businesses like theirs.

In Washington, the Senate confirmed Isabel Guzman, Biden's pick to lead the Small Business Administration on Tuesday. She is expected to play a key role in implementing the relief bill.

Biden is trying to showcase how the aid package will bring transformational change to the nation by halving child poverty, fueling record levels of hiring and pumping money to parents, schools and state and local governments. It's a sharp turn from the start of the Biden administration, when vaccination goals were relatively modest and Americans were warned the country might not return to normal until Christmas.

The Biden administration estimates that 400,000 small businesses have closed because of the pandemic and millions more are barely surviving. His aid package includes a \$28 billion grant program to support restaurants and drinking establishments. It also includes \$15 billion in flexible grants.

The visit to Smith Flooring was meant to drive home that point. The business saw revenue fall about 20% during the pandemic. It recently qualified for a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan during a two-week window in which the Biden administration focused the program exclusively on helping businesses with 20 or fewer employees.

Harris also held a virtual chat with the operators of a Fort Lupton, Colorado, vaccine clinic.

The second day of the vice president's tour to publicize the virus relief was disrupted because of a mechanical issue with the government plane that flew the vice president to Las Vegas and Los Angeles on Monday. A smaller backup plane was sent to fly her to Denver, relegating most of her staff, Secret Service and a small group of reporters to fly on a cavernous cargo plane.

Because of the plane issue, Harris scratched her plan for her visit to the vaccine clinic, Plan De Salud Del Valle Inc., and instead spoke with the clinic's staff over Zoom. She praised their work, making particular note of the clinic's focus on helping minority communities get vaccinated.

"The President and I from the beginning of this have made it one of our highest priorities to make sure that we are taking into account racial disparities, and that we supply folks on the ground with the resources you need so that we have equitable outcomes," she said.

Superville reported from Denver and Madhani from Chicago.

McConnell vows 'scorched earth' if Senate ends filibuster

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell warned ominously Tuesday of a "scorched earth" landscape if Democrats use their new majority to bring an end to the Senate filibuster in hopes of muscling legislation supporting President Joe Biden's agenda past GOP opposition.

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The GOP leader’s stark remarks landed as the Biden administration is taking a victory lap over the just-passed \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the big COVID-19 relief package that was approved by Congress without a single Republican vote. Republicans acknowledged privately they are struggling to pry attention away from the bill, which appears to be popular among Americans benefitting from \$1,400 cash payments, vaccine distribution and other aid, as the GOP focuses on future battles.

With the Senate evenly divided, 50-50, the rest of Biden’s priorities face a tougher climb in Congress. While the Democratic-controlled House is able to swiftly approve a long list of potentially popular bills — to expand voting rights, extend gun purchase background checks and other measures — the rules of the Senate are more cumbersome. It typically requires 60 votes to break a filibuster to advance most legislation.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer brushed off McConnell’s remarks as a “diversion” and said he hopes to work with Republicans on the upcoming bills, but said all options for filibuster changes are on the table.

Biden told ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos on Tuesday: “I don’t think that you have to eliminate the filibuster, you have to do it what it used to be when I first got to the Senate back in the old days. You had to stand up and command the floor, you had to keep talking.”

Senate Democrats are talking privately about changing the decades-old rules for the filibuster, which allows a single senator to block a bill by objecting. In earlier eras, senators would seize the floor, speaking for hours about their objections, as was done in the Hollywood movie “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.” They also used it to stall civil rights legislation in the middle of the 20th century.

Supporters of the process say it protects the rights of the party not in power, but detractors argue it is being used to block popular bills.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Tuesday that nearly 65 years after South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond’s record-setting 24-hour-plus filibuster over the 1957 Civil Rights Act, “the filibuster is still making a mockery of American democracy.”

It takes 51 votes to change the Senate rules and do away with the filibuster, and Democrats do not appear to have support from within their ranks to do so, even with Vice President Kamala Harris serving as the tiebreaker. At least two Democratic senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have signaled their objections, but there may be more.

The Senate will be put to the test in the weeks ahead. As senators start considering the House-passed bills, Democrats will be testing Republican willingness to participate in the legislative process by amending the bills toward eventual passage.

If Republicans simply block the bills, Democrats are expected to lean in more forcefully to try to change the rules.

Some Democrats want to require senators who engage in filibusters to be forced to hold the floor, as Jimmy Stewart did in “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.” These days, senators can simply signal their filibuster, which Durbin derided as “Mr. Smith Phones it In.”

“We must change the rules,” Durbin said.

McConnell warned Democrats not to take the next step, unveiling the actions he could take in retribution. “This is an institution that requires unanimous consent to turn the lights on before noon, to proceed with a garden-variety floor speech, to dispense with the reading of a lengthy legislative text, to schedule committee business, to move even non-controversial nominees at anything besides a snail’s pace,” he said.

Changes to the filibuster have been underway for a decade, an escalating procedural arms race alongside the nation’s rising partisanship.

Democrats did away with the filibuster rules to overcome Republican stonewalling of President Barack Obama’s executive branch nominations and some judicial nominees.

Republicans and McConnell then escalated the process by eliminating the filibuster for Supreme Court justices, smoothing confirmation of President Donald Trump’s three high court nominees.

Child border crossings surging, straining US facilities

By BEN FOX and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A surge of migrants on the Southwest border has the Biden administration on the defensive, with the head of Homeland Security acknowledging the depth of the problem Tuesday but insisting it's under control and saying he won't revive a Trump-era practice of immediately expelling teens and children.

The number of migrants being stopped at the U.S.-Mexico border has been rising since last April, and the administration is still rapidly expelling most single adults and families under a public health order issued by President Donald Trump at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. But it is allowing teens and children to stay, at least temporarily, and they have been coming in ever larger numbers.

More than 4,000 migrant children were being held by the Border Patrol as of Sunday, including at least 3,000 in custody longer than the 72-hour limit set by a court order, according to a U.S. official. The agency took in an additional 561 on Monday, twice the recent average, according to a second official. Both spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss figures not yet publicly released.

It has put President Joe Biden in a difficult spot, blasted by Republicans for what they view as encouragement to illegal border crossers and by some Democrats over the prolonged detention of minors. It's also a challenge to his effort to overhaul the broader Trump policies that sought to curtail both legal and illegal immigration.

"The situation at the southwest border is difficult," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas conceded Tuesday in his most extensive remarks to date on the subject. "We are working around the clock to manage it and we will continue to do so. That is our job."

The number of migrants attempting to cross the border is at the highest level since March 2019, with Mayorkas warning that it is on pace to hit a 20-year peak.

The number of children crossing by themselves, mostly from Central America, appears to be surging in particular in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The Border Patrol took in 280 there alone on Monday.

The total of 561 unaccompanied minors from Monday offers a snapshot of how quickly conditions have changed along the border. That was up 60% from the daily average in February, one of the officials said. In May 2019, during the last surge, the one-day peak was 370 teens and children.

Children and teens crossing by themselves rose 60% from this January to more than 9,400 in February, according to the most recent statistics released publicly by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The Health and Human Services Department plans to open shelter facilities at Moffett Federal Airfield near San Francisco and in Pecos, Texas, to handle the flow. It is also looking to expand a facility in Donna, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, to hold 2,000.

Also, the Dallas Convention Center is scheduled to begin holding children as early as Wednesday with plans to accommodate up to 3,000. Another makeshift holding center in Midland, Texas, that opened last weekend for 700 children had 485 on Monday.

Some of the increase in adults is due to people who are repeatedly caught after being expelled under the public health order issued last year to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Other factors include economic upheaval caused by the pandemic and recent hurricanes that worsened living conditions in Central America. Officials say it's also likely that smugglers have encouraged people to try to cross under the new administration.

Mayorkas said the a surge in the number of children is a challenge for the Border Patrol and other agencies amid the coronavirus pandemic. But he rejected a Trump-era policy of sending them immediately back to Mexico or other countries.

"They are vulnerable children and we have ended the prior administration's practice of expelling them," he said.

Though there have been previous migrant surges, including under Trump, Republicans in Congress say that Biden's support for new immigration legislation and his decision to allow people to make legal asylum claims have become a magnet for migrants.

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At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Tuesday, Sen. Jim Inhofe held up a photo of a small crowd of demonstrators in Tijuana, Mexico, wearing matching T-shirts with the words "Biden, Please Let us in" that circulated widely on social media in recent days.

"They're all coming across the border, they're coming fast, and they're wearing Biden T-shirts," said the Oklahoma Republican.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy led a delegation of a dozen Republican lawmakers on Monday to the border in Texas and blamed the Biden administration for driving an increase in migrants by actions that include halting border wall construction and supporting legislation in Congress that would provide a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented people now in the country.

"The sad part about all of this is it didn't have to happen. This crisis was created by the presidential policies of this new administration," McCarthy said.

Biden pushed back in an interview Tuesday with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, noting previous surges under Trump and pointing out that his administration has been trying to discourage people from crossing while it works to restore an asylum system undermined by his predecessor. "I heard the other day that they're coming because they know I'm a nice guy. Yeah, well here's the deal. They're not."

Trump confronted a similar surge in 2019 even as he rushed to expand the border wall system along the border and forced people seeking asylum to do so in Central America or remain in Mexico. A year earlier, he forcibly separated migrant children from their families as part of a zero-tolerance campaign that became one of the most significant political challenges of his administration.

The Biden administration is allowing migrants who are under 18 years old and cross by themselves to remain in the country while the government decides whether they have a legal claim to residency, either under asylum law or for some other reason.

Mayorkas noted that 80% of the minors, most of whom are from the three Northern Triangle countries of Central America, have relatives in the U.S. and 40% have a parent. "These are children being reunited with their families who will care for them," he said.

The Biden administration last week ended a Trump policy that made relatives reluctant to contact HHS to retrieve children for fear of being deported themselves.

Besides setting up new temporary facilities to house migrant children, it is also backing aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to try to stem the flow of migrants at the source.

Mayorkas took swipes at the previous administration for dismantling an asylum system that would have enabled a more "orderly" immigration process, cutting aid to Central America and failing to vaccinate Border Patrol agents.

Also, he said the Biden administration is working to make the asylum process shorter and to make it possible to petition from an applicant's home country rather than make a dangerous and uncertain journey. "We have no illusions about how hard it is," he said, "and we know it will take time."

Associated Press writers Ron Nixon and Colleen Long contributed to this report. Spagat reported from San Diego.

Tiger Woods returns to Florida to recover from car crash

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

Tiger Woods is back at home in Florida to resume his recovery from career-threatening leg injuries he suffered when his SUV ran off a road and down a hill in the Los Angeles suburbs last month.

"Happy to report that I am back home and continuing my recovery," Woods said in a tweet posted Tuesday night. "I am so grateful for the outpouring of support and encouragement that I have received over the past few weeks."

Woods was injured Feb. 23, two days after the Genesis Invitational at Riviera. He was on his way to a television shoot for GolfTV a little after 7 a.m. when his SUV crashed into a median, rolled over and ended up on its side near a steep road known for wrecks, authorities said. He had to be pulled out through the windshield.

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He had a lengthy surgery that day at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center for shattered tibia and fibula bones of his lower right leg in multiple locations. Those were stabilized with a rod in his tibia. Additional injuries to the bones in his foot and ankle required screws and pins.

He was transferred to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for follow-up procedures.

Woods thanked the medical staff at both hospitals for taking care of him.

"I will be recovering at home and working on getting stronger every day," Woods said in the statement.

A dozen or so players at the Workday Championship in Florida wore black trousers and red shirts — the Sunday colors of Woods for his record-tying 82 victories on the PGA Tour — in the final round.

Woods has stayed in touch through text messages, sending them to Bryson DeChambeau ahead of his Bay Hill victory and to Justin Thomas, one of his closest friends in golf, ahead of his victory in The Players Championship on Sunday.

Rory McIlroy suggested in an interview with Jimmy Fallon that Woods might be headed home to Florida.

"He's doing better," McIlroy said. "I think all the guys have reached out to him. Hopefully if things go well over the next week or so, he might be able to get home and start recovery at home, which would be great for him. See his kids, see his family.

"But yeah, he's doing better. And I think all of us are wishing him a speedy recovery at this point."

McIlroy and Thomas are among those who live near Woods in Jupiter, Florida.

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

Uber to give UK drivers minimum wage, pension, holiday pay

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Uber is giving its U.K. drivers the minimum wage, pensions and holiday pay, following a recent court ruling that said they should be classified as workers and entitled to such benefits.

The ride hailing giant's announcement Tuesday comes after it lost an appeal last month at the U.K. Supreme Court following a yearslong court battle. The court's decision holds wider implications for the country's gig economy.

Uber said it's extending the benefits immediately to its more than 70,000 drivers in the U.K. Drivers will earn at least the minimum wage, which currently stands at 8.72 pounds (\$12.12), after accepting a trip request and expenses, and will still be able to earn more.

Drivers will also get holiday pay equal to about 12% of their earnings, paid every two weeks. And they'll be enrolled in a pension plan that both they and the company will pay into.

"This is an important day for drivers in the U.K.," Uber's regional general manager for Northern and Eastern Europe, Jamie Heywood, said in a filing to the SEC. He noted that drivers will still be able to work on a flexible basis. "Uber is just one part of a larger private-hire industry, so we hope that all other operators will join us in improving the quality of work for these important workers who are an essential part of our everyday lives."

The drivers who filed the case welcomed the news but said it's not enough.

Uber has "arrived to the table with this offer a day late and a dollar short, literally," James Farrar and Yaseen Aslam of the App Drivers And Couriers Union said in a statement. They said the changes stopped short of the Supreme Court's ruling that pay should be calculated from when drivers log on to the app until they log off. And they said the company can't decide by itself the expense base for calculating the minimum wage, which should be based on a collective agreement.

Farrar and Aslam had taken their case to an employment tribunal, which found drivers are not independent contractors, but should be designated workers, which under British law means their work terms are more casual than employees but still come with some benefits. Uber lost two rounds of appeals before the Supreme Court decision.

Providing more benefits for its drivers is likely to raise costs for San Francisco-based Uber, which already was struggling to make a profit and had previously run into regulatory trouble in London, where authorities

had sought to revoke its license. It said, however, that it wasn't adjusting its earnings forecast for the year.

The move in the U.K. contrasts with the outcome of a November ballot proposition in California, where voters passed an initiative exempting app-based ride-hailing and food delivery services from classifying their drivers as employees instead of contractors.

For all of AP's tech coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/apf-technology>

Follow Kelvin Chan at www.twitter.com/chanman

US: Putin approved operations to help Trump against Biden

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized influence operations to help Donald Trump in last November's presidential election, according to a declassified intelligence assessment that found broad efforts by the Kremlin and Iran to shape the outcome of the race but ultimately no evidence that any foreign actor changed votes or otherwise disrupted the voting process.

The report released Tuesday from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence represents the most detailed assessment of the array of foreign threats to the 2020 election. These included efforts by Iran to undermine confidence in the vote and harm Trump's re-election prospects as well as Moscow operations that relied on Trump's allies to smear Joe Biden, the eventual winner.

Despite those threats, though, intelligence officials found "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to interfere in the 2020 US elections by altering any technical aspect of the voting process, including voter registration, ballot casting, vote tabulation, or reporting results."

The report is the latest official affirmation of the integrity of the election, even as Trump supporters continue to make false claims of interference, from foreign or domestic actors, and refuse to accept Biden's victory. Multiple courts and even Trump's own Justice Department refuted claims of widespread fraud. The document makes clear that even while Trump has cried foul about the legitimacy of the election, intelligence officials believe Russia sought to influence people close to Trump as a way to tip the election in his favor.

The report wades into the politically charged task of ferreting out which foreign adversaries supported which candidates during the 2020 election, an issue that dominated headlines last year. Trump, whose 2016 campaign benefited from hacking by Russian intelligence officers and a covert social media effort, seized on an intelligence assessment from August that said China preferred a Biden presidency — even though the same assessment also said Russia was working to boost Trump's own candidacy by disparaging Biden.

Tuesday's report, however, says China ultimately did not interfere on either side and "considered but did not deploy" influence operations intended to affect the outcome. U.S. officials say they believe Beijing prioritized a stable relationship with the U.S. and did not consider either election outcome as advantageous enough for it to risk the "blowback" that would ensue if it got caught with interfering.

The primary threats instead came from Russia and Iran, albeit with different intentions and through different means, according to intelligence officials.

In the case of Russia, the report says, Russia sought to undermine Biden's candidacy because it viewed his presidency as opposed to the Kremlin's interests, though it took some steps to prepare for a Democratic administration as the election neared.

The report also says Putin authorized influence operations aimed at denigrating Biden, boosting Trump, undermining confidence in the election and exacerbating social divisions in the U.S.

Central to that effort was reliance on proxies linked to Russian intelligence "to launder influence narratives" by using media organizations, U.S. officials and people close to Trump to push "misleading or unsubstantiated" allegations against Biden.

Intelligence officials did not single out any Trump ally in that effort. But longtime associate Rudy Giuliani met multiple times with Ukrainian lawmaker Andrii Derkach, who in 2020 released heavily edited recordings of Biden in an effort to link the Democratic nominee to unsubstantiated corruption allegations. U.S.

officials have said they regard Derkach as an "active Russian agent," and Tuesday's report said Putin is believed to have "purview" over his activities.

Notably, though, Russia was not as aggressive as in past election cycles in trying to hack election infrastructure. The report says Russian cyber operations that targeted state and local government networks last year were probably not election-focused and were instead part of a broader effort to target U.S. and global entities.

Iran, meanwhile, carried out its own influence campaign aimed at harming Trump's re-election bid, an effort U.S. officials say was probably approved by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

One "highly targeted operation" — the subject of an October news conference by then-Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe and FBI Director Christopher Wray — involved a flurry of emails to Democratic voters in battleground states that falsely purported to be from the far-right group Proud Boys and threatened the recipients if they didn't vote for Trump.

Iran's efforts, which officials say were more aggressive than in past elections and continued even after the contest was over, were focused on sowing discord in the U.S., likely because Tehran believed that would hurt Trump's re-election chances.

Though Iran sought to exploit vulnerabilities on state election websites, and did "compromise US entities associated with election infrastructure as a part of a broad targeting effort across multiple sectors worldwide," it did not attempt to manipulate votes or affect election infrastructure, the report concluded.

The 15-page document is a declassified version of an election interference report that was provided to Trump on Jan. 7, one day after a riot at the U.S. Capitol that occurred as Congress was gathering to certify the election results.

A separate document released Tuesday from the departments of Justice and Homeland Security reached a similar conclusion about the integrity of the election, saying there was no evidence any foreign actor had changed votes.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Battle over Floyd's 2019 arrest highlights key trial issue

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A lawyer for the former Minneapolis police officer who pressed his knee against George Floyd's neck wants to bring up Floyd's history of drug use and a previous arrest in an effort to show jurors that Floyd was partly to blame for his own death.

A prosecutor says it's irrelevant and that Derek Chauvin's lawyer is trying to smear Floyd to excuse his client's actions. Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter.

Now it's up to Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill to decide the critical question of how much the high-profile trial will revolve around Floyd's own actions on May 25, when the Black man was declared dead after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against his neck for about nine minutes. Floyd's death, captured on a widely seen bystander video, set off weeks of sometimes-violent protests across the country and led to a national reckoning on racial justice.

The judge previously rejected Chauvin's attempt to tell the jury about Floyd's May 2019 arrest — a year before his fatal encounter with Chauvin — but heard fresh arguments Tuesday from both sides. He said he would rule on the request Thursday.

Defense attorney Eric Nelson argued that new evidence makes the earlier arrest admissible: Drugs were found last December during a second search of the car Floyd was in, and were found in a January search of the squad car into which the four officers attempted to put Floyd.

He also argued the similarities between the encounters are relevant: Both times, as officers drew their guns and struggled to get Floyd out of the car, he called out for his mother, claimed he had been shot before and cried, and put what appeared to be pills in his mouth. Both searches turned up drugs in the cars. Officers noticed a white residue outside his mouth both times, although that has not been explained.

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In the first arrest, several opioid pills and cocaine were found. An autopsy showed Floyd had fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system when he died.

"The similarities are incredible. The exact same behavior in two incidents, almost one year apart," Nelson said.

Paramedics who examined Floyd in 2019 warned him that his blood pressure was dangerously high, putting him at risk for a heart attack or stroke, and took him to a hospital for examination. Nelson argued that shows Floyd knew that swallowing drugs might result in going to the hospital rather than jail.

But prosecutor Matthew Frank argued that evidence from the 2019 arrest was prejudicial. He said the defense wants it as a backdoor way of depicting Floyd as a bad person. He called it "the desperation of the defense to smear Mr. Floyd's character, to show that what he struggled with an opiate addiction like so many Americans do, is really evidence of bad character."

And he argued that the only relevant thing in Floyd's death is how he was handled by Chauvin and the other officers.

"What these officers were dealing with is what they were responsible for," Frank said. "What is relevant to this case is what they knew at the scene at this time."

Cahill said he would stop the defense "very quickly" from suggesting at trial that Floyd didn't deserve sympathy because he used drugs.

"You don't just dirty up someone who has died in these circumstances as a defense," he said. But he said he would weigh the defense's argument that alleged drug use during the 2019 arrest that led to "a hypertensive emergency" is relevant to what may have caused Floyd's death in 2020.

"I think that's, that's the only relevance I see," Cahill said.

One legal expert said he saw legitimate grounds for Cahill to allow the 2019 arrest at trial given the evidence found in the follow-up searches of the cars. But he said it also could unfairly prejudice the jury against Floyd.

"The problem is, it's not possible to do one without doing the other," said Ted Sampsell-Jones, a professor at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law. "The evidence does have some legitimate relevance, but it also carries a significant potential for unfair prejudice. It's a difficult evidence problem that Judge Cahill will have to carefully balance."

Michael Brandt, a local defense attorney, said the new evidence would bolster the argument that Floyd had a "propensity for ingesting pills when being arrested" and that he knew that it could be a way to stay out of jail. That might be enough for jurors to pass up convicting Chauvin on the most serious charges, Brandt said.

The question of Floyd's drug use has played out in jury selection, with prosecutors gauging prospective jurors' attitudes.

One person picked for the jury, a Black man in his 30s, said he didn't judge drug users more harshly than others.

"My opinion on them is no different than my opinion on anybody else. It's just something they are struggling with, they are possibly trying to get through," he said.

Another, a white man in his 30s, said he'd heard news stories that Floyd may have been under the influence of drugs, but when asked what he thought about it said he didn't think it should affect the case.

"Whether you are under the influence of drugs doesn't determine whether you should be living or dead," he said.

Nine jurors had been seated through Monday, including five who are white; one who is multiracial; two who are Black; and one who is Hispanic. The jurors include six men and three women and range in age from their 20s to their 50s.

No new jurors were selected on Tuesday, with several dismissed for hardship reasons, including a substitute teacher and a woman who has a child under age 1. One man was dismissed because he sees daily headlines about the case in software applications job for a major news organization, and another after he kept explaining that he could only try but not guarantee that he could presume Chauvin's innocence.

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The selection process continues until 14 people — 12 to deliberate and two alternates — are seated. Opening statements are expected March 29 unless the process isn't complete by then.

Cahill is considering a defense motion to postpone the trial after Nelson argued that a \$27 million settlement to the Floyd family — announced by the city of Minneapolis last week in the midst of jury selection — unfairly tainted the jury pool.

Cahill planned on Wednesday to re-interview the seven jurors who had been seated by that point to determine whether they could continue to serve.

Three other former officers face an August trial in Floyd's death on charges of aiding and abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

CBS says 'The Talk' staying off air after racism talk

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CBS says its daytime show "The Talk" will stay on hiatus for another week after a discussion about racism involving co-host Sharon Osbourne went off the rails last week.

The network said in a statement that it is committed to "a process where all voices are heard, claims are investigated and appropriate action is taken where necessary."

Osbourne reacted angrily last week during a discussion about British television personality Piers Morgan, who she describes as a friend. Morgan left the "Good Morning Britain" show after he said he didn't believe Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, when she said in an interview that she had considered suicide when unhappy with her life in Britain's royal family.

A fellow host, Sheryl Underwood, said to Osbourne on the show last Wednesday, "what would you say to people who may feel that, while you're standing by your friend, it appears that you gave validation or safe haven to something that he has uttered that is racist, even if you don't agree?" Underwood, like Markle, is Black.

Osbourne replied angrily, using words that were bleeped out, and said she felt like she was being placed on "the electric chair" for having a friend that some people think is racist.

The emotional discussion continued after a commercial break. At one point Osbourne said to Underwood, "don't try to cry. If anyone should be crying, it should be me."

Osbourne claimed later that the show's producers told her offscreen that CBS had ordered she be confronted about her support for Morgan. CBS has not addressed that accusation.

The network would not say precisely what claims it is investigating. CBS said in a statement that it "is committed to a diverse, inclusive and respectful workplace across all of our productions."

Journalist Yashar Ali posted a story on Tuesday saying that Osbourne, wife of rock star Ozzy Osbourne who came to fame during MTV's series about the family, has a history of making culturally offensive and bullying comments.

In response to that story, Osbourne spokesman Howard Bragman said she is "disappointed but unfazed and hardly surprised by the lies, the recasting of history and the bitterness coming out at this moment."

CBS said the show is expected back on the air next Tuesday.

Jesuits in US pledge \$100M for racial reconciliation

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

The U.S.-based branch of the Jesuits has unveiled ambitious plans for a "truth and reconciliation" initiative in partnership with descendants of people once enslaved by the Roman Catholic order. The Jesuits pledge to raise \$100 million within five years with a broader goal of reaching \$1 billion from an array of donors in pursuit of racial justice and racial healing.

Even the smaller amount represents the largest financial pledge thus far from a U.S. religious institution, as a variety of them nationwide seek to make amends for their past involvement in slavery and racial

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oppression.

Partnering with the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States in the initiative is the GU272 Descendants Association, which represents the descendants of 272 enslaved men, women and children sold by the Jesuit owners of Georgetown University to plantation owners in Louisiana in 1838.

Together, the two parties have formed the Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation to oversee fundraising and allocate grants. Already, the Jesuits have placed \$15 million in a trust that will finance the effort.

The foundation's acting president is Joe Stewart, one of more than 1,000 descendants of Isaac Hawkins, an enslaved man who was among those sold in 1838.

Stewart said many Americans understand the wrongs of slavery and segregation yet are divided over approaches to reconciliation and reparations.

"We hope what we've created here is an offer to join us in a peaceful and loving approach to removing your shame," Stewart said Tuesday. "There are a lot of people who want to be a part of change — we hope we're providing the answer to, 'What do I do?'"

The foundation's plan calls for the Jesuits to raise \$100 million through their own fundraising network, and the \$1 billion figure would be attained with support from corporations, foundations and the general public, Stewart said.

Atoning for its slaveholding past has been a recurring issue at Georgetown. The Washington, D.C., university's administration and student body both took steps in 2019 to extend financial support to descendants of the people sent to Louisiana.

Three years earlier, the president of the Jesuits' conference, the Rev. Tim Kesicki, had an initial meeting with Stewart to discuss a possible reconciliation project.

"Hearing what it felt like, that the church that baptized him had held his ancestors as slaves — it's a life-changing feeling," Kesicki said. "You can walk away, which is what we've done as a country, or you can embrace it."

That reckoning requires organizations and institutions examine their histories pertaining to slavery and acknowledge how their current status is built on that history.

Details on how the funds will be spent remain to be worked out. But Stewart said roughly half of the grant money would go to organizations and initiatives seeking to promote racial justice and reconciliation. Some other funds would provide scholarships and other educational support for descendants of the 272.

"We will have programs in three to five years," Stewart said. "But that will never be as important as what we do over the long run, the next 50 to 100 years."

"We're talking about dismantling the continuing legacy of slavery," he said. "The way to get there is bring the whole nation along and face the truth about that history."

Stewart said he and other leaders of the initiative do not consider it to be a form of reparations — a topic that has created conflict.

"We're taking a positive approach not based on individual stipends," he said. "It's transformative rather than payback."

Several other religious organizations in the U.S. have launched similar initiatives in the past two years, notably on the part of long-established Protestant churches that were active in the era of slavery.

The Episcopal Church has been the most active major denomination, and others, including the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, are urging congregations to consider similar steps.

The Minnesota Council of Churches cited a host of injustices, from mid-19th century atrocities against Native Americans to police killings of Black people, in launching a "truth and reparations" initiative last year engaging its 25 member denominations.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has not embraced the term "reparations" in its official policies. The word never appears in a 2018 pastoral letter condemning "the ugly cancer" of racism, though the document encourages support for programs "that help repair the damages caused by racial discrimination."

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Shannen Dee Williams, a history professor at Villanova University, is among several Black Catholics who have been urging the U.S. church to participate in reparations rather than leaving decisions on such actions up to individual Catholic institutions.

"I pray other religious orders of men and women, the U.S. bishops, and the Vatican will be moved to follow the U.S. Jesuits' example," she said via email. "The Church must formally acknowledge and apologize for its histories of slavery, segregation, and racial exclusion, and institutionalize the teaching of Black and Black Catholic history in all areas of church life."

Nkechi Taifa, a human rights attorney who serves on the National African American Reparations Commission, welcomed the Jesuits' announcement, but characterized it as a partial step.

"No amount of material resources will ever compensate for the horror that was done of ripping people from their families and literally selling them down the river to Louisiana," she said. "The harm was multifaceted; the remedy must be multifaceted as well."

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Advocates, some AGs wary of Purdue Pharma bankruptcy plan

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Some state attorneys general and opioid addiction activists pushed back Tuesday against a settlement offer from OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma, saying it didn't include enough money and goes too far in protecting the company and family members who own it from future liability.

A group of nearly half the state attorneys general said it was disappointed in the plan Purdue filed late Monday night in federal bankruptcy court and some said they would seek changes. The lukewarm reaction from them and others raised doubts about how soon the company could emerge from bankruptcy and begin to compensate victims.

"We think it's a step in the right direction, but we've got a long way to go," said Joe Rice, one of the lead lawyers representing local governments that have sued Purdue and other companies over the toll of opioids.

The \$10 billion plan calls for turning the Connecticut-based pharmaceutical giant into a new company, with its profits going toward efforts to combat the opioid crisis. Members of the Sackler family who own Purdue would contribute about \$4.3 billion.

A new public health-oriented arm of the transformed company would produce addiction treatment and overdose antidote drugs, and a trove of company documents would be made public.

Most of the money would go to trusts that would distribute it to state and local governments. They would be allowed to use it only on initiatives that address the opioid crisis, which has contributed to more than 470,000 deaths in the U.S. since 2000.

Tennessee Attorney General Herbert H. Slatery III, a Republican, offered only tentative support Tuesday for Purdue's plan. He said details remain to be ironed out on exactly how much money will go to state and local governments.

"While the Purdue Pharma plan filing represents a significant step toward providing crucial opioid abatement resources, Tennessee's support is still contingent on remaining unresolved issues," he said.

Some activists whose families have been hit hard by opioid addiction are upset about a provision of the plan that would prohibit lawsuits over opioid claims against the company, its owners and others, though protections like this are common in some areas of law, such as class-action cases. The list of who would be shielded from litigation over the toll of opioids was still in the works and not included.

Cynthia Munger, of Wayne, Pennsylvania, said Purdue's plan is too focused on providing legal protections for members of the Sackler family. Her son is in recovery from an addiction that began more than a decade ago when he was prescribed OxyContin for a shoulder injury as a high school baseball player, "The bankruptcy plan is a complete travesty!" she wrote in an email Tuesday.

Purdue has been negotiating its future through bankruptcy court for a year and a half with state and

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local governments, Native American tribes, groups representing individuals harmed directly by opioids and others. When it filed its reorganization plan late Monday night, Purdue said it has support from many of those interests.

A group representing victims in bankruptcy court is among those agreeing to the plan.

"Today marks an important step toward providing help to those who suffer from addiction," members of the Sackler family said in a statement. "And we hope this proposed resolution will signal the beginning of a far-reaching effort to deliver assistance where it is needed."

One of the major changes since Purdue sought bankruptcy protection in September 2019 is that it is now backing a fund to make payments to individuals harmed previously by opioids. Under the plan, victims and their families would share a pool of \$700 million to \$750 million. Checks would range from \$3,500, which most children who were born in opioid withdrawal would receive, to \$48,000 for survivors of those whose deaths were linked to OxyContin.

Scott Bickford, a lawyer representing the children, said he opposes the plan filed Monday because it does not spell out the process for determining which of his clients and other victims would qualify for payments.

"They say, 'We're not going to tell you who's eligible and who qualifies,'" Bickford said. "That's fundamentally unfair."

State attorneys general have long been divided over whether to support Purdue's plans, with nearly all the Republicans in favor and nearly all Democrats opposed.

On a Facebook Live video Tuesday, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, a Democrat, said the payment from Sackler family members was too little. She said it's possible the family would emerge with more money because of their extended payment schedule of up to 10 years.

"They shouldn't be allowed to keep their OxyContin fortune and walk away from this richer than they already are today," Healey said.

In recent letters to a congressional committee, Sackler family members said those who previously served on Purdue's board of directors had combined net assets of \$1.1 billion. That's just a fraction of the \$12 billion to \$13 billion family members received in transfers from the company over the years, according to earlier court filings. A lawyer said much of the transferred amount was consumed by taxes and reinvested in the company.

Healey said she intends to try to force Purdue, which pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges last year over its role in the opioid crisis, to amend its plan.

The plan is subject to approval from a bankruptcy court judge. Groups with claims against Purdue can vote on it by July 14, but there is no clear threshold for how much support it needs.

Follow Mulvihill at <http://www.twitter.com/geoffmulvihill>

In Pennsylvania, Biden showcases aid to small businesses

By JOSH BOAK, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

CHESTER, Pa. (AP) — President Joe Biden turned up at a minority-owned flooring business in suburban Philadelphia on Tuesday to highlight how his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package can help small businesses and to put a face on those who have struggled throughout the pandemic.

The visit to Smith Flooring, Inc. was Biden's first stop in a cross-country administration roadshow — also involving his vice president and his wife — designed to publicize, and take credit for, the virus relief package.

It "took some loud, strong voices to get this done," Biden said, making a subtle dig at Republicans during his visit to the small union shop that will benefit from the relief. "And it's not like it passed with 100 votes. It was close."

While Biden was in Pennsylvania for his first stop on the "Help is Here" tour, Vice President Kamala Harris and husband Doug Emhoff were reinforcing the small business theme Tuesday with stops in Colorado.

With Harris and Emhoff taking notes during a business roundtable in Denver, Lorena Cantarovici, who began making empanadas in her garage after emigrating from Argentina, told of how her small shop

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grew over the years into three Maria Empanada locations but then was forced to lay off workers when the coronavirus struck.

She said 80% of her team came back through previous relief programs but it could take two years to get back to full capacity and "recover all this loss." Harris and Emhoff did their part by departing with empanadas in tow.

Gabriela Salazar, whose Colorado Artisans represents more than 100 artisans in Denver, estimated more than 90% of those artisans are unemployed or collecting unemployment. Salazar, a small business owner for 30 years, told Harris that help from the Small Business Administration has "kept me afloat but more is needed."

In Pennsylvania, meanwhile, Smith Flooring had 23 employees during peak times but currently is employing 12 workers. It is using the loan to help retain workers and upgrade technology. Borrowers are eligible for forgiveness if they meet certain requirements, including devoting at least 60% of the proceeds to payroll expenses.

In his chat with the owners of Smith Floors, Biden repeatedly asked "what else" they thought his administration should be doing to help businesses like theirs.

In Washington, the Senate confirmed Isabel Guzman, Biden's pick to lead the Small Business Administration on Tuesday. She is expected to play a key role in implementing the relief bill.

Biden is trying to showcase how the aid package will bring transformational change to the nation by halving child poverty, fueling record levels of hiring and pumping money to parents, schools and state and local governments. It's a sharp turn from the start of the Biden administration, when vaccination goals were relatively modest and Americans were warned the country might not return to normal until Christmas.

The Biden administration estimates that 400,000 small businesses have closed because of the pandemic and millions more are barely surviving. His aid package includes a \$28 billion grant program to support restaurants and drinking establishments. It also includes \$15 billion in flexible grants.

The visit to Smith Flooring was meant to drive home that point. The business saw revenue fall about 20% during the pandemic. It recently qualified for a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan during a two-week window in which the Biden administration focused the program exclusively on helping businesses with 20 or fewer employees.

Harris also held a virtual chat with the operators of a Fort Lupton, Colorado, vaccine clinic.

The second day of the vice president's tour to publicize the virus relief was disrupted because of a mechanical issue with the government plane that flew the vice president to Las Vegas and Los Angeles on Monday. A smaller backup plane was sent to fly her to Denver, relegating most of her staff, Secret Service and a small group of reporters to fly on a cavernous cargo plane.

Because of the plane issue, Harris scratched her plan for her visit to the vaccine clinic, Plan De Salud Del Valle Inc., and instead spoke with the clinic's staff over Zoom. She praised their work, making particular note of the clinic's focus on helping minority communities get vaccinated.

"The President and I from the beginning of this have made it one of our highest priorities to make sure that we are taking into account racial disparities, and that we supply folks on the ground with the resources you need so that we have equitable outcomes," she said.

Superville reported from Denver and Madhani from Chicago.

Battling bigness: Congress eyes action against monopolies

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The battle against bigness is building. Whether it's beer, banks or book publishing, lawmakers are targeting major industries they say have become so concentrated that they're hurting competition, consumers and the economy.

The economic dislocation of the pandemic has laid bare the struggles of small businesses unable to compete with corporate giants that have been able to capitalize on the new order. Experts and lawmakers

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are throwing out stunning stats:

The four biggest airlines control about 65% of U.S. passenger traffic, five giant healthcare insurers control an estimated 45% of the market, pharmaceuticals are dominated by three major companies, the top four banks control about 44% of the market, the so-called Big Five book publishers control some 80% of the U.S. book market, and Google alone accounts for about 90% of web searches worldwide.

Beer and a burger? Four companies are estimated to control 80% of U.S. meat-packing; the top four brewers and importers control about 76% of the U.S. beer market.

Congress, federal regulators and states had already been putting Big Tech companies under intense scrutiny for nearly two years and even suing some for antitrust. Now with Democrats in the majority in Congress and President Joe Biden seemingly prepared to act on an anti-monopoly agenda, the focus is widening to the rest of corporate America.

Critics say the corporate concentration is quickening, limiting consumers' choices, raising prices and eroding service.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., has put forward expansive legislation to overhaul antitrust law. It would make it harder for dominant companies to win regulators' approval of mergers and stretch the government's authority over competition in other ways. Klobuchar, who heads the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on competition policy, has launched a broad examination by the panel of monopoly concerns.

"At stake is nothing less than the future of our economy and the way of life that it supports," Klobuchar said at the panel's first hearing last week. "This is about saving capitalism and building an economy that works for all Americans."

At the extreme, experts don't expect the antitrust push to force breakups of big corporations, as is being called for by many critics of Big Tech. But legislative success could make it harder for the companies to make new acquisitions and shift the burden to them to prove that a given merger would be good for consumers. Right now the onus is on the government to prove a merger would be bad.

On Tuesday, the Federal Trade Commission singled out one industry, Big Pharma, to be subjected to a tougher stance on weighing proposed mergers. Citing proliferating mergers and "skyrocketing" drug prices, new acting FTC chair Rebecca Kelly Slaughter said, "It is imperative that we rethink our approach toward pharmaceutical merger review. We intend to take an aggressive approach to tackling anticompetitive pharmaceutical mergers."

The current drift toward bigness began with a merger boom in the 1980s in corporate America that fattened profits for the dominant companies. Decisions by both Democratic and Republican administrations over the past 15 years have allowed most big mergers to sail through.

With anti-monopoly sentiment having a moment, some observers see possible bipartisan agreement on new legislation, with Klobuchar's blueprint a likely starting point to be pushed and pulled. Democrats are mindful that the Senate is split 50-50 with Republicans, and their one-vote margin depends on a tiebreaker by Vice President Kamala Harris. That dictates reaching for compromise, as it would likely take the support of at least 10 Republicans to make new antitrust law.

"We have a monopoly problem in the U.S.," said Allen Grunes, who led merger investigations at the Justice Department as an antitrust attorney. "It's not going to be perfect; it's not going to be easy. But I think there's a reasonable chance of bipartisan agreement."

"Is it a tweak or is it a big reform? Something's going to happen," said Grunes, now an attorney with Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck in Washington.

George Hay, a law professor and antitrust expert at Cornell University, wonders, "God knows what somebody's going to tack onto it. It opens up the floodgates."

Republicans express concern over runaway concentration of corporate power and stress their belief in competition to keep the economy vibrant. But hold on, some are saying, let's not punish bigness for its own sake; better to look at each case individually. They say big companies can bring efficiencies of scale, reduce prices and create jobs.

Industry executives can be expected to make similar arguments when they weigh in on Klobuchar's

legislation at upcoming hearings and mount a lobbying blitz. So far Corporate America hasn't spoken out publicly on the new antitrust initiative.

Republican lawmakers are denouncing a new school of antitrust thought, gaining currency among Democrats, that looks beyond the impact of big-company market dominance on consumer prices to its broader effects on industries, employees and communities.

Biden has named a legal scholar who's an adherent of this school, called "hipster antitrust" by its detractors, as a top presidential adviser on competition. And he's expected to name another to a seat on the Federal Trade Commission; the moves signal a possibly tough stance for Biden on antitrust. He said as a candidate that breaking up Big Tech companies was something that should be considered.

With this approach, Democrats are seeking to use antitrust law not to promote competition but to advance social or environmental goals, the Republicans contend.

"What we need now is not a sweeping transformation of the antitrust laws," Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, the Judiciary panel's senior Republican, said at the hearing. "Rather, this moment calls for ... (federal) agency leaders with the resources and the will to vigorously enforce the laws we have."

As a moderate Democrat, Klobuchar may be looking to try on Republican President Teddy Roosevelt's "Trustbuster" mantle. Her book coming out next month is titled "Taking on Monopoly Power from the Gilded Age to the Digital Age."

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., predicts: "A runaway bestseller."

Follow Marcy Gordon at <https://twitter.com/mgordonap>

Gunmen kill at least 58 in attack on Niger market sellers

By DALATOU MAMANE Associated Press

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Gunmen on motorcycles attacked a group of civilians returning from market day in a volatile corner of Niger, leaving at least 58 people dead and then burning granaries to the ground, the government said Tuesday.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for Monday's massacres, though extremists belonging to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara group are known to be active in the Tillaberi region where the villages were attacked.

The victims were returning home from a large livestock market in Banibangou, near Niger's troubled border with Mali. The suspected extremists also destroyed nearby granaries that held valuable food stores.

The announcement was read on Niger state television Tuesday evening by government spokesman Abdourahmane Zakaria, who declared three days of national mourning for the victims.

Monday's attacks underscore the enormous security challenges facing Niger's new president, Mohamed Bazoum, who won the election in late February to succeed outgoing leader Mahamadou Issoufou.

Not only are jihadis active in the Tillaberi region, but the counterterrorism offensives against those extremists have helped given rise to ethnic militias, analysts say. Intercommunal tensions have been exacerbated as a result, particularly near the border between Mali and Niger.

Monday's attack echoed a January massacre that left 100 people dead in two villages also in the Tillaberi region that hadn't been claimed by any extremist group or militia.

Extremists staged mass attacks on Niger's military in the Tillaberi region, killing more than 70 in December 2019 and more than 89 in January 2020. It's near the area where four U.S. Special Forces soldiers were killed along with five Nigerien colleagues in 2017.

Associated Press writer Krista Larson in Dakar, Senegal contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: What's behind some Chauvin jury questions?

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

Potential jurors in the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer accused in George Floyd's death have

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been asked many predictable questions. Attorneys from both sides have asked how they feel about the Black Lives Matter movement, and about police. They ask how they felt when they saw the video showing Derek Chauvin with his knee on Floyd's neck.

But some questions are less pointed, and their reasoning more subtle: Have you ever had to resolve conflict? Have you ever been certain you were right only to find out you were wrong?

The Associated Press asked legal experts to decode some of those questions. The experts are former Ramsey County (Minnesota) Attorney Susan Gaertner, now with the law firm Lathrop GPM in Minneapolis; Ted Sampsell-Jones, professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota; and Peter Joy, professor at the Washington University School of Law in St. Louis.

DEFENSE QUESTION: HAVE YOU EVER BEEN CERTAIN YOU WERE RIGHT, ONLY TO LATER REALIZE YOU WERE WRONG?

Few cases in recent history have received as much attention as Floyd's death. The experts agreed that Chauvin's attorneys are trying to identify potential jurors who will be open to making a decision based on the evidence, not any preconceived beliefs.

"A juror with an open mind is the next best thing to a juror that leans in your direction," Joy said. Gaertner said the question also addresses whether someone can "listen to all the evidence and realize perhaps that it wasn't really that open and shut."

PROSECUTOR QUESTION: DO YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO USES HARD DRUGS, AND WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF PEOPLE WHO USE HARD DRUGS?

The defense is expected to argue that Floyd's drug use contributed to his death. An autopsy showed Floyd had fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system. The experts agreed that prosecutors want to avoid jurors with strongly negative views of drug users.

Gaertner said that as a prosecutor, "You don't want the jury judging the victim, you want the jury judging the defendant." Joy said the question seeks to weed out potential jurors who will "devalue his (Floyd's) life because he used drugs."

DEFENSE QUESTION: HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN A POSITION WHERE YOU HAD TO RESOLVE CONFLICT?

For Chauvin's side, acquittal is the obvious goal, but the next best thing is a hung jury.

"Because a jury verdict has to be unanimous, you want any potential juror who might be in favor of acquittal to be able to hold their own and try to sway the rest of the jury," Gaertner said.

Sampsell-Jones, who also works as an attorney, recalled working with a jury selection consultant for a major federal trial in 2017. He said the consultant sought out very specific personality traits.

"Opinionated. Contrarian," Sampsell-Jones said. "Someone who will sit there for three days and refuse to budge. There aren't many people like that. Most people eventually give in."

PROSECUTOR QUESTION: WOULD YOU TRUST POLICE OFFICERS' TESTIMONY OVER TESTIMONY OF OTHER WITNESSES?

This question is typically asked by defense lawyers, not prosecutors. The difference is that in this case, a police officer is the one on trial.

"There are a lot of people in the world who are really pro-police, the Blue Lives Matter people," Sampsell-Jones said. "You heard one juror say this already, basically, 'I think it's wrong to second-guess police.' They kicked that juror off."

DEFENSE QUESTION: DO YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL SECURITY IF YOU ARE SELECTED AS A JUROR?

The courthouse where the trial is taking place is heavily fortified, evidence of concerns about renewed unrest. Some potential jurors have worried aloud about what could happen to them or their families if Chauvin is acquitted.

"The argument would be that concern for that person's safety is going to interfere with their ability to be an impartial juror here," Joy said.

Sampsell-Jones said there's also the risk that a juror could vote to convict simply to spare the community from more violence.

"Those few days were terrifying for everyone who lived here," he said. "There is a very strong sense here in the community that we have to convict or there's going to be riots again. Obviously from the defense

perspective you don't want jurors to think that way."

DEFENSE QUESTION: HOW DO YOU VIEW THE MOVEMENT THAT FOLLOWED FLOYD'S DEATH?

Gaertner said defense attorneys want the case decided on its merits. "You do not want the jury to decide the case based on larger issues of racism and historical oppression of minorities," she said.

Sampsell-Jones noted that that the question is important to lawyers on both sides.

"A lot of the community sees this case as a hugely important symbolic case for social justice and police reform," he said. "Some people want conviction and some on the other side want acquittal because they think the riots were terrible and they hate Black Lives Matter, and they want this guy to be acquitted as a repudiation of those things."

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

'We are hungry': Lebanese protest worsening economic crisis

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Outraged protesters returned to the streets of Lebanon's capital Tuesday, blocking roads with burning tires and garbage containers as the currency continued to plummet to all-time lows and the country's financial crisis intensified.

The protests resumed — although in smaller numbers — following several days of relative calm as the Lebanese pound continued its slide, plunging to a new low of 15,000 to the U.S. dollar on the black market.

"Where are the people? Come down, we are hungry, we are fed up!" yelled Ahmad Shuman, a protester frustrated at the small number of people taking part in demonstrations.

In another Beirut neighborhood, small groups of young men, some driving scooters, pelted shop windows with stones and asked them to close in an apparent attempt to broaden public outrage and force shutdowns.

In a panic, motorists queued outside gas stations fearing rising prices. Police went around to some gas stations in the south of Lebanon to ensure no one was hoarding fuel in anticipation of price hikes.

The currency has lost 90% of its value since October 2019, when anti-government protests erupted, including more than 25% in the past few weeks alone. Inflation and prices of basic goods have skyrocketed in the country, which imports more than 80% of its basic goods.

Senior politicians, meanwhile, have refused to work together to form a new government that would implement the reforms needed to extract the nation from the crisis.

The currency crash has pushed more than half the population into poverty. It has also depleted foreign reserves, raising concerns that Lebanon's central bank will not be able to finance subsidies of some basic commodities, including fuel in coming weeks.

Meanwhile, lawmakers approved \$200 million in assistance from the central bank's shrinking foreign reserves to go to Lebanon's electricity company. The transfer is to cover fuel purchases for the next few weeks to prevent the country from plunging into darkness.

The crisis is posing the gravest threat to Lebanon's stability since the 1975-90 civil war. France's foreign minister warned last week that Lebanon is running out of time before total collapse, putting the blame squarely on the country's leaders whose refusal to come together to form a government has exacerbated the crisis.

U.S. State Department deputy spokeswoman Jalina Porter, speaking to reporters in Washington on Monday, said the U.S. is concerned about developments in Lebanon and the apparent inaction of the country's leadership in the face of multiple ongoing crises.

"Lebanon's political leaders need to put aside their partisan brinkmanship and form a government that will quickly implement critical and long-needed reforms, restore investor confidence, and rescue the country's economy," she said.

Lebanon's government resigned in August following a massive explosion at Beirut's port that killed 211 people, wounded more than 6,000 and damaged entire neighborhoods in the capital.

Disagreements between President Michel Aoun, who is an ally of the militant group Hezbollah, and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, who is opposed to the group, have so far delayed the formation of a Cabinet. Hariri was chosen for the post in October.

Utah campaign against porn marches on with phone filter plan

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and SOPHIA EPPOLITO Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Conservative lawmakers in Utah have fired another salvo in their longtime campaign against online porn with a new requirement that all cellphones and tablets sold in the state automatically block pornography in a plan that critics call a significant intrusion on free speech.

Supporters and critics alike are now waiting to find out if new Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, will sign or veto a proposal that the GOP-controlled Legislature passed this month.

Cox hasn't indicated publicly which way he's leaning. His spokeswoman, Jennifer Napier-Pearce, said only in an email that Cox "will carefully consider this bill during the bill signing period." He has until March 25 to decide.

Supporters argue the restriction is a critical step to help parents keep explicit content away from kids — especially as more children have their own electronic devices and have been forced to spend more time online during the pandemic.

Combating porn is a perennial issue for Utah lawmakers who have previously mandated warning labels on print and online pornography and declared porn a "public health crisis."

Utah's generally conservative culture means racy mainstream magazines and lingerie catalogs can be considered risqué. Leaders of the predominant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faith have also drawn attention to what they consider the harms of pornography.

Even if Cox signs the measure, it wouldn't go into effect unless five other states also enacted similar laws, a provision added after manufacturers and retailers voiced concerns that it would be difficult to implement the filters for a single state.

There is some precedent for other states following Utah's example on porn — more than a dozen states advanced similar resolutions to declare porn a public-health crisis after the state became the first to do so in 2016.

If Cox signs the bill, Utah appears poised to become the first state to mandate filters on devices, according to two prominent technology experts and the bill's sponsor, though federal internet restrictions aimed at preventing kids from accessing porn were passed in the late 1990s and later stuck down in the courts.

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation, an anti-porn group, cheered the bill, saying that while many electronic devices come with filters installed, turning them on can be challenging for parents.

"Utah has passed a critical, common sense solution to help protect vulnerable children from accessing harmful pornographic content on phones and tablets," Executive Director Dawn Hawkins said in a statement. Adults would be able to turn off the filters if they chose.

Research has raised questions about how pornography shapes kids' attitudes about sex, and content filters can be an important tool in keeping children from being exposed before it's healthy, said Emily Rothman, a Boston University professor who has studied the issue.

But even more important is comprehensive sex education to counteract messages kids might get from porn, she said.

Moves to expand sex education face long odds in Utah, and this year a bill that would have required more discussion about consent in sexual encounters died at the state Legislature.

Republican Rep. Susan Pulsipher sponsored the pornography filter measure, though she acknowledged it isn't a complete solution.

"A child that wants to find it and tries to would probably be able to still. It's just one step in the right direction," she said.

She contends the measure passes constitutional muster because adults can deactivate the filters, but experts said it still raises several legal concerns.

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"You've basically got the state mandating the filtering of lawful content. That raises immediate First Amendment flags," said Samir Jain, policy director at the Center for Democracy and Technology, a Washington, D.C.-based internet policy group.

The bill as written could apply to any device "activated" in Utah, raising the possibility that it could require location tracking to activate filters on the phones of anyone coming into the state, Jain said.

The new porn filtering plan harkens back to the attempts struck down in the 1990s, and if it does go into effect, "my guess is a device manufacturer would go into court the next day and have the law enjoined," said David Greene, civil liberties director with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a San Francisco-based internet civil liberties group.

The U.S. does allow for some explicit materials to be restricted from minors, but it's a fine distinction that can require the courts to define, Greene said.

And he said no existing filters are that sophisticated: "It's not like you put a judge in your phone," he said.

The filters in the marketplace have also been known to block other types of content, such as nude art works, educational information and facts about sex and sexuality, said Mike Stabile, a spokesman for the Free Speech Coalition, an adult-entertainment trade group.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah said the bill is an overreach that imposes the same standards on everyone.

"Parental filters already exist," said attorney Jason Groth, "and every Utah parent can decide the level of access for their children."

Eppolito 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.

Google gets into sleep surveillance with new Nest Hub screen

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN RAMON, Calif. (AP) — Google's next internet-connected home device will test whether consumers trust the company enough to let it snoop on their sleep.

New sleep-sensing technology will be a key feature on Google's latest version of its Nest Hub, a 7-inch smart screen unveiled Tuesday. Like the previous generation, the \$100 Nest Hub can display pictures and video in addition to fielding questions and handling household tasks through Google's voice-activated assistant. It also doesn't feature a camera.

But the latest Nest Hub's new trick may help differentiate it from similar devices, such as Amazon's Echo Show, while also providing a springboard for Google to get more involved in helping people manage their health.

If you allow it, the device will also monitor your sleeping patterns from your bedside, negating the need to wear a fitness device or any other potentially bothersome gadget in bed. The feature, which Google intends to offer for free through at least this year, relies on a new chip Google calls Soli, which uses radar to detect motion, including the depth of a person's breathing.

The Nest Hub is supposed to generate weekly sleep reports with easy-to-understand breakdowns on the length and quality of sleep, how frequently the user gets up at night and snoring and coughing frequency, along with tips developed in consultation with the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

Google says it honed the technology by studying 15,000 sleeping people over a combined 110,000 nights.

That kind of help may sound appealing to the millions of people who have trouble sleeping. But the feature may also raise privacy concerns — especially given Google's long history of online surveillance to collect personal details such as interests, habits and whereabouts to help sell the digital ads that generate most of its revenue.

It also underscores Google's obvious intent to extend its tentacles into new areas of people's lives in its relentless quest to make more money, said Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital

Democracy, a consumer and privacy rights group.

"Google's goal is to monetize every cell of your body," Chester said.

The sleep sensing feature will remain free through the rest of this year, but Google could eventually sell it as a subscription service, acknowledged Ashton Udall, Google Nest's senior product manager.

The company may also eventually tweak the feature to work with its FitBit line of fitness devices, which Google took over in January. That \$2.1 billion purchase has raised concerns that Google could use those gadgets to peer more deeply into people's personal health.

Google is emphasizing the privacy protections built into the sleep sensing feature. For starters, users will have to turn it on themselves. The Nest Hub will also have controls that Google says will make it clear when sleep tracking is on and to make it easy to delete data from the device.

All audio will be kept on the device, meaning it won't be sent to Google's data centers, although other sleep information will be provided to generate the analysis and reports. None of the information collected through the sleep sensing feature will be used to sell ads, Udall said.

But Chester is skeptical about that pledge. Knowing an individual's sleeping patterns, for instance, could help Google know when a person is feeling anxious or sick, Chester said, and those insights could influence which ads to show.

EU regulator 'convinced' AstraZeneca benefit outweighs risk

By RAF CASERT and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union's drug regulator insisted Tuesday that there is "no indication" the AstraZeneca vaccine causes blood clots as governments around the world faced the grimmest of dilemmas: push on with a vaccine known to save lives or suspend its use over reports of clotting in some recipients.

The European Medicines Agency urged governments not to halt use of the vaccine at a time when the pandemic is still taking thousands of lives each day. And already there are concerns that even brief suspensions could have disastrous effects on confidence in inoculation campaigns the world over, many of which are already struggling to overcome logistical hurdles and widespread hesitancy about vaccines.

"We are still firmly convinced that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine in preventing COVID-19 with its associated risk of hospitalization and death outweigh the risk of the side effects," said Emer Cooke, the head of the agency.

Many scientists have argued that even the loss of a few days in vaccinating vulnerable people could be far costlier than the impact of any rare phenomenon.

But a cascading number of countries have taken a different view and locked away shots from the Anglo-Swedish company, awaiting the results of an EMA review, promised Thursday.

Sweden was the latest to do so Tuesday, choosing caution over speed, even as Cooke insisted "that at present there is no indication that vaccination has caused these conditions."

Highlighting the difficulty of making such decisions at a time when people are voraciously following the ups and downs of every vaccine candidate, Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell said that the risk, if it existed, was rare but the country's authorities "have felt compelled to pause AstraZeneca's vaccine" after receiving ever more reports of blood clots.

Europe has the luxury to be able to pick from several vaccine candidates — but the decision of whether to suspend use of the vaccine is still not an easy one on the continent where the virus has already killed over half a million people, is surging again and where the vaccination campaign has repeatedly stumbled.

The choice may be even more fraught elsewhere because many countries are relying heavily on AstraZeneca, which is cheaper and easier to handle than some other shots. The vaccine has so far played a huge role in the global initiative to ensure vaccines get to poorer countries known as COVAX.

For instance, when Congo decided to hold off on the vaccine, it put its entire campaign on hold before it even began since it has not yet received doses of any other shot. Somalia, by contrast, went ahead with its first shots of AstraZeneca on Tuesday — including one for the health minister, who received the jab publicly to reassure the nation about its safety.

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The AstraZeneca shot has already struggled to gain public trust after troubles with reporting of its data and concerns about its effectiveness in older people. More than half of the 15 million AstraZeneca doses delivered to the EU's 27 member states are still lying in storage, according to data compiled by the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.

The current debate could further erode confidence in the vaccine — and that skepticism could even spread to others.

"We are worried that there may be an effect on the trust of the vaccines. But our job is to make sure that the products that we authorize are safe," Cooke said.

The EMA chief noted that thousands of people across the EU develop blood clots every year for a variety of reasons and that there were no reports of increased clotting incidents in the clinical studies of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Still, experts would undertake a "very rigorous analysis" and make a recommendation Thursday.

The difficulty of the decision was clear in Thailand, the first country outside Europe to temporarily suspend use of the AstraZeneca vaccine, only to recant on Tuesday — when its prime minister received a dose.

"There are people who have concerns," Prayuth Chan-ocha said after getting the shot. "But we must believe doctors, believe in our medical professionals."

Many other countries in Asia have likewise shrugged off concerns, but Indonesia, a nation of over a quarter-billion people, halted use of the shot this week, saying it would wait for a World Health Organization report on the issue.

In addition to the EMA, AstraZeneca and the WHO have said there is no evidence the vaccine carries an increased risk of blood clots. There have been 37 reports of blood clots among the more than 17 million people who have received the vaccine across the EU and Britain, the company said.

"This is much lower than would be expected to occur naturally in a general population of this size and is similar across other licensed COVID-19 vaccines," the drugmaker said.

But the number of countries in the bloc that are sticking with the shot is falling after heavyweights like Germany, Italy, France and Spain all said they were suspending it.

That left Belgium — and a handful of others such as Poland, Romania and Greece — increasingly isolated in their insistence that halting the shots now would cause more harm than the side effects so hotly debated.

"When you know how the virus is making the rounds, it would be very imprudent to stop," Belgian Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke told VRT network early Tuesday.

Experts have noted that such concerns are inevitable in mass vaccination campaigns — with so many people getting shots, some are bound to get sick even if the vaccine is not to blame. That would mean "we'd have to incessantly interrupt campaigns during the coming months," Vandenbroucke said.

Still, the torrent of decisions casting doubt on the AstraZeneca vaccine despite assurances of experts is testing public opinion.

But Bogdan Greco, 26, who works in Romania's petroleum sector, was unfazed when he got his shot Tuesday.

"I'm pretty sure it's worth the risk," he said. "I don't think it's possible for the vaccine to create a worse reaction than the virus."

Frank Jordans reported from Berlin. AP reporters around the world contributed to this report.

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US VP Harris: 'status of women is the status of democracy'

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

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UNITED NATIONS (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris told the U.N.'s premiere global body fighting for gender equality that "the status of women is the status of democracy" and the Biden administration will work to improve both.

America's first female vice president quoted the late U.S. first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the drafting committee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1948, as saying: "Without equality, there can be no democracy."

Harris said in a virtual speech to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women's annual meeting that the exclusion of women in decision-making -- its focus this year -- is "a marker of a flawed democracy," stressing that their participation "strengthens democracy."

But she warned that democracy is "increasingly under great strain," with "a troubling decline in freedom around the globe" over the past 15 years, and experts saying the past year "was the worst on record for the global deterioration of democracy and freedom."

The Biden administration is committed to upholding "the democratic values" in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Harris said, "and we firmly believe that, when we work together globally, we can achieve the vision within it."

The decision to have Harris deliver the U.S. address marked a step up from the Trump administration's lower level representation at commission meetings, and reflected President Joe Biden's commitment to expanding the number of women in top decision-making jobs and to multilateralism after his predecessor's "America First" policy.

Harris said the U.S. is strengthening its engagement with the United Nations and the broader international system, pointing to its re-engagement with the U.N. World Health organization, rejoining the U.N. Human Rights Council and revitalizing its partnership with UN Women "to help empower women worldwide."

UN Women's Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at Monday's opening meeting of the commission, cited a number of positive developments including the increase in women ministers in the United States from 17 percent in 2020 under former president Donald Trump to 46 percent in Biden's Cabinet, "a historic high."

Harris pointed to other signs of progress: more women than men voting in every presidential election for the last 56 years, more women than ever before serving in the U.S. Congress, more women breadwinners, women becoming major decision-makers in local, state and national governments, and Biden last week appointing women to head two of America's 11 military combat commands.

But she said the COVID-19 pandemic "has threatened the economic security, the physical security and the health of women everywhere."

When women face obstacles to quality health care, worry about food for their families, live in poverty, are more vulnerable to gender-based violence, and disproportionately impacted by conflict and climate change, Harris said, it's harder for them "to fully participate in decision-making."

"Which, in turn, makes it that much harder for democracies to thrive," she said.

Nonetheless, Harris stressed the Biden administration's commitment to improving democracy and empowering women — and in another reversal from the Trump era to "partnering with all of you in the days and years ahead."

"Looking around the world, I am inspired by the progress that is being made," she said. "And I am proud to report that, while the United States still has work to do, we, too, are making progress -- and that women strengthen our democracy every day."

Venezuelan teen sells drawings on Twitter to buy food

By JUAN PABLO ARRÁEZ and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

BARQUISIMETO, Venezuela (AP) — Samuel Andrés Mendoza carefully chooses from dozens of colored pencils spread out on his kitchen table, humming a reggaeton song as he deftly applies contrast to the Dragon Ball anime character taking shape on his sketch pad.

It is not just a pastime anymore for the 14-year-old. Without his mother's knowledge, he began selling

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his drawings on his Twitter page to help the family get by and to pay for a special diet doctors say he needs in Venezuela's troubled economy.

"Hi. I'm Samuel, I'm selling my drawings for \$1 to help my mom with my diet, buy her a house and a shop so she won't work on the street and get sick with COVID-19 and buy peanut butter for me. Thank you, sir and madam," he tweeted along with photos of four drawings.

It caught the eye of many and he now has more than 15,000 followers, selling dozens of drawings he has worked up at a table between a worn-out couch and a rusting refrigerator in the small family home in Barquisimeto, about five hours west of Venezuela's capital, Caracas.

"The truth is I did not know that I was going to draw like that, but time has passed, and I have managed to paint for real," Samuel said this month, showing his finished drawing of Dragon Ball's Goku. "And here it is."

In a crisis-wracked country where workers earn an average of \$2 per month, his sales can make a big difference for a family budget strained by his need for high-protein foods to deal with a form of malnutrition.

Like millions of other Venezuelans, Samuel and his mother, Magdalena Rodríguez, emigrated in search of better conditions. They went to Colombia in 2019 when widespread power outages hit her homeland just as she learned of her son's diagnosis.

But they came home in December after she lost her job and found increasing prejudice against the growing number of Venezuelan migrants.

The mother of three now sells snacks from a table in Barquisimeto's main plaza. She also found work as a cleaner. Still, it has been difficult to afford the relatively expensive high-protein foods needed by her son, who also has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, a broad branch of the autism spectrum.

"It's not easy," Rodríguez said.

Rodríguez, 38, discovered Samuel's effort when he asked for her bank account information so that people could pay for his work.

Samuel, who said he began drawing at age 5, has an inclination for anime characters, but has also portrayed soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo and the animated SpongeBob SquarePants.

Venezuelan artist Oscar Olivares, who runs an art academy, saw Samuel's tweets and gave him a scholarship to study drawing. Social media followers have also gifted him a laptop, a set of artists' pencils — and peanut butter, a good source of protein.

Samuel, who said he may raise his prices as his skills advance, would like to make YouTube-style videos about videogames when he grows up.

"I'm proud of him, really. I don't have words," Rodríguez said. "But I do feel angry sometimes, I feel helpless, because I think that at his age, he should be studying, learning, and not wanting to work to help me, when I'm the one who has to do everything possible to give them comfort and nourishment."

Garcia Cano reported from Mexico City.

This story has been corrected to show that the teen's last name is Mendoza.

Gonzaga, Baylor dominate AP All-America teams

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Gonzaga and Baylor spent almost the entire season holding down the top two spots in the Top 25.

Makes sense they'd hold down a bunch of spots on The Associated Press All-America teams.

The Bulldogs' Corey Kispert and the Bears' Jared Butler led the way with first-team nods Tuesday from the national panel of 63 media members that vote each week in the AP Top 25 poll. They were joined by unanimous pick Luka Garza of Iowa, a two-time selection, along with Ayo Dosunmu of Illinois and Cade Cunningham of Oklahoma State.

Kispert and Butler had plenty of company, though.

The Bulldogs also landed big man Drew Timme and freshman sensation Jalen Suggs on the second

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team while Joel Ayayi was an honorable mention pick. The Bears had Davion Mitchell on the third team and MaCio Teague as an honorable mention.

"Thinking about me as a freshman coming to Baylor and not knowing what I'm getting myself into, having no expectations for how well I'm going to be or how good I'm going to be — it means a lot to come full circle," said Butler, the Big 12 player of the year and a third-team All-American last season.

It is the first time Baylor, which earned a No. 1 seed for the NCAA Tournament, has had a first-team All-American.

"These awards are just team awards," said Butler, who withdrew from the NBA draft to return for his junior year. "I wouldn't be here without my teammates just playing with me and giving me confidence. It's been nice."

Kispert also withdrew from the draft and also led his team to a No. 1 overall seed, along with helping the Bulldogs finish a perfect regular season. He joined Dan Dickau, Adam Morrison and Kelly Olynyk as first-team All-Americans from Gonzaga.

"He's the epitome of a college athlete. He's a poster child for the term student-athlete, great student, great ambassador for the program, our school and college athletics in general," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "It's all been because of the work, the time he's put in, and his growth physically and mentally. He's just an unbelievable guy."

So is Garza, the brilliant big man from Iowa, who came up two votes of being a unanimous choice last season. In fact, he's been so dominant that the school's career scoring leader will have his No. 55 jersey retired at the end of the season.

"He's the focal point of every defense every time we take the floor. The more tape that's on him, the tougher that gets for him," Hawkeyes coach Fran McCaffery said. "So I just have been really impressed with his relentlessness to continue to improve and to handle anything that comes his way."

Like the Hawkeyes, the Fighting Illini had never had a first-team pick until Dosunmu came along. The two-time All-Big Ten guard led them to the conference tournament title last weekend and a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tourney.

Joining those veterans — seniors Garza and Kispert, juniors Butler and Dosunmu — is Cunningham, the favorite to be chosen first overall in the NBA draft. The calm freshman forward helped engineer an upset of Baylor in the Big 12 tourney and will lead the fourth-seeded Cowboys into the NCAA Tournament.

"Oklahoma State, last year wasn't the year that they were proud of," Cunningham said, "but I know there's a bunch of guys that wanted to win and were going to do everything that it took to win. So having a group of guys like that, with the coach we have and staff we have, that's what I want to surround myself with."

SECOND TEAM

While the first team was full of upperclassmen, the second team belonged to college basketball's youth. There was Suggs, the freshman who led Gonzaga to high-profile wins over Kansas and Iowa early in the season, and Timme, the sophomore who went from key reserve to crucial starter for the West Coast Conference champs.

Joining them were a trio of post players: Kofi Cockburn of Illinois, Hunter Dickinson of Michigan and Evan Mobley of USC.

"Very proud of Evan, his development," Trojans coach Andy Enfield. "He's really improved as a player throughout the season and we are going to need him to play at a high level starting the end of this week."

THIRD TEAM

Baylor's Mitchell was joined on the third team by Quentin Grimes, the high-scoring guard from Houston; Herb Jones of Alabama; Cameron Krutwig of mid-major darling Loyola Chicago; and Chris Duarte of Oregon.

Just like the first- and second-team All-Americans, their teams also will be playing in the NCAA Tournament this week.

"You never want to take winning for granted," said Krutwig, a member of the Ramblers team that reached the Final Four in 2018. "We put a lot of hard work into it. But we were sitting there saying, 'There's so much more to go.'"

—

AP Basketball Writer John Marshall and AP Sports Writers Michael Marot and Stephen Hawkins contributed to this report.

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and http://www.twitter.com/AP_Top25

Yaphet Kotto of 'Live and Let Die,' 'Alien,' dies at 81

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Yaphet Kotto, the commanding actor who brought tough magnetism and stately gravitas to films including the James Bond movie "Live and Let Die" and "Alien," has died. He was 81.

Kotto's wife, Tessie Sinahon, announced his death Monday in a Facebook post. She said he died Monday in the Philippines. Kotto's agent, Ryan Goldhar, confirmed Kotto's death.

"You played a villain on some of your movies but for me you're a real hero and to a lot of people," wrote Sinahon.

Standing 6-foot-3-inches, Yaphet Frederick Kotto was a regular and compelling presence across films, television and Broadway beginning with the films "Nothing But a Man" (1964) and "The Thomas Crown Affair" (1968). He made his stage debut in a Boston production of "Othello." In 1969, he replaced James Earl Jones in the Pulitzer-winning "The Great White Hope" on Broadway. His big-screen breakthrough came as Lieutenant Pope in 1972's "Across 110th Street."

Raised in the Bronx and a descendent of Cameroonian royalty on his father's side, Kotto was best known for his infuriated FBI agent in "Midnight Run" who has his badge stolen by Robert De Niro, the James Bond villain Mr. Big in "Live and Let Die" and the technician Dennis Parker in 1979's "Alien."

"He's one of those actors who deserved more than the parts he got," wrote director Ava Duvernay on Twitter. "But he took those parts and made them wonderful all the same."

Kotto was nominated for an Emmy for his performance as Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in the 1977 television movie "Raid on Entebbe." In Paul Schrader's 1978 "Blue Collar," about Detroit auto workers, he starred alongside Richard Pryor and Harvey Keitel as the ex-convict Smokey James.

Kotto also co-starred in the 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger action film "The Running Man" and played Al Giardello from 1993 to 1999 on the NBC series "Homicide: Life on the Street."

"Memories and respect for Yaphet Kotto, whose film career was legend even before he came to Baltimore to grace our television drama," said David Simon, author of the book that launched the "Homicide" show. "But for me, he'll always be Al Giardello, the unlikeliest Sicilian, gently pulling down the office blinds to glower at detectives in his squadroom."

Kotto sometimes struggled with being typecast as a detective, and he lamented how many of his characters died in the end.

"I'm always called powerful, bulky or imposing," Kotto told the Baltimore Sun in 1993. "Or they say I fill up a room. I'm a 200-pound, 6-foot-3-inch Black guy. And I think I have this image of a monster. It's very difficult."

"I want to try to play a much more sensitive man. A family man," he added. "There is an aspect of Black people's lives that is not running or jumping."

Kotto is survived by his wife and six children.

AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy contributed to this report.

Researchers study impact of pandemic cancer screening pause

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

John Abraham's colonoscopy was postponed for several months because of the pandemic. When he finally got it, doctors found a growth too big to be removed safely during the scope exam. He had to wait several weeks for surgery, then several more to learn it had not yet turned cancerous.

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"I absolutely wonder if I had gotten screened when I was supposed to have, if this would have been different" and surgery could have been avoided, said Abraham, a mortgage banker in Peoria, Illinois.

Millions of colonoscopies, mammograms, lung scans, Pap tests and other cancer screenings were suspended for several months last spring in the United States and elsewhere as COVID-19 swamped medical care.

Now researchers are studying the impact, looking to see how many cancers were missed and whether tumors found since then are more advanced.

Already, there are hints of trouble. University of Cincinnati researchers found that when CT scans to check for lung cancer resumed in June, 29% of patients had suspicious nodules versus 8% in prior years.

Multiple studies suggest that fewer cancers were diagnosed last year, likely because of less screening. About 75 cancer organizations recently urged a return to prepandemic screening levels as soon as safely possible.

But tumors take years to develop, and some reports suggest that a few months' delay in screening for certain types of cancer may not have been as bad as feared. For example, researchers in the Netherlands found that a lapse in that country's mammography program did not lead to more cancers being found at a late stage after screening resumed.

The pandemic also bred some creative solutions, such as wider use of tests that can be done at home. In Philadelphia, a large church partnered with local doctors and used its drive-thru flu shot program to also pass out stool tests for colon cancer screening.

"We're not afraid to try anything as it relates to health and wellness," said the Rev. Leroy Miles of Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church. "The women were encouraging men to get the screening, saying, 'I got my mammogram.' And I'm saying, 'ma'am, you have a colon too.'"

SCREENING'S MERITS

Screening tests differ in their risks and benefits, and health experts have long debated who should get which ones and how often. The pandemic lapse may serve as a "natural experiment" to see their value in modern times versus what's known from studies done long ago.

Any difference in deaths may not be seen for years, and early detection is only one factor in survival. Treatment also matters and it was hurt by pandemic delays too.

Dr. Ned Sharpless, director of the U.S. National Cancer Institute, estimates there could be nearly 10,000 excess deaths over the next decade because of delayed detection and treatment of breast and colon cancers. Postponing care "was prudent at one time" because of the risks of COVID-19 exposure, but deferring for too long "may turn one public health crisis into many others," he wrote in the journal *Science*.

Based on what's known about breast cancer deaths from past years in the United States, about 10% "could have been prevented if women were getting routine screening," but 20% to 25% could have been prevented with appropriate treatment, said Dr. Otis Brawley, a Johns Hopkins University professor and former chief medical officer of the American Cancer Society.

"That's not to say screening is not important, but many people think that cancer screening saves more lives than it actually does," Brawley said.

A short-term delay may not hurt mortality much if screening resumes quickly, as it needs to do, he said.

Some reassuring news came at a recent American Association for Cancer Research conference from Sabine Siesling of the Netherlands Comprehensive Cancer Organization. That country offers women ages 50 to 74 a mammogram every two years but stopped in mid-March because of COVID-19. After it resumed in late summer, results "did not show any shift" to more advanced tumors, she reported.

Researchers from Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's Hospital analyzed their screening tests for lung, cervical, colon, prostate and breast cancer. Screening dropped dramatically from March through June but the portion that found cancer or a precancer was higher than usual, suggesting that those who did get screened were at higher risk. When screening returned to near-normal from June to September, the number of potentially "missed" cancers was lower than expected.

GETTING CREATIVE

When 43-year-old actor Chadwick Boseman died of colon cancer last summer, Miles feared for the

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12,000 members of his Philadelphia church. Black people are more likely to die of the disease than other groups, and there was limited access to colonoscopies, which can find and remove growths before they turn cancerous.

Miles, who has drawn more than 1,000 church members to other health events, called the University of Pennsylvania and said, "we know how to get people to come if you're willing and able to set something up."

Dr. Carmen Guerra had a federal grant to increase screening in racially diverse communities and realized that home tests could help. Studies show these tests, which look for blood in stool, help save lives. People put a tiny stool sample in a tube and mail it to a lab or, in this case, use a drop box at the church. If blood is found, the next step is colonoscopy.

Doctors passed out kits in the parking lot during a drive-thru flu shot event in October. Church members had to watch a video about colon cancer in advance and register to ensure they qualified for screening.

So far, 154 kits have been returned. Stacy Hill was among the 13 who tested positive. The 48-year-old Philadelphia woman had just lost her job and health insurance. Her colonoscopy revealed two growths that, like Abraham's, were caught before they turned cancerous.

"I was shocked," Hill said. "I'm a proactive-type person so I was glad to know."

The doctors also helped her enroll in Medicaid, "so now I have medical insurance" and can continue getting cancer screenings, she said.

The church hopes to offer the home tests again during blood pressure and diabetes screening events this spring.

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Voter outreach led to big drop in rejected mail ballots

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic triggered an unprecedented surge in mailed ballots last year, raising concerns that a flood of first-time absentee voters would lead to another record: more ballots tossed out for missing deadlines, signatures or other reasons.

Those fears never materialized. An analysis by The Associated Press found that the rate of rejected ballots was actually lower in November than during last year's primaries in several politically pivotal states despite an increase in the number of absentee ballots cast.

In one of the most striking instances, Wisconsin saw both a decline in rejection rate and the overall number of ballots tossed out. During the state's chaotic primary at the start of the pandemic, Wisconsin rejected roughly 23,000 absentee ballots compared with about 4,000 ballots in November even as the number of absentee ballots rose from just shy of 1.2 million in the primary to nearly 2 million.

Election officials and voting experts attribute the declines to extensive voter education campaigns; work by volunteers to help find voters and fix ballot issues; and myriad efforts to make absentee voting easier, including new ways for people to track their ballots. Concerns about U.S. Postal Service delays also played a role, motivating voters to return ballots early or take advantage of a fleet of drop boxes that were deployed for the election.

Despite this success, Republican lawmakers in several states have invoked former President Donald Trump's unfounded claims of election fraud to propose strict limits on absentee voting. For instance, a GOP push in Georgia would eliminate no-excuse absentee voting, requiring people to give a reason.

In the weeks following the election, Trump seized on preliminary reports of lower rejection rates in Georgia and Pennsylvania — states he lost. But the AP analysis shows November rejection rates also declined in Florida, North Carolina and Ohio — states Trump won.

Ohio's rejection rate declined from 1.35% in the primary to just 0.42% in November. The state's chief election official, a Republican, credited more user-friendly voting materials and requirements that local election officials call and email voters about ballot problems, rather than just notifying them by mail. Ab-

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sentee ballots represented 36% of all votes cast.

"All of those things that we did helped to reduce the error rate," said Secretary of State Frank LaRose. "And that's a really big success story — that we had massive absentee voting and a tiny number of errors."

Election officials and voting experts pay close attention to ballot rejection data because it represents, in most cases, people who were unable to vote successfully. Newly registered, Black, Hispanic and younger voters have had their ballots rejected at higher rates than white and more experienced voters, according to research by University of Florida political scientist Daniel A. Smith.

For its analysis, the AP sought 2020 ballot data from swing states: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. In nine, it found the mailed ballot rejection rate declined. Pennsylvania said data was not yet available, and Arizona noted its numbers were preliminary. Of the states, Colorado sends mail ballots to all registered voters and about 75% of Arizona voters are on a permanent early voting list and automatically receive ballots in the mail.

"It's not that something bad didn't happen when we worried something bad would happen. It's that we did all this hard work to stop the bad thing from happening," said Sylvia Albert with Common Cause, one of several groups assisting voters who encountered problems with mail ballots.

In a few states, election officials implemented extensive ballot-tracking and notification systems while various organizations mobilized volunteers to track down and help voters whose ballots were flagged for rejection. North Carolina and Georgia were among the states where groups made a concerted effort to reduce rejections.

"There is nothing more sad than a person taking these steps to be involved in the process and then being disenfranchised through no fault of their own," said Saira Draper, voter protection director for the Democratic Party of Georgia.

For the presidential election, a joint effort by state Democrats and the Biden-Harris campaign involving thousands of volunteers knocking on doors and working phones reached nearly 16,000 people who ultimately fixed their ballots, Draper said.

In Florida, nearly 73% of voters whose ballots were initially flagged for rejection successfully fixed their ballots, according to a new analysis by Smith.

Florida's rejection rate was just shy of 0.3% in November, down from about 1.3% in the primary.

The U.S. Elections Project has estimated that 65 million people cast mail ballots in the 2020 general election, nearly double the 33.3 million in 2016.

Paige Weber, a freelance editor in Atlanta, was among the first-time absentee voters. Weber, who has diabetes, was worried about contracting the coronavirus at her polling place. She also was concerned about using the mail to return her ballot, so she opted for one of the more than two dozen drop boxes her county had set up.

She was impressed with how easy — and safe — the process was.

"Even when the pandemic is over, it was just so quick," Weber said. "You are not waiting in line waiting for people to finish. And it has to be better for people than taking time off from work to vote."

She was among 1.3 million Georgia voters who successfully cast an absentee ballot in November. Overall, about 0.34% of absentee ballots cast were rejected, compared with roughly 1% in the primary.

Trump, in a December speech, blasted Georgia over the high acceptance rate and suggested fraud had occurred: "They took everything. Nothing was rejected, practically, compared to 6.4% in 2016."

But changes made in 2019 included a law supported by the Republican-controlled Legislature that formalized a process for fixing ballot problems and providing a deadline of three days after the election. Amid the pandemic, Georgia election officials added drop boxes and implemented a system that alerted voters when their ballots were sent, when they were received and whether they were accepted.

This year, lawmakers are pushing restrictions on absentee voting, including on drop boxes. Lawmakers say they are responding to public concerns about ballot security, although state election officials had described the drop boxes as secure with 24-hour video surveillance.

Georgia wasn't the only state to make changes ahead of the 2020 election. In North Carolina, a lawsuit led to a formal process for allowing voters to fix problems with absentee ballots and lawmakers eased a

ballot requirement from two witness signatures to one.

The rejection rate there dropped from 9% in the primary to 1.2% in the general election. State election officials said some people whose ballots were rejected may have successfully voted using another method.

Michigan officials said they conducted extensive outreach that included newspaper inserts and a social media and digital campaign. Just over 15,000 ballots were rejected there in November, just shy of 0.5% of absentee ballots cast and down slightly from the primary.

"Voter education works, if you do it well and do it methodically," Democratic Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said.

Associated Press writer Julie Carr Smyth in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report.

Advocates seek Biden push on gun bills, but prospects iffy

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After President Joe Biden's giant COVID-19 relief bill passed Congress, he made a prime-time address to the nation and presided over a Rose Garden ceremony.

But there wasn't so much as a statement from the White House after the House passed legislation that would require background checks for gun purchases, a signature Democratic issue for decades.

Biden's views on gun regulation have evolved along with his party — at one point reluctant to impose too many restrictions that blue-collar Democrats opposed — to a near-unanimous call to do something about gun violence after a spate of mass shootings.

In the early months of Biden's presidency, even popular proposals like background checks are lower on his list of priorities and their prospects in the Senate cloudy.

The two bills that passed the House last week would expand background checks on gun purchases, the first significant movement on gun control since Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress and the White House.

They are among a number of major bills House Democrats have pushed through in recent weeks, including legislation to expand voting rights and support union organizing, that now face an uncertain fate in the Senate. Supporters of the background check bills are hoping to see Biden become more actively involved.

"I hope and I expect that President Biden will be willing to get engaged in hand to hand advocacy in the Senate on background checks," said Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat who has led the push for gun control in the Senate.

While Biden was more conservative on gun issues early in his Senate career, in the mid-1990s he helped pass the Brady bill, which mandated federal background checks for gun purchases, and he wrote the 1994 crime bill that included a 10-year assault weapons ban.

During his presidential campaign, Biden embraced an expansive gun-control agenda, backing an assault weapons ban and buyback program that was once seen as highly controversial and won't see action in a divided Congress.

On the third anniversary of the Parkland, Florida, school shooting last month, Biden issued a statement reiterating his support for such measures, prompting the National Rifle Association to label him "increasingly hostile" towards gun rights.

"Today, I am calling on Congress to enact commonsense gun law reforms, including requiring background checks on all gun sales, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and eliminating immunity for gun manufacturers who knowingly put weapons of war on our streets," Biden said in the statement.

But the bills that just passed the House received meager GOP support there and face a much tougher road in the Senate, where 10 Republicans would have to join all 50 Democrats and independents for them to move toward passage.

Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., who sponsored one of the bills, suggested Democrats would have to eliminate the 60-vote threshold for passing legislation to move them along.

"I think it's about time for us to get rid of the filibuster," Clyburn said in an interview.

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But multiple Democrats have expressed opposition to reforming the filibuster, as has Biden himself. That leaves gun-control advocates hoping that the politics of gun control have shifted enough that more Republicans may be open to legislation that advocates argue is widely popular with the American public.

With Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., promising to give the background check bills a vote on the floor, Democrats are hopeful Republicans will step up when they're put on the spot.

They're also heartened by the declining influence of the NRA, which filed for bankruptcy this year after being outspent by gun-control groups for the first time during the 2018 election.

"I think the implosion of the NRA, the growing support among the American people and the inevitability of increased support gives us an opportunity we haven't had before," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said last week. He added: "What's changed is we now have a president who can put pressure on our colleagues."

While much of Biden's gun-control agenda is unlikely to win passage in an evenly divided Senate, some of his proposals can be achieved by prioritizing resources within the federal government. Biden has proposed, for instance, directing the FBI to ensure state and local law enforcement agencies are notified if someone who tries to buy a gun fails a background check. He has also said he'll ask his attorney general to look for ways to better enforce gun laws.

But the Biden administration has yet to signal how the president himself will get engaged. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden is looking forward to working with Congress "to advance priorities, including repealing gun manufacturers' liability shields." She added that he "will look for opportunities to be engaged" on the background check bills.

Democrats still face political headwinds. A Gallup poll last November found that while 57% of Americans want stricter gun laws, that marked the lowest number in favor since 2016. And gun sales hit a new record high in January, continuing a surge over the past year.

Republican Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a moderate, have worked together for years to find compromise on background checks.

In a statement, Toomey's office said the senator remains supportive of a previous bipartisan proposal with Manchin but believes "progress is only possible on this issue if the measure in question is narrow and protects the rights of law-abiding gun owners."

Still, advocates say with a largely unified Democratic Party and the president on their side, they hope to finally see some movement.

John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, pointed in particular to Democratic wins in the 2018 midterms while running openly for gun control as evidence the politics are changing.

"Democrats are in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress. The NRA is in the weakest shape it's ever been," he said. "It's become clear that gun-safety laws aren't only good life-saving policies, they're good politics."

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show that Feinblatt is the president of Everytown for Gun Safety, not Everytown USA.

Michelle Obama aims to give a million meals in new campaign

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Michelle Obama is launching a nonprofit campaign that aims to provide more than 1 million meals to food-insecure families in connection with the debut Tuesday of her children's food show on Netflix.

The "Pass the Love w/ Waffles + Mochi" initiative, named after the new series "Waffles + Mochi," is a collaborative campaign by the nonprofit Partnership for a Healthier America, its honorary chair Obama and Higher Ground Productions, the production company owned by the former first lady and her husband, former President Barack Obama.

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The nonprofit says the campaign was inspired by the series, which tells the story of two puppet friends who “travel the world exploring the wonders of food and culture while learning how to cook with fresh ingredients.”

Walmart and Blue Apron have jumped in to support the initiative, which also aims to “leverage the show, its characters, and Mrs. Obama to meaningfully shift our food culture toward more affordable, fun, at-home meals for families of every income level,” according to the nonprofit.

PHA President and CEO Nancy Roman told The Associated Press that the two companies will contribute funds to the campaign and raise money for it among their customers. More than half the money is expected to come from the public, Roman says.

The nonprofit was created in conjunction with Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! effort in 2010. The former first lady, who has long been a champion of healthy eating, said in the announcement last week that the idea is to “help make sure families all over the country can access fresh, nutritious food” amid the devastating impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

The U.S. has seen a significant rise in hunger during the virus outbreak. One estimate from the organization Feeding America says around 45 million Americans in 2020 may have experienced food insecurity — limited or uncertain access to adequate food — compared with 35 million in 2019.

Caitlin Caspi, a University of Connecticut professor who studies food insecurity, says the rise in unemployment, the closure of schools and disruptions across food systems -- like shortages of staple foods in the early days of the pandemic — all played a factor in the increase. And many, left with little options, turned to food banks for help.

The issue has been “most pronounced among households with children, and in particular, households with children of color,” Caspi said.

“Meal boxes that provide fresh food and a complete set of ingredients to households are one way to reduce the impact of these food access disruptions, and to get healthy meals on the table,” she added.

The food service organization Genuine Foods will source and assemble the campaign’s meal boxes, which will then be distributed by local nonprofits in various cities. Roman says they will begin to roll out the campaign in cities that have the highest child poverty rates as the funds are raised.

The rollout will start in May, Roman says, and continue throughout the year. Each city deployment is expected to take place over four weeks.

“We’re thinking of a pace of about two a month,” Roman said. But, she added, “It will depend in part on how the campaign is going.”

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Israeli experts announce discovery of more Dead Sea scrolls

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli archaeologists on Tuesday announced the discovery of dozens of Dead Sea Scroll fragments bearing a biblical text found in a desert cave and believed hidden during a Jewish revolt against Rome nearly 1,900 years ago.

The fragments of parchment bear lines of Greek text from the books of Zechariah and Nahum and have been dated around the first century based on the writing style, according to the Israel Antiquities Authority. They are the first new scrolls found in archaeological excavations in the desert south of Jerusalem in 60 years.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of Jewish texts found in desert caves in the West Bank near Qumran in the 1940s and 1950s, date from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. They include the earliest known copies of biblical texts and documents outlining the beliefs of a little understood Jewish sect.

The roughly 80 new pieces are believed to belong to a set of parchment fragments found in a site in

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southern Israel known as the "Cave of Horror" — named for the 40 human skeletons found there during excavations in the 1960s — that also bear a Greek rendition of the Twelve Minor Prophets, a book in the Hebrew Bible. The cave is located in a remote canyon around 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Jerusalem.

The artifacts were found during an operation in Israel and the occupied West Bank conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority to find scrolls and other artifacts to prevent possible plundering. Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 war, and international law prohibits the removal of cultural property from occupied territory. The authority held a news conference Tuesday to unveil the discovery.

The fragments are believed to have been part of a scroll stashed away in the cave during the Bar Kochba Revolt, an armed Jewish uprising against Rome during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, between 132 and 136. Coins struck by rebels and arrowheads found in other caves in the region also hail from that period.

"We found a textual difference that has no parallel with any other manuscript, either in Hebrew or in Greek," said Oren Ableman, a Dead Sea Scroll researcher with the Israel Antiquities Authority. He referred to slight variations in the Greek rendering of the Hebrew original compared to the Septuagint — a translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek made in Egypt in the third and second centuries B.C.

"When we think about the biblical text, we think about something very static. It wasn't static. There are slight differences and some of those differences are important," said Joe Uziel, head of the antiquities authority's Dead Sea Scrolls unit. "Every little piece of information that we can add, we can understand a little bit better" how the Biblical text came into its traditional Hebrew form.

Alongside the Roman-era artifacts, the exhibit included far older discoveries of no lesser importance found during its sweep of more than 500 caves in the desert: the 6,000-year-old mummified skeleton of a child, an immense, complete woven basket from the Neolithic period, estimated to be 10,500 years old, and scores of other delicate organic materials preserved in caves' arid climate.

In 1961, Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni excavated the "Cave of Horror" and his team found nine parchment fragments belonging to a scroll with texts from the Twelve Minor Prophets in Greek, and a scrap of Greek papyrus.

Since then, no new texts have been found during archaeological excavations, but many have turned up on the black market, apparently plundered from caves.

For the past four years, Israeli archaeologists have launched a major campaign to scour caves nestled in the precipitous canyons of the Judean Desert in search of scrolls and other rare artifacts. The aim is to find them before plunderers disturb the remote sites, destroying archaeological strata and data in search of antiquities bound for the black market.

Until now the hunt had only found a handful of parchment scraps that bore no text.

Amir Ganor, head of the antiquities theft prevention unit, said that since the commencement of the operation in 2017 there has been virtually no antiquities plundering in the Judean Desert, calling the operation a success.

"For the first time in 70 years, we were able to preempt the plunderers," he said.

Britain's Prince Philip returns home after treatment

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's Prince Philip returned to Windsor Castle on Tuesday, following a month in the hospital during which he was treated for an infection and underwent a heart procedure.

Philip, 99, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II, was admitted to the private King Edward VII's Hospital in London on Feb. 16, where he was treated for an infection.

He was later transferred to a specialized cardiac care unit at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, before returning to King Edward VII's.

Photographers standing outside the door of the private hospital captured his departure in the back of a black car. Buckingham Palace later issued a statement confirming Philip's release.

"His Royal Highness wishes to thank all the medical staff who looked after him at both King Edward VII's Hospital and St Bartholomew's Hospital, and everyone who has sent their good wishes," the palace

said in a statement.

Philip's illness is not believed to be related to COVID-19. Both Philip and Elizabeth received coronavirus vaccines 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, he had been isolating at Windsor Castle, west of London, with the queen.

His illness comes as the royal family has been rocked by an interview with Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, and Prince Harry. In the explosive broadcast, Meghan, who is biracial, said the palace had failed to help her when she had suicidal thoughts and that an unidentified member of the royal family had raised "concerns" about the color of her baby's skin when she was pregnant with her son, Archie.

The interview, conducted by Oprah Winfrey, divided people around the world. While many say the allegations demonstrate the need for change inside a palace that hasn't kept pace with the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, others have criticized Harry and Meghan for dropping their bombshell while Philip was hospitalized.

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.

Anxiety, confusion, terror, relief: Giving birth in pandemic

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Pregnancy, birth and life with a newborn in the middle of a pandemic has brought on high anxiety, ever-shifting hospital protocols and intense isolation for many of the millions of women who have done it around the world.

As the pandemic stretches into a second year and economic worry persists, demographers are studying the reasons for an anticipated pandemic baby bust. Women, meanwhile, have learned to go through labor in masks and to introduce fresh arrivals to loved ones through windows.

Fear, anxiety and chaos were particularly acute in New York City during the early months of the pandemic in what was one of the country's most devastating hot spots.

Whitnee Hawthorne gave birth to her second son May 7 in a New York hospital. Ten months later, her baby has yet to meet his paternal grandparents, who live in Louisiana.

"Our first son met them the second week of his life," said Hawthorne, whose husband was thankfully by her side after a ban on birth partners during delivery was lifted at their hospital several weeks before her time.

As a Black woman, she said, she had decided she would leave the state rather than be in labor alone.

"I'm keenly aware of the high maternal death rates for Black women and also, having had a negative experience with a nurse during my first birth, I was scared," Hawthorne said.

Like Hawthorne, Nneoma Maduiké was masked when she gave birth Aug. 1 to her second child, a son, after a pregnancy filled with unknowns.

"The anxiety was absolutely awful. Information was evolving as quickly as anything you can imagine," said Maduiké, who lives in Brooklyn. "I didn't know what guidance to follow. My husband's a doctor and he was still going in every single day and that brought on even more anxiety."

Twenty-four hours after a cesarean section, Maduiké was cleared to go home. Hospitals at the time were attempting to protect new mothers and babies from the virus by shuffling them out early, lightening the load as well on skeleton staffs.

While her husband was on hand for the birth, neither knew the hospital would require their newborn to stay in Maduiké's room, rather than the nursery, as a precaution. Her husband went home to be with their older child, leaving her to care for the baby alone soon after surgery. Then it was a struggle getting her husband back inside the hospital due to safety concerns.

There were no visitors, of course, in stark contrast to her first delivery. No friends were permitted to drop by the hospital with balloons, flowers and food. Maduiké's mother, who lives in Texas, didn't move in for an extended stay after the baby came home, a tradition in their Nigerian culture. Her mother did manage

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a far shorter visit, but with little time to gather the many ingredients for ji mmiri oku, a yam pepper soup offered to new moms after birth.

Maduiké won't soon forget meeting her baby in a mask. "There's something so sad about that," she said. "You're terrified to eliminate that barrier because you just don't know."

Due to pandemic travel restrictions, her father remains stuck in Nigeria and still hasn't met her baby.

Liz Teich and her husband moved with their 3-year-old in February 2020 from Brooklyn to suburban New Rochelle before she gave birth to their second child about two months later. They landed within a containment zone in one of the earliest COVID surges in the U.S. The hospital, under pressure from women due to deliver there, had just lifted its ban on birth partners in the delivery room when Teich went into labor.

"My husband had to leave the hospital two hours after the birth," she said. "I was lucky. I suffered hemorrhaging after the first birth. I was really concerned to be alone during a pandemic when the hospital was short-staffed."

Thirty hours after giving birth, Teich and her baby were home.

"I didn't even shower. I was too scared to touch the bathroom. We didn't know if the virus was airborne or whether it was on surfaces, or really anything about the virus at all. I mostly labored at home because I was too scared to go," she said.

Teich found herself doubled over in a hospital parking garage during contractions less than two minutes apart after circling with her husband looking for a spot because valet service had been eliminated. She didn't want to be dropped off, fearing he wouldn't be allowed in on his own.

"I thought, you know, if I give birth in the car it might be safer than in the hospital," she laughed.

The pain of separation was felt in other ways, too.

Parham Zar, founder and managing director of the Egg Donor & Surrogacy Institute in Los Angeles, said that in the early months of the pandemic, parents awaiting 52 births via surrogate were impacted by travel barriers at his agency alone.

"The vast majority of parents were located in China, and while the biological parents are typically present during the child's birth, they couldn't travel to the U.S. to unite with their children. Some surrogates took care of the children for months before they could be joined by his or her biological family," Zar said.

Jen Guyuron, in Cleveland, gave birth last March to a girl, Gigi, and she's pregnant again.

"Nobody met Gigi and now we're coming out with two babies," she said. "The hospital was basically shutting down right as we walked in. I vividly remember telling my husband that he better not cough or sneeze. We were in survival mode."

Her mom, who with her dad waited in their car at the hospital while she was in labor, wrote Guyuron a poem after Gigi arrived. It inspired Guyuron to write a poem to her new daughter. She turned her words into a children's book, "The Baby in the Window," which she self-published as a way to let other pandemic moms know they aren't alone.

The story looks forward to easier times, when parents can freely let others hold their babies, visit with loved ones without masks and let their children out to play without pandemic worry.

In Gigi's case, siblings, grandparents, cousins and friends first met her through the windows of Guyuron's home. There were socially distanced dinners in her parents' garage and meals on her patio wrapped in blankets by a heat lamp.

"There's a lot of sadness being isolated in our houses without family around," Guyuron said. "It's been really hard as a new mom. You expect to come home to all these big hugs and happiness and family, and we didn't have any of that."

Since Gigi has largely known only masks on the faces of others, Guyuron wonders if revealed faces will be jarring to her.

"She only knows masks," Guyuron said. "They definitely don't scare her."

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 17, the 76th day of 2021. There are 289 days left in the year. This is St. Patrick's Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 17, 1762, New York held its first St. Patrick's Day parade.

On this date:

In 1776, the Revolutionary War Siege of Boston ended as British forces evacuated the city.

In 1936, Pittsburgh's Great St. Patrick's Day Flood began as the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers and their tributaries, swollen by rain and melted snow, started exceeding flood stage; the high water was blamed for more than 60 deaths.

In 1941, the National Gallery of Art opened in Washington, D.C.

In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet for India in the wake of a failed uprising by Tibetans against Chinese rule.

In 1966, a U.S. Navy midget submarine located a missing hydrogen bomb that had fallen from a U.S. Air Force B-52 bomber into the Mediterranean off Spain. (It took several more weeks to actually recover the bomb.)

In 1969, Golda Meir became prime minister of Israel.

In 1970, the United States cast its first veto in the U.N. Security Council, killing a resolution that would have condemned Britain for failing to use force to overthrow the white-ruled government of Rhodesia.

In 1988, Avianca Flight 410, a Boeing 727, crashed after takeoff into a mountain in Colombia, killing all 143 people on board.

In 1992, 29 people were killed in the truck bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In Illinois, Sen. Alan Dixon was defeated in his primary reelection bid by Carol Moseley-Braun, who went on to become the first Black woman in the U.S. Senate.

In 2003, edging to the brink of war, President George W. Bush gave Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave his country. Iraq rejected Bush's ultimatum, saying that a U.S. attack to force Saddam from power would be "a grave mistake."

In 2009, U.S. journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee were detained by North Korea while reporting on North Korean refugees living across the border in China. (Both were convicted of entering North Korea illegally and were sentenced to 12 years of hard labor; both were freed in August 2009 after former President Bill Clinton met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.) The Seattle Post-Intelligencer published its final print edition.

In 2010, Michael Jordan became the first ex-player to become a majority owner in the NBA as the league's Board of Governors unanimously approved Jordan's \$275 million bid to buy the Charlotte Bobcats from Bob Johnson.

Ten years ago: The U.N. Security Council paved the way for international air strikes against Moammar Gadhafi's forces, voting to authorize military action to protect civilians and impose a no-fly zone over Libya. U.S. drone missiles hit a village in Pakistan; U.S. officials said the group targeted was heavily armed and that some of its members were connected to al-Qaida, but Pakistani officials said the missiles hit a community meeting, killing four Taliban fighters and 38 civilians and tribal police. Country music entertainer Ferlin Husky, 85, died in Westmoreland, Tennessee.

Five years ago: The Obama administration formally concluded the Islamic State group was committing genocide against Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Syria. An Arizona man was convicted of a terror charge tied to an attack on a Prophet Muhammad cartoon contest in Texas, marking the second conviction in the U.S. related to the Islamic State group; Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, an American-born Muslim convert, was later sentenced to 30 years in prison. Finally bowing to years of public pressure, SeaWorld Entertainment said it would no longer breed killer whales or make them perform crowd-pleasing tricks.

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One year ago: A three-week shelter-in-place order took effect in six San Francisco-area counties, requiring most residents to stay inside and venture out only for food, medicine or exercise. State TV in Iran warned that "millions" could die if Iranians kept traveling and ignored health guidance; the coronavirus death toll in Iran neared 1,000. More movie theaters closed nationwide; the nation's largest chain, AMC, said its theaters would close for at least six to 12 weeks. Bus riders in Detroit were stranded after most drivers didn't report to work. The Kentucky Derby and the French Open were each postponed from May to September. A case of the coronavirus was reported in West Virginia, the only U.S. state that hadn't seen one until that point. As Florida, Arizona and Illinois went ahead with presidential primaries, hundreds of poll workers dropped out, forcing state officials to scramble. Joe Biden swept to primary victories, increasingly pulling away in the Democratic race.

Today's Birthdays: The former national chairwoman of the NAACP, Myrlie Evers-Williams, is 88. Former astronaut Ken Mattingly is 85. Singer-songwriter John Sebastian (The Lovin' Spoonful) is 77. Former NSA Director and former CIA Director Michael Hayden is 76. Rock musician Harold Brown (War; Lowrider Band) is 75. Actor Patrick Duffy is 72. Actor Kurt Russell is 70. Country singer Susie Allanson is 69. Actor Lesley-Anne Down is 67. Actor Mark Boone Jr. is 66. Country singer Paul Overstreet is 66. Actor Gary Sinise is 66. Actor Christian Clemenson is 63. Former basketball and baseball player Danny Ainge is 62. Actor Arye Gross is 61. Actor Vicki Lewis is 61. Actor Casey Siemaszko (sheh-MA'-zshko) is 60. Writer-director Rob Sitch is 59. Actor Rob Lowe is 57. Rock singer Billy Corgan is 54. Rock musician Van Conner (Screaming Trees) is 54. Actor Mathew St. Patrick is 53. Actor Yanic (YAH'-neek) Truesdale is 52. Rock musician Melissa Auf der Maur is 49. Olympic gold medal soccer player Mia Hamm is 49. Rock musician Caroline Corr (The Corrs) is 48. Actor Amelia Heinle is 48. Country singer Keifer Thompson (Thompson Square) is 48. Actor Marisa Coughlan is 47. Actor Natalie Zea (zee) is 46. Sports reporter Tracy Wolfson is 46. Actor Brittany Daniel is 45. Singer and TV personality Tamar Braxton is 44. Country musician Geoff Sprung (Old Dominion) is 43. Reggaeton singer Nicky Jam is 40. TV personality Rob Kardashian (kar-DASH'-ee-uhn) (TV: "Keeping Up With the Kardashians") is 34. Pop/rock singer-songwriter Hozier is 31. Actor Eliza Hope Bennett is 29. Actor John Boyega is 29. Olympic gold medal swimmer Katie Ledecky is 24. Actor Flynn Morrison is 16.