

# Groton Daily Independent

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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.

## Two vying for Ward 1 spot

Groton City Ward 1 will have an election between incumbent Jon Cutler and challenger Mitchell Locke. The position is for a 2-year term.

Here are their profiles as compiled by Dorene Nelson.

### Jon Cutler

Jon Cutler is a graduate of Groton High School and the Universal Technical Institute in Phoenix, AZ, with Associate's Degrees in automotive and industrial diesel mechanics. He is currently defending his position on the Groton City Council.

He has worked as a diesel mechanic at DMI Inc. in Aberdeen and as a fertilizer spreader and sprayer for South Dakota Wheat Growers. Currently he owns Cutler Precision Application, spraying fields throughout the spring and summer.

"I believe that good city council members need critical thinking skills," Cutler explained. "I've been on the city council for a year and a half and now have a better understanding of what is needed for everything to run smoothly."

"I believe that the biggest challenge for the city of Groton is economic development," he added. "We need to find ways to bring more businesses and industry to our town as well as more housing and more developments for new homes."

"In my opinion, the next major city project should be to fully loop water through the Olson development," Cutler explained. "This improvement will ensure adequate water throughout the community as well as provide for potential economic growth and new residential developments."

"The purchase of the Wells Fargo bank building has been a hot topic, and I've been approached by individuals on both sides of the issue, mostly positive," he said. "Since the money used to purchase the building is surplus from a COVID relief grant that the city received, taxes will not be raised."

"Our city offices and library will be moved there along with our police department," Cutler stated. "The move will be followed by only necessary renovations, such as giving the police department its own space and entrance."

"The police department has a very small area where four police officers currently share one desk and use the same entrance as the rest of city hall," he explained. "By moving the police to the new building and giving them their own area, everyone will be safer in the event of someone being detained."

"Other plans and improvements, such as expanding the library and providing more space for computer use by the public, are being planned for the future," Cutler added.



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## Mitchell Locke

Mitchell Locke, a graduate of Groton High School and Northern State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management, is running for a seat on Groton City Council.

He has worked at James Valley Telecommunications in the IT department for the past three years. His wife Heidi works at Dacotah Bank in Groton. Mitchell and Heidi have three children, Devan (7), Landon (4), and Blake (2).

"I am open-minded and look at both sides of an issue before making a decision," Mitchell stated. "I am a progressive thinker and want what is best for this city's future."

"I am seeking a position on the Groton City Council because I want to serve the community and make it better for all residents," he explained. "I personally believe that road improvements should be the next major project for the city."

"The City of Groton is facing several challenges now, including road improvements, budget, and affordable housing," Mitchell listed. "My decision to run for City Council is mainly due to my frustration with some decisions that have been made recently and how some situations have been handled."

"I want to help ensure our community is reputable and represented in a professional manner," he said. "One of the decisions that I most recently disagreed with is the purchase of the Wells Fargo building."

"Before making such a large commitment of public money, I would have had to see the reasons for this purchase and be able to provide an answer to those questioning it," Mitchell admitted. "I feel that it was not in our community's best interest at this time."



**Happy 80th  
Birthday**

**Patrick  
Stoebner**

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## #388 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Hardly any change from yesterday. We reported 56,700 new cases today. That brings us up to 29,629,800 total cases so far in this pandemic in the US, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. Hospitalizations ticked upward again today to 40,143, nothing of consequence unless it continues to rise. And deaths are up to 537,560 today, 0.2% more than yesterday. We reported 1088 deaths today.

The CDC's latest ensemble forecast for deaths has been released; each of these covers an additional week from the previous one. The current forecast is for a high of 574,000 deaths by April 10. The previous one issued a week ago today projects a high of 571,000. This is notable because, for a brief moment a few weeks ago, the current forecast was actually lower than the immediately-previous one, which meant the number of deaths had slowed significantly. Those days, unfortunately, are now gone.

One year ago today, March 17, 2021, we had 5587 cases in the US. West Virginia, our last holdout, reported its first case on this day, so we were now looking at all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands. New York took over the lead with 1374, our first state above 1000 cases. Washington and California followed with 865 and 636, respectively—still more than half the cases in these three states. Two more over 200 and seven over 100. Things were getting worse fast. There were 101 deaths in 18 states; this was our first day over 100 deaths.

Thirty-seven states had closed their schools. NASA ordered employees to work from home. The US Navy prepared hospital ships to serve hard-hit areas. The National Guard had been deployed in 22 states across the nation. Air travel worldwide had collapsed. Moderna administered its vaccine candidate to the first of 45 volunteers in a phase 1 trial in an attempt to establish the safety of the candidate and to show it induces the desired response; this was just about two months since the viral genome was released by Chinese scientists. Going to say it again: This is simply remarkable.

There had been 182,400 cases worldwide with 7100 deaths. Italy reported 3526 new cases on this day, bringing them to 31,506, and 345 deaths for a total of 2503. Iran had 1178 new cases for a total of 16,169 and 135 new deaths for a total of 988. Spain reported 1987 new cases, bringing them to 11,178 with 491 deaths. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated the Tokyo Olympics would be held on schedule.

Cancellations and closures: Bolivia; nonessential businesses in Nevada; nonessential travel between the US and Canada; air traffic control at Chicago Midway; UN Security Council meetings; more PGA tournaments; bars and restaurants in South Carolina; shopping malls and amusement parks in New Jersey; the European Union; Marvel's "Black Widow" film and Disney's "History of David Copperfield" and "The Woman in the Window;" Macy's stores; large groups on Florida beaches; Uber pool service in the US and Canada; events involving the Queen of England and her family; Vail's resorts; the UEFA European Championship soccer tournament; AMC Theaters; IKEA stores in Germany; Volkswagen production; Airbus production in Spain and France; the Kentucky Derby; all Philippine airlines CEBU Pacific and CEBGO flights.

Here's a good reason to be vaccinated, even if you ain't askeert of no durned virus: because vaccines aren't helping some folks. Just read a report in JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association) showing that solid-organ transplant recipients who are immunosuppressed are responding very poorly to a first dose of the current mRNA vaccines (Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech). If you're wondering, here's the dilemma facing people who receive organs from donors: The donor organs are antigenically different from the new owners' own organs and tissues. That means the new owner's immune system is going to notice all this foreign antigen and do exactly what it was designed to do: attack and destroy the invader. Your immune system can't tell friendly foreign antigens (like the donated kidney that's keeping you alive) from unfriendly foreign antigens (like the bacteria eating away at your toe), so it just attacks and destroys whatever it doesn't recognize as "self." (If you missed our early discussions on these points, check out my Update #250 posted October 30 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4125507854132256>; it contains some links to even earlier explanations you may also find helpful.)

The upshot of all this is, if we're going to stick a big old kidney into you that's not originally yours, your immune system's going to notice this; so we need to stop your immune system from destroying it, an

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outcome we call organ rejection. That's a serious problem both because you needed that organ and because some of the products of the destruction are sort of toxic. To be clear, this is not a malfunctioning immune system causing the problem; it is a perfectly well functioning immune system doing exactly what it was designed to do. And so the only way out of this dilemma is to make your immune system stop working so well by giving you drugs called immunosuppressives—to inhibit it. We can, to some degree, use particular drugs to target the processes most responsible for organ rejection, but it's sort of a blunt instrument, and there are real risks. Folks who've received solid organ transplants and immunosuppressives are going to be a whole lot less immunologically competent. They're going to be at higher risk for infections and cancers. Forever. Just the way it works.

And that brings us to this study of 436 Covid-naïve (never infected) organ recipients, only 17 percent of whom produced detectable antibody levels to mRNA vaccine. By comparison, 100 percent of immunocompetent people produced detectable antibodies. That is a serious problem for these people. We want to remember that these are preliminary data; the study will continue to follow these patients through their second doses, and there may be improved responses at that point. It is clear, however, that vaccines are not eliciting fabulous immune responses in these folks. This isn't enormously surprising, but it is really important because it means these folks may have to rely on the rest of us for protection. The authors are recommending suppressed people be antibody tested before they cast caution to the winds and behave recklessly. And I'm just going to point out that, if we can't get the population to a place where the sheer numbers of immune people cut chains of transmission off at the pass, these people might never be free of the threat. While I am aware appeals to people's sense of humanity, community spirit, civic duty, or obligation to our fellow humans is a long shot these days, I have to try: This is not only about you. You are not the only person you are protecting from this virus when you receive a vaccine; you are also protecting people who cannot protect themselves, but have every bit as much right to live and see family and go places as you do.

New variants of this virus emerge all the time; most of them aren't any big deal because they're not appreciably different from what's already circulating in any way that will affect our ability to deal with them—not different in transmissibility, diagnostics, lethality, or antigenic properties. Because so many new variants are unimportant, we usually wait a bit after something new emerges before getting excited about it; there's no point assigning a label and all to a variant no one cares about in the end. Some variants, however, might be a big deal, and there is a designation, Variant of Interest (VOI), used to denote the ones we think we might care about, generally those with specific genetic markers we think may affect one of those characteristics of transmissibility, diagnostics, lethality, or antigenic make-up or those which are increasing in proportion of cases or creating unique outbreak clusters.

There are three VOI we've identified as circulating in the US at the moment. Each of these has mutations which have been identified as potentially showing a reduction in neutralization by monoclonal antibodies, convalescent serum, or post-vaccination serum. These reductions may mean that monoclonal antibody treatments we've been using might not work as well on them, that people with prior infections may be more susceptible to reinfection, or that vaccinated people may not be completely protected—the so-called immune escape we do not want to see. These include B.1.526 and B.1.525, both first seen in New York, and P.2 first seen in Brazil. We don't know just what we have here, but they've elicited sufficient concern to draw names. These bear watching, and you can be sure folks are doing just that.

A step up is the designation, Variant of Concern (VOC), a variant for which we have actual evidence of increased transmissibility, diagnostic detection failures, more severe disease or increased lethality, and/or reduction in neutralization by antibodies, whether monoclonal, convalescent, or vaccine-induced. VOC currently circulating in the US include the following:

(1) B.1.1.7 first seen in the UK, which has around 50 percent increased transmissibility and likely increased severity based on hospitalizations and case fatality rates. It does not appear to present a risk for immune escape.

(2) P.1 first seen in Brazil (and Japan), which shows some reduction in neutralization by monoclonal, convalescent, and post-vaccination antibodies. This is the one I've been calling B.1.1.28.1, but it appears

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this name is not permitted by the variant-naming gods, so it will henceforth be known here as P.1 (supposing I remember).

(3) B.1.351 first seen in South Africa, which shows around 50 percent increased transmissibility and moderate reduction in neutralization by monoclonal, convalescent, and post-vaccination antibodies.

(4) B.1.427 first seen in California, which shows around 20 percent increased transmissibility, a significant reduction in neutralization by some therapeutics, and moderate reduction in neutralization by convalescent and post-vaccination antibodies.

(5) B.1.429 first seen in California, which shows around 20 percent increased transmissibility, a significant reduction in neutralization by some therapeutics, and moderate reduction in neutralization by convalescent and post-vaccination antibodies.

There is one more category, the variant of high consequence. (We might consider this the hair-on-fire variant.) This would be a variant with clear evidence that prevention measures or medical countermeasures have significantly reduced effectiveness. This is a variant that would show, in addition to the characteristics of a VOC, demonstrated failure of diagnostics; significant reduction in vaccine effectiveness, a disproportionately high number of vaccine breakthrough cases, or very low vaccine-induced protection against severe disease; significantly reduced susceptibility to multiple authorized therapeutics; and/or more severe clinical disease and increased hospitalizations. In short, a catastrophic variant. We do not currently have any of those, which may be viewed as sort of a miracle at the moment.

I'm going to strongly suggest we don't want to see any variants of high consequence; we really, really do not want to see them. If you've been here very long and have been paying even cursory attention, you will not be stunned to learn that there is one way to reduce the possibility of such a variant emerging: stop transmission of all cases of this virus as soon as possible. The virus mutates only when it replicates, so the less it replicates the better. We've got to stop folks getting this thing. As low-frequency an event as the emergence of this sort of monster is, if we continue to tempt fate, if we continue to encourage this virus to replicate willy-nilly and unhindered, if we keep passing it around amongst our unmasked and defiant citizenry, we're going to find ourselves in a place none of us wishes to be—including the unmasked and defiant, because even those folks will not enjoy life (or the end of it) on a vent. (Liberty is all well and good, but no one experiences much of it tethered to a breathing tube or six feet under.) I know it's fashionable to call everything fake news these days, but trust me on the vent thing. I really do not want to read another article about another this-is-all-a-hoax guy who, on his deathbed, said, "How could I have been so wrong?" or worse yet, even with his last gasp, continued to insist he COULD NOT have Covid-19 because we all know that's a fake disease. Sigh.

About a month ago, there was a significant snow storm—what's called a nor'easter—in the Northeast; this includes Rhode Island. Anyone who's worked a shift during a snowstorm, and I am definitely raising my hand here—knows how dismaying it is to come outside after a hard day's work to find your car buried in snow you're going to have to clear away before you can go home. A fifth-grader in Westerly, Rhode Island, was thinking about that during this storm and decided he wanted to do a nice thing for hospital workers who'd been knocking themselves out saving patients, so he dragged his cold-weather-hating friend with him to the parking lot of the local hospital. There, they cleared snow off some 80 vehicles at a shift change. The friend told CNN, "We kind of made it a game."

They would wait for a car to be started or unlocked with a remote control, then race to it and clear all the snow from the windows before the owner came out. The child, Christian Stone said, "I was thinking they've been helping us a lot through this whole pandemic, and I figured why don't we help them, you know? All day, every day the nurses here, they deal with the pandemic like Covid and they want to get home from work, so we thought we would make it a tiny bit easier for them by clearing off their cars for them."

They had to change clothes a couple of times because they got wet from the snow, which is not a great thing when the weather's very cold. Stone added, "It's been cold but extremely fun seeing how happy they get. Some of them say, 'Thank you very much' and I'm just really happy to see them happy." This kid has clearly gotten the memo about caring for our fellow humans. I wonder whether it's too late for some of us old folks to get the same memo.

Be well. We'll talk again.

## Need help Getting Social Security Disability Benefits?

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	455	432	883	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2827	2709	5988	39	Substantial	14.9%
Bennett	384	371	1187	9	Minimal	3.1%
Bon Homme	1510	1479	2108	26	Minimal	1.5%
Brookings	3672	3555	12220	37	Substantial	3.7%
Brown	5224	5057	12932	90	Moderate	6.2%
Brule	699	682	1895	9	Minimal	3.2%
Buffalo	422	407	902	13	Minimal	8.3%
Butte	991	958	3267	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	259	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1322	1257	3996	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	387	367	956	5	Minimal	16.7%
Clay	1825	1786	5483	15	Substantial	6.2%
Codington	4112	3924	9797	78	Substantial	21.6%
Corson	473	459	1005	12	Minimal	9.1%
Custer	769	745	2758	12	Moderate	3.5%
Davison	3011	2898	6673	64	Substantial	13.4%
Day	678	639	1810	29	Moderate	3.6%
Deuel	482	464	1155	8	Minimal	5.0%
Dewey	1434	1403	3885	26	Substantial	6.9%
Douglas	437	424	925	9	Minimal	6.5%
Edmunds	488	467	1077	13	Minimal	14.8%
Fall River	556	528	2668	15	Substantial	4.5%
Faulk	363	348	706	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	990	931	2286	39	Moderate	5.0%
Gregory	561	515	1310	30	Moderate	4.0%
Haakon	258	244	545	10	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	734	676	1802	38	Moderate	4.3%
Hand	353	333	832	6	Moderate	9.1%
Hanson	371	360	739	4	Moderate	13.6%
Harding	92	91	186	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2339	2273	6688	36	Moderate	2.2%
Hutchinson	797	759	2416	26	Moderate	0.0%

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Hyde	139	138	416	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	282	264	919	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	275	253	565	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	86	86	229	0	None	0.0%
Kingsbury	657	631	1700	14	Moderate	2.4%
Lake	1242	1179	3406	18	Substantial	12.7%
Lawrence	2842	2777	8631	45	Moderate	2.0%
Lincoln	7972	7720	20633	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	607	590	1884	10	Moderate	6.5%
Marshall	352	323	1222	6	Substantial	10.0%
McCook	765	720	1665	24	Substantial	19.4%
McPherson	240	234	561	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2650	2572	7817	31	Moderate	7.4%
Mellette	255	247	744	2	Moderate	0.0%
Miner	277	255	587	9	Minimal	10.0%
Minnehaha	28757	27849	79581	338	Substantial	9.4%
Moody	621	601	1788	17	Minimal	0.0%
Oglala Lakota	2076	2001	6682	49	Moderate	9.2%
Pennington	13092	12745	39964	190	Moderate	6.2%
Perkins	348	331	826	14	Minimal	0.0%
Potter	384	369	844	4	Moderate	13.8%
Roberts	1270	1179	4219	36	Substantial	18.7%
Sanborn	335	325	698	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	814	773	2163	26	Moderate	9.4%
Stanley	338	334	949	2	Minimal	4.3%
Sully	137	134	320	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1188	4172	29	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	723	685	1507	16	Substantial	11.9%
Turner	1100	1017	2757	53	Substantial	20.8%
Union	2044	1949	6389	40	Substantial	11.3%
Walworth	735	706	1840	15	Moderate	12.8%
Yankton	2847	2774	9452	28	Moderate	9.0%
Ziebach	337	327	873	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1783	0		

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## South Dakota



**RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES**

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	85925	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13617	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5536	5%
Hispanic	4182	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2544	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1682	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1480	1%

**COVID-19 Variant # of Cases**

COVID-19 Variant	# of Cases
B.1.1.7	2
B.1.351	0
B.1.427	0
B.1.429	0
P.1	0

**SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES**

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59824	902
Male	55142	1013

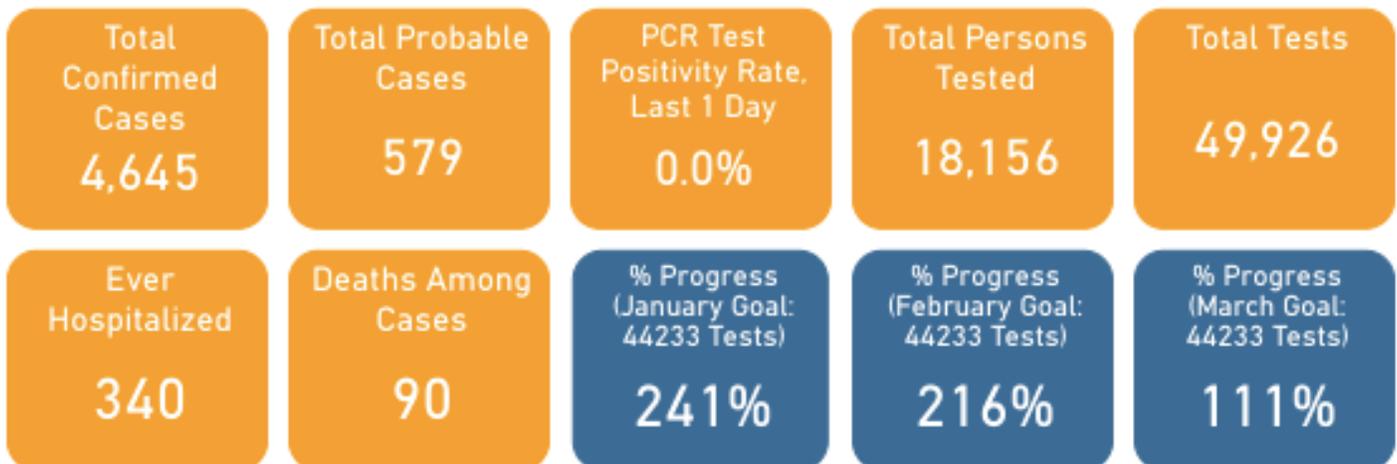
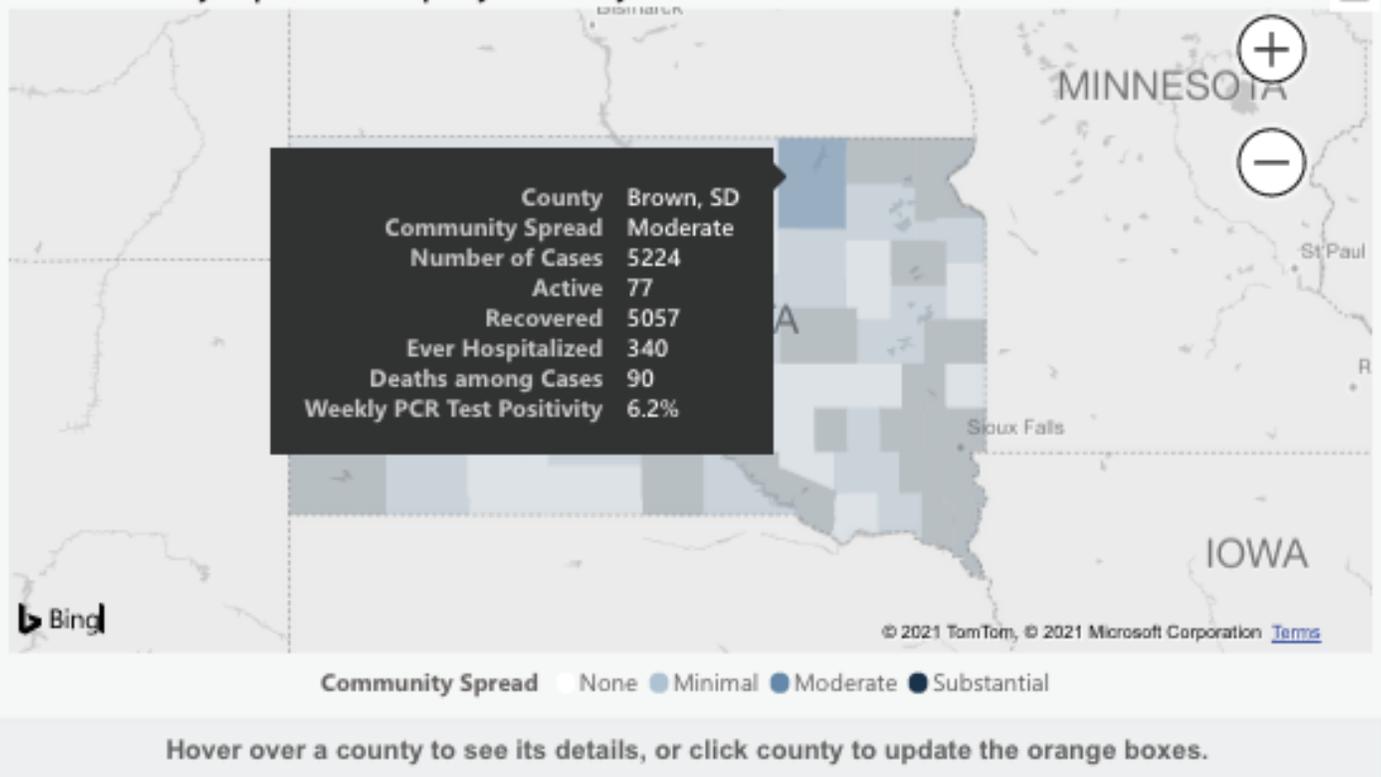
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## Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



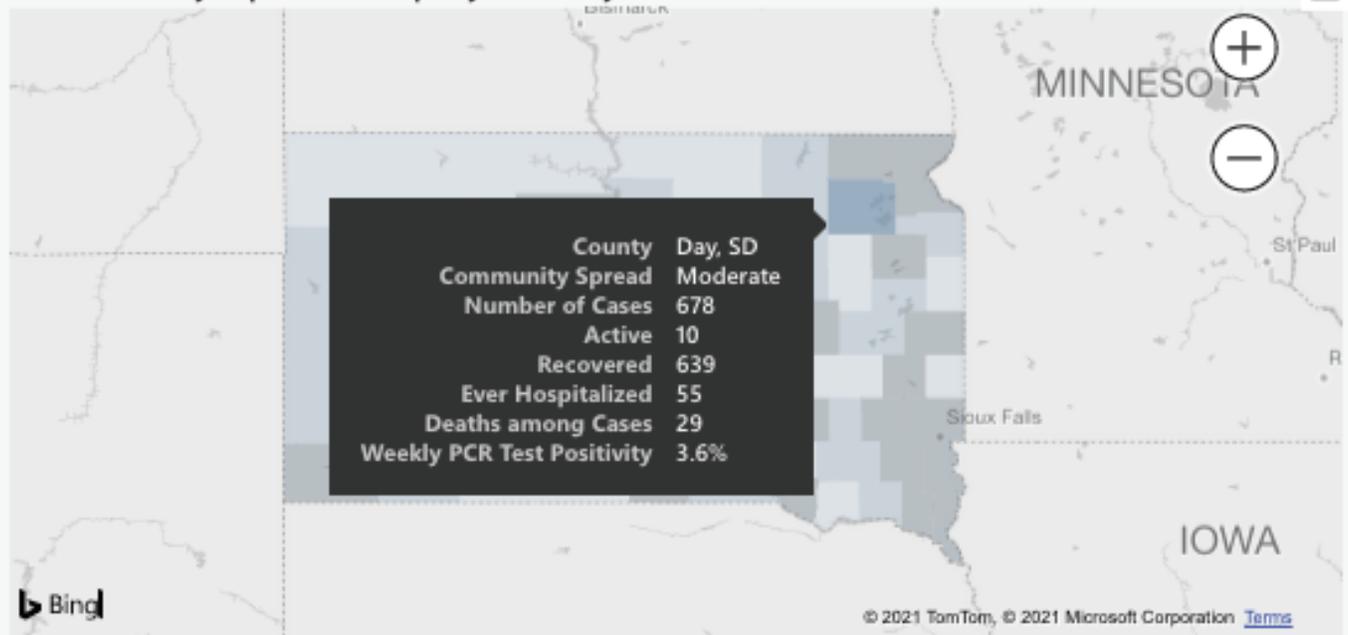
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## Day County

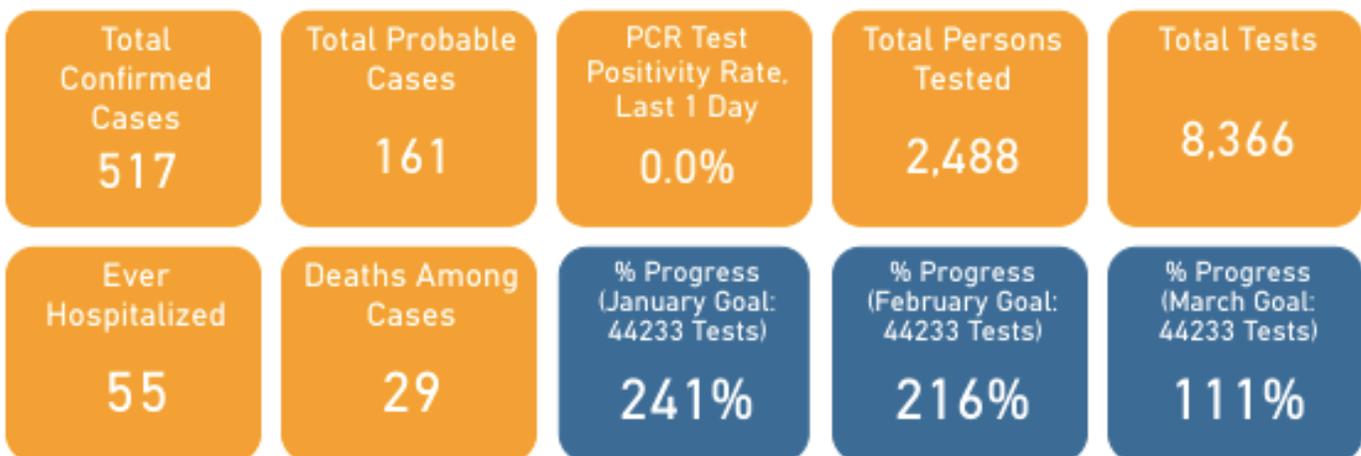


### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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



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## Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

315,171

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	3,712
Moderna	153,402
Pfizer	158,057

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

201,813

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	3,712
Moderna - 1 dose	44,090
Moderna - Series Complete	54,656
Pfizer - 1 dose	40,669
Pfizer - Series Complete	58,694

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

35%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	34.80%
Series Complete	20.52%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	881	311	285	596
Beadle	6,341	2,026	2,157	4,183
Bennett*	477	133	172	305
Bon Homme*	3,565	1,139	1,213	2,352
Brookings	9,911	4,157	2,877	7,034
Brown	15,190	3,824	5,683	9,507
Brule*	1,902	476	713	1,189
Buffalo*	130	80	25	105
Butte	2,171	881	645	1,526
Campbell	965	271	347	618
Charles Mix*	3,251	1,121	1,065	2,186
Clark	1,231	409	411	820
Clay	5,070	1,768	1,651	3,419
Codington*	9,846	3,208	3,319	6,527
Corson*	294	90	102	192
Custer*	2,798	886	956	1,842
Davison	7,501	2,177	2,662	4,839
Day*	2,516	894	811	1,705
Deuel	1,462	550	456	1,006
Dewey*	370	74	148	222
Douglas*	1,192	354	419	773
Edmunds	1,386	436	475	911
Fall River*	2,495	777	859	1,636
Faulk	1,045	321	362	683
Grant*	2,719	1,207	756	1,963
Gregory*	1,737	605	566	1,171
Haakon*	535	153	191	344

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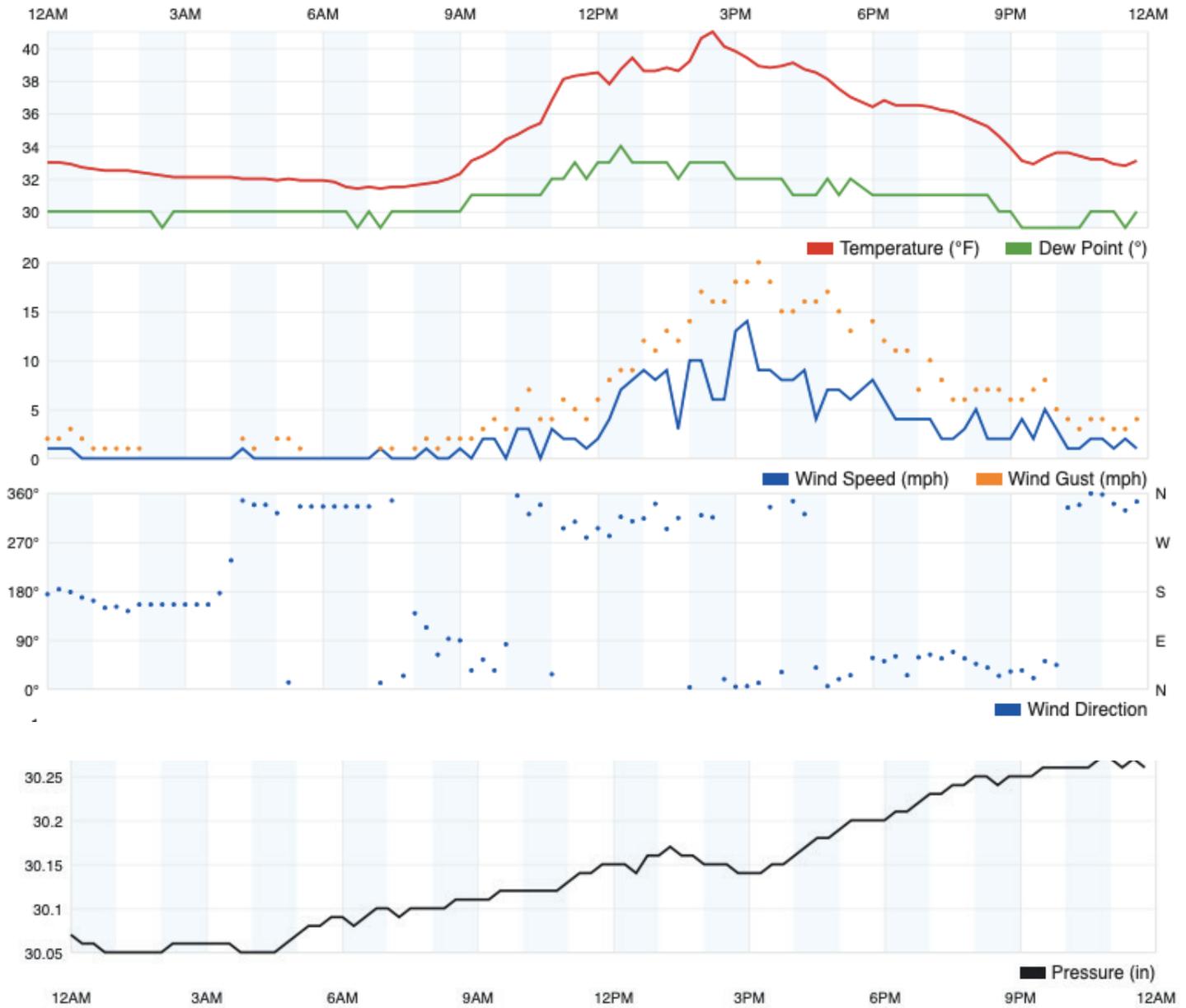
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Hamlin	1,711	553	579	1,132
Hand	1,559	513	523	1,036
Hanson	484	170	157	327
Harding	101	51	25	76
Hughes*	7,780	1,658	3,061	4,719
Hutchinson*	3,552	1,017	1,267	2,284
Hyde*	564	156	204	360
Jackson*	385	111	137	248
Jerauld	873	291	291	582
Jones*	618	158	230	388
Kingsbury	2,409	927	741	1,668
Lake	4,024	1,560	1,232	2,792
Lawrence	8,174	3,092	2,541	5,633
Lincoln	25,725	5,692	10,016	15,708
Lyman*	808	266	271	537
Marshall*	1,740	568	586	1,154
McCook	2,226	622	802	1,424
McPherson	241	77	82	159
Meade*	6,315	1,951	2,182	4,133
Mellette*	45	17	14	31
Miner	865	249	308	557
Minnehaha*	80,636	19,345	30,643	49,988
Moody*	1,781	627	577	1,204
Oglala Lakota*	173	55	59	114
Pennington*	37,553	9,437	14,058	23,495
Perkins*	683	281	201	482
Potter	856	306	275	581
Roberts*	4,436	1,264	1,586	2,850
Sanborn	972	304	334	638
Spink	2,821	879	971	1,850
Stanley*	1,185	241	472	713
Sully	359	71	144	215
Todd*	158	50	54	104
Tripp*	1,990	534	728	1,262
Turner	3,423	983	1,220	2,203
Union	3,240	1,220	1,010	2,230
Walworth*	1,843	517	663	1,180
Yankton	9,895	2,625	3,635	6,260
Ziebach*	56	14	21	35
Other	5,931	1,683	2,124	3,807

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 49 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 24 °F

Friday



Sunny then  
Sunny and  
Breezy

High: 55 °F

Friday  
Night



Clear and  
Breezy

Low: 35 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny  
and Breezy

High: 59 °F

Sun Comes Out Today!  
Warming Up For The Weekend

**Today:**

Patchy AM fog then partly cloudy  
Highs 42-50° (warmest north  
central SD)

**Friday:**

Mostly sunny, breezy, elevated  
fire danger  
Highs 48-61°

**Saturday:**

Partly cloudy, breezy  
Highs 55-67°

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## Today in Weather History

March 18, 1982: Northern Lawrence and Southwest Butte Counties experienced strong winds during the afternoon of March 18, 1982. Winds gusting to 70mph in Spearfish and Belle Fourche areas overturned a trailer house near Belle Fourche. No injuries were reported.

March 18, 2013: An area of low pressure moving across the region brought widespread accumulating snowfall along with powerful northwest winds to northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts from 1 to 4 inches along with sustained winds of 25 to 35 mph with gusts up to near 60 mph caused widespread blizzard conditions. Travel was disrupted or halted. Some businesses and schools were also closed. Some snowfall amounts included; 1 inch at Sisseton; 2 inches south of Bristol and at Bowdle; 3 inches near Big Stone City; and 4 inches at Summit. The highest wind gust was 58 mph at Aberdeen and near Summit. The snowfall began between 5 and 7 pm on the 17th and ended between 5 and 9 pm on the 18th.

March 18, 2014: A low-pressure surface area moving off to the east brought some heavy snow into far eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota. A narrow band of heavy snow set up across this area bringing from 6 to 11 inches of snow.

1925: The great "Tri-State Tornado" occurred, the deadliest tornado in U.S. history. The storm claimed 695 lives (including 234 at Murphysboro, IL, and 148 at West Frankfort, IL), and caused seventeen million dollars property damage. It cut a swath of destruction 219 miles long and as much as a mile wide from east-central Missouri to southern Indiana between 1 PM and 4 PM. The tornado leveled a school in West Frankfort, Illinois, and picked up sixteen students setting them down unharmed 150 yards away. Seven other tornadoes claimed an additional 97 lives that day.

1952: 151.73 inches of rain fell at Cilaos, La Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean over five days (13th-18th) to set the world rainfall record. This record was broken on February 24th-28th, 2007, when Commerce La Reunion Island picked up 196.06 inches.

1990: An intense hailstorm struck the Sydney region in Australia, producing strong winds and torrential rains in a swath from Camden to Narrabeen, causing extensive damage. Hailstones were measured up to 3 inches in diameter. The total insured cost was estimated at \$319 million, the third-largest loss event in Australian insurance history.

1971 - High winds accompanied a low pressure system from the Rocky Mountains to the Great Lakes. Winds gusted to 100 mph at Hastings NE, and reached 115 mph at Hays KS. High winds caused two million dollars damage in Kansas. Fire burned 50,000 forest acres in eastern Oklahoma. (17th-19th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the central U.S. produced up to 10 inches of snow in western Nebraska, and up to six inches of rain in eastern sections of the state. The heavy rains pushed the Elkhorn River out of its banks, submerging the streets of Inman under three feet of water. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Light rain and snow prevailed east of the Mississippi River. Fair weather prevailed west of the Mississippi. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy rain in California, with heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada Range. Venado CA was drenched with 5.40 inches of rain in 24 hours. A dozen cities in the eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Baltimore MD with a reading of 82 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Heavy rain caused extensive flooding of rivers and streams in Georgia, with total damage running well into the millions. Flooding also claimed six lives. Nearly seven inches of rain caused 2.5 million dollars damage around Columbus, and up to nine inches of rain was reported over the northern Kinchafoone Basin in Georgia. (Storm Data)

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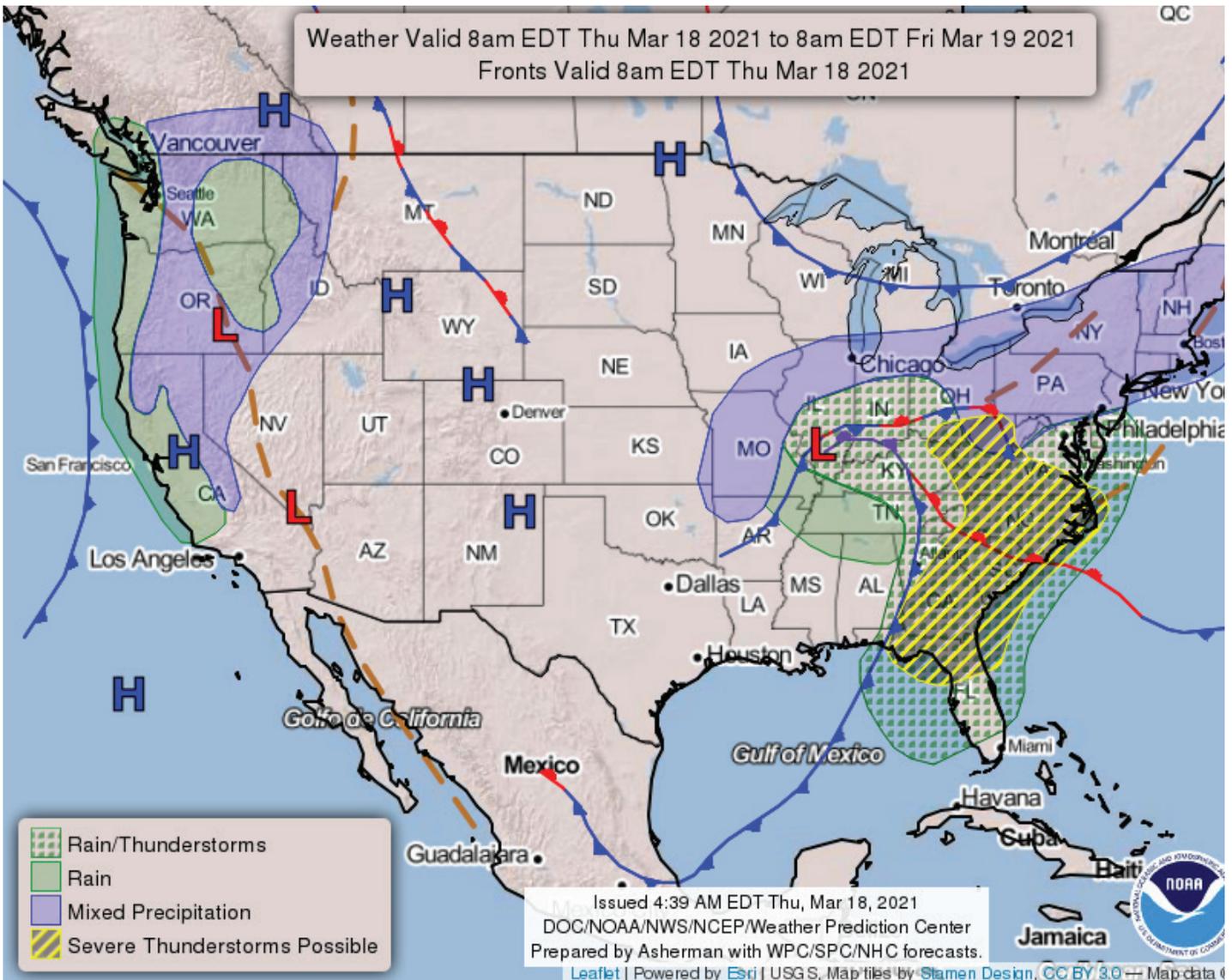
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 41 °F at 2:36 PM**  
**Low Temp: 31 °F at 6:36 AM**  
**Wind: 20 mph at 2:46 PM**  
**Precip:**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 85° in 2012**  
**Record Low: -15° in 1923**  
**Average High: 41°F**  
**Average Low: 21°F**  
**Average Precip in Mar.: 0.55**  
**Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35**  
**Average Precip to date: 1.57**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.53**  
**Sunset Tonight: 7:44 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:38 a.m.**



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## MOVING ON

There is a story of a patient in a mental institution who sits alone and looks longingly out the window. Every now and then he wistfully moans, "If only I had..." And his voice trails off as his mind recalls a past event.

At one time he was a brakeman on a freight train. On a bitterly cold night, he decided not to light his lantern and leave the warmth of his caboose to warn an oncoming train that his train had stopped to reload its coal car. He had been at this particular place before and could not remember if there were any trains that needed a warning.

Unfortunately, an oncoming train did not see his caboose and crashed into it leaving three of his friends dead. He escaped with severe bodily injuries that healed, but, mentally he could not escape the scene. Whenever his mind recalled the event, he would say, "If only I had..."

Many of us have memories that have left scars we wish we could erase. David also had one. He traded a peaceful mind for a moment of pleasure that left him overwhelmed with grief. Finally, he cried out, "Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. According to Your love, remember me for You are good, O Lord."

Was that prayer answered? Indeed. "When we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us." And He also promises, "Their sins and iniquities I will remember no more."

There is no sin beyond God's forgiveness! And, no forgiveness without asking!

Prayer: Lord, with grateful hearts we accept Your forgiveness and cleansing. But may we never forget that they cost You Your life. We love You sincerely. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. According to Your love, remember me for You are good, O Lord. Psalm 25:7

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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 Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

07-12-16-17-33

(seven, twelve, sixteen, seventeen, thirty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$75,000

Lotto America

05-07-10-19-40, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 4

(five, seven, ten, nineteen, forty; Star Ball: six; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.83 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$105 million

Powerball

34-38-42-61-62, Powerball: 19, Power Play: 2

(thirty-four, thirty-eight, forty-two, sixty-one, sixty-two; Powerball: nineteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$184 million

### States sue Biden in bid to revive Keystone XL pipeline

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Attorneys general from 21 states on Wednesday sued to overturn President Joe Biden's cancellation of the contentious Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada.

Led by Ken Paxton of Texas and Austin Knudsen of Montana, the states said Biden had overstepped his authority when he revoked the permit for the Keystone pipeline on his first day in office.

Because the line would run through multiple U.S. states, Congress should have the final say over whether it's built, according to the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Texas.

Construction on the 1,200-mile (1,930-kilometer) pipeline began last year when former President Donald Trump revived the long-delayed project after it had stalled under the Obama administration.

It would move up to 830,000 barrels (35 million gallons) of crude daily from the oil sand fields of western Canada to Steele City, Nebraska, where it would connect to other pipelines that feed oil refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Biden cancelled its permit over longstanding concerns that burning oil sands crude would make climate change worse.

Some moderate Democratic lawmakers also have urged Biden to reverse his decision, including Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Jon Tester of Montana.

### Interim cabinet secretaries appointed permanently by Noem

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem announced Wednesday that two interim cabinet secretaries will be given the jobs permanently.

Secretary Joel Jundt of the Department of Transportation and Secretary Kevin Robling with Game, Fish, and Parks will both continue to serve in their roles as secretaries to their departments.

Noem said Robling has a great understanding of the state's natural resource and conservation priorities. "He has already done fantastic work to protect and promote South Dakota's outdoor opportunities while balancing conservation efforts with landowners and outdoor enthusiasts," Noem said.

Robling said he work to enhance South Dakota's quality of life through "the great outdoors."

"Providing excellent customer service, creating partnerships with landowners, focusing on habitat de-

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velopment, expanding public access opportunities, and operating one of the best state parks systems in the country are all top priorities for me and my team," he said.

In regards to Jundt's appointment, Noem said he has dedicated his life to promoting transportation access in South Dakota.

"He has proven himself to be the leader who can spearhead the future of mobility here in South Dakota," Noem said.

## Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined  
Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 16, 2021.

Editorial: South Dakota Regents Plot A Path Back To Normal

Without question, there is still a ways to go before we can truly say we've conquered COVID-19, but at least contemplating a return to the way life used to be, if even only somewhat, is not only uplifting but also essential.

This was made clear in a press release issued by the South Dakota Board of Regents (BOR) Monday, stating that they aim to have South Dakota higher-education institutions return to a state of what the press release's headline referred to as "normalcy" 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 and CEO for the South Dakota Board of Regents, in the press release. "With vaccines available now in higher education and K-12 settings, we can all look forward to more normal operations ahead."

This is good news on many fronts, and not simply because so many of us are yearning to get back to those "before times" prior to the pandemic.

The closure of schools at practically all levels one year ago had a seismic impact on education in this state, as any student/parent or any teacher/administrator could tell you. While things reverted somewhat closer to normal in South Dakota when the school year began last August, there were always contingency plans and limitations looming in the background, whether it was for pre-kindergarten or for the University of South Dakota's law school. Besides distance-learning options, there were — and are — limitations in place at many schools and campuses for what events people can attend or how they can attend them.

The colleges and universities dealt with these issues just like the high schools and elementary schools, but on a broader scale, with students remote-learning at points around the country, not just in the area.

Of course, what happened at those universities also impacted the communities they call home. In every one of those towns, the local college is a staple of the local economy and an immense factor of community life. The various restrictions created by COVID-19, whether it's through distance learning or reduced attendance at activities, have had real consequences.

Thus, the BOR announcement Monday had to be greeted warmly by those communities, who are also hoping to get back to some normalcy in their relationship with their colleges and universities.

What's more, aiming for a normal fall semester will be a big boost for students in terms of giving them a more complete college experience, which cultivates loyalty and, down the line, more robust alumni support.

"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," University of South Dakota President Sheila K. Gestring said in a press release. "We are optimistic about our ability to live and learn together as we did before the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will continue to prioritize the health and safety of our campus and Vermillion communities as we navigate the weeks and months ahead."

Make no mistake, however, that the threat posed by COVID-19 is still with us. While the ramping up of vaccinations is helping to turn this tide, concerns will remain for some time.

Nevertheless, plotting a course for a return to life is essential to building a new momentum that the colleges and the communities are going to need to propel themselves forward again. And with the right planning, this can happen.

END

## Despite headwinds, House set to OK Dems' immigration bills

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats seem poised to claim victory in the House's first votes this year on immigration, but moving legislation on the divisive issue all the way through Congress to President Joe Biden is an uphill fight.

The House was set to vote Thursday on one bill giving over 2 million young "Dreamer" immigrants and others full legal status and a chance for citizenship. A second measure would do the same for around 1 million immigrant farm workers. Both seemed certain to pass.

But party divisions and solid Republican opposition mean pushing legislation through the Senate on immigration remains difficult, especially for Biden's goal of a sweeping measure helping all 11 million immigrants in the U.S. illegally become citizens. The partisan battle shows little promise of easing before next year's elections, when Republicans could use it in their effort to regain House and Senate control.

Work on the legislation comes as the number of migrants attempting to cross the border has been growing since April and has hit its highest level since March 2019. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Tuesday that figure is on track to reach a 20-year high.

Scores of groups supporting the bills include the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Among those arrayed in opposition is the conservative Heritage Action for America.

GOP lawmakers have been singularly focused on the growing wave of migrants, including children, trying to enter the U.S. from Mexico and blaming Biden administration policies for it. Though neither House bill would affect those trying to cross the boundary, top Republicans were urging rank-and-file lawmakers to oppose both measures.

"By failing to include enforcement provisions to deal with the tide of illegal immigration or provisions to address the humanitarian crisis at the border, the bill would only worsen the flow of illegal immigrants to the U.S.," an email No. 2 House GOP leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana sent his colleagues said of the "Dreamers" measure.

Democrats were showing no signs of wavering from either bill, similar versions of which the House approved in 2019. Seven Republicans voted for the "Dreamers" bill and 34 backed the farm workers measure that year, but GOP support was expected to plummet this time as the party rallies behind demands for stiffer border restrictions.

"It looks like they're trying to weaponize the border situation against Democrats in 2022 to say that we're weak on border security," said Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar, whose south Texas district abuts the border.

Both 2019 measures died in what was a Republican-run Senate and never would have received the signature of Donald Trump, who spent his four years as president constricting legal and illegal immigration.

To counter GOP messaging, Cuellar said, Biden must send "a clear message about the border, 'Hey, you can't come here illegally.'" Republicans say the administration's policies and rhetoric have encouraged the migrants to come.

In an ABC News interview that aired Wednesday, Biden said, "I can say quite clearly: Don't come over." He has ended Trump's separation of young children from their migrant families and allowed apprehended minors to stay in the U.S. as officials decide if they can legally remain, but has turned away most single adults and families.

No. 2 Senate Democrat Dick Durbin of Illinois said this week that he saw no pathway for an immigration overhaul this year, citing GOP demands for tough border enforcement provisions. Democrats would likely need at least 10 GOP votes in the 50-50 chamber to pass immigration legislation.

The "Dreamer" bill would grant conditional legal status for 10 years to many immigrants up to age 18 who were brought into the U.S. illegally before this year. They'd have to graduate from high school or have equivalent educational credentials, not have serious criminal records and meet other conditions.

To attain legal permanent residence, often called a green card, they'd have to obtain a higher education

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degree, serve in the military or be employed for at least three years. Like all others with green cards, they could then apply for citizenship after five years.

The measure would also grant green cards to an estimated 400,000 immigrants with temporary protected status, which allows temporary residence to people who have fled violence or natural disasters in a dozen countries.

The other bill would let undocumented immigrant farm workers who've worked over the past two years — along their spouses and children — get certified agriculture worker status. That would let them remain in the U.S. for renewable 5 1/2-year periods.

To earn green cards, they would have to pay a \$1,000 fine and work for up to an additional eight years, depending on how long they've already held farm jobs.

The legislation would also cap wage increases, streamline the process for employers to get H-2A visas that let immigrants work legally on farm jobs and phase in a mandatory system for electronically verifying that agriculture workers are in the U.S. legally.

Nearly half the nation's 2.4 million farm workers were in the U.S. illegally, according to Labor Department data from 2016.

## Who deserves credit? Biden leans into pandemic politics

By STEVE PEOPLES and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In President Joe Biden's war against the coronavirus, former President Donald Trump hardly exists.

The Democratic president ignored Trump in his first prime-time address to the nation, aside from a brief indirect jab. It was the same when Biden kicked off a national tour in Pennsylvania on Tuesday to promote the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan. Now, as his administration is on the cusp of delivering on his promise of administering 100 million doses of vaccine in his first 100 days, Biden is in no rush to share the credit.

In Biden's telling, the United States' surging vaccination rate, economic recovery and the hope slowly spreading across the nation belongs to him and his party alone.

On Thursday afternoon, Biden is set to provide an update on the state of the vaccination campaign, with what is expected to be an early victory lap on reaching the milestone more than a month before he promised. While the official figures won't be reported for days, the 100 millionth dose is likely to be administered on Thursday — his 58th day in office.

The president's approach represents a determination to shape how voters — and history — will remember the story of America's comeback from the worst health and economic crises in generations. In the short term, the debate will help decide whether Democrats will continue to control Congress after next year's midterm elections. And in the longer term, each president's legacy is at stake.

For now, the fight is framed by conflicting realities.

On the Democratic side, Biden and his allies see a nation still desperate for government intervention. They point to more than 9 million jobs still lost, thousands of Americans still dying every week, and state and local leaders in both parties seeking help.

Enter Biden's relief package, which public polling shows has broad support. The package provides checks and tax breaks directly to Americans, and will add money to the pandemic fight, as well as help state and municipal governments close budget shortfalls.

On the other side, Republicans largely believe that most Americans are doing just fine after the GOP — under Trump's leadership — put the country on a path to recovery before Democrats won the White House and both chambers of Congress in January. They note that hundreds of billions of dollars remain unspent from last year's rescue packages.

In an interview, Pennsylvania Sen. Pat Toomey stopped short of endorsing the call by his Republican Senate colleague Rick Scott of Florida for states to return billions of dollars allocated in Biden's pandemic-relief plan, which includes \$1,400 checks for most Americans. But Toomey described the Democrat-backed

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package, which polling suggests is overwhelmingly popular, as “an embarrassment.”

“We certainly didn’t need it right now,” the Pennsylvania Republican said of Biden’s American Rescue Plan. “I have heard from a lot of people receiving the check saying they didn’t need it.”

Toomey also mocked Biden’s attempts to take credit for the pandemic progress, saying: “I suppose roosters take credit for the sunshine sometimes.”

The truth is that both Biden and Trump deserve some credit, though Biden stands to benefit from being in power during the nation’s emergence from the pandemic.

Trump’s response to the virus last year was wildly inconsistent and divisive, but it’s undeniable that the former Republican president’s push for vaccine production, known as Operation Warp Speed, gave Biden something to build on as soon as he took over.

In his early days in the White House, Biden’s team made headlines as they said publicly that he had inherited no plan to combat the pandemic. The White House has since backed off that argument, however, because it’s not technically accurate.

The Biden administration inherited two effective vaccines, with others in the pipeline. And even a much-touted program to distribute vaccines through retail pharmacies has its roots in the last administration.

Even so, since taking over, Biden has overseen a dramatic increase in vaccine distribution and played a more active role in giving states consistent pandemic-related guidance. Late last week, for example, the new president announced that all Americans would be eligible for a vaccine by May 1, a directive meant to help cut through the patchwork of conflicting eligibility requirements across the country.

Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison charged that Trump played down the seriousness of the coronavirus for months, leaving states on their own to address the historic health and economic crises.

“Joe Biden has come in to clean it up, to clean up the mess,” Harrison told The Associated Press. “I have no room for giving Donald Trump any credit. This is a man who couldn’t even say, ‘You need to wear a mask.’ And right now, you see the people who are resisting the most are people who voted for him, in terms of taking the vaccine.”

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 42% of Republicans say they probably or definitely will not get the shot, compared with 17% of Democrats.

For all the GOP griping, Trump has not helped position himself as effective leader in public health.

The former president largely ignored the pandemic — and the success of the vaccine development — in his final months in office, consumed instead by spreading false claims of election fraud.

Trump’s White House aides all but begged him to focus on selling the promising vaccines in the weeks after the November election, believing he would be able to take credit for their development and rollout. But Trump rejected an aggressive plan to promote the vaccines that his team had planned.

Trump is the only living president who did not appear in a public service announcement released last week encouraging all Americans to get the vaccine. He addressed the issue briefly during a Tuesday interview on Fox News, acknowledging that a lot of his supporters are reluctant to be vaccinated.

“I would recommend it to a lot of people that don’t want to get it. And a lot of those people voted for me, frankly,” Trump said. “But you know, again, we have our freedoms, and we have to live by that and I agree with that, also. But it’s a great vaccine, it’s a safe vaccine. And it’s something that works.”

Privately, some Biden aides are surprised that Trump hasn’t been more active in trying to sell the vaccines developed on his watch to help rehabilitate his legacy. It is an oversight they are not going out of their way to correct.

While publicly welcoming Trump’s engagement on the vaccines, the White House is content to have Trump recede from the spotlight. Biden has moved to turn the page on “the former guy,” rarely uttering Trump’s name in public since his inauguration — for good or ill.

White House officials note that Biden has taken pains to credit researchers and scientists who developed the technologies used in the three approved COVID-19 vaccines, though he has not extended that courtesy to the Republican administration that injected billions into their work over the last year.

While Trump is largely absent from the debate, the Republican National Committee hopes to undercut Biden's message by flooding local media outlets with Republican critics in key states.

RNC talking points distributed to surrogates say that "just 1 percent" of the rescue package (which would be roughly \$20 billion) will go to vaccine distribution. But the Kaiser Family Foundation found that almost \$93 billion in the legislation is focused on vaccine distribution and related public health measures.

The Republican talking points ignore the \$1,400 checks for most Americans that carry a total price tag of \$422 billion.

The Democratic National Committee, meanwhile, has launched a modest national advertising campaign that declares, "Help is here," and related billboards attacking Republicans in several states for opposing "\$1,400 checks & shots in arms."

Harrison, the DNC chairman, vowed that Democrats would not let voters forget Republican obstruction and Trump's lack of leadership when the nation needed help the most.

"We are going to be a dog with a bone on this particular issue," he said. "Joe Biden and the Democrats, they did it alone."

Peoples reported from New York. Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

## EU regulator reviews AstraZeneca shot and blood clot links

By MARIA CHENG and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The world is awaiting a decision from Europe's top medical regulator on its investigation into whether there is any evidence to show the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine is linked to a small number of blood clots reported in people across the continent.

The European Medicines Agency's expert committee is set to announce the results of its investigation later Thursday.

Earlier this week, more than a dozen countries including Germany, France, Spain and Italy suspended immunization using the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine after reports of unusual blood clots in several people among the 17 million who have received at least one dose in Europe. Both the EMA and the World Health Organization have said there is no current evidence to suggest the vaccine was responsible and that the benefits of immunization far outweighed the potentially small risk of getting vaccinated. AstraZeneca said after a careful review of its COVID-19 immunization data, it found no evidence of any increased risk of blood clots in any age group or gender in any country.

On Tuesday, EMA executive director Emer Cooke said the agency's priority was the the vaccine's safety and that it would consider issues including if extra warnings needed to be added for the AstraZeneca vaccine. She noted the daily toll COVID-19 is continuing to take across the continent and said vaccines were critical to stopping its spread.

"We are worried that there may be an effect on the trust of the vaccines," she said. "But our job is to make sure that the products that we authorize are safe and we can be trusted by the European citizens."

The pause in vaccination using the AstraZeneca shot comes as COVID-19 is surging across the continent and as Britain is expecting major delays in its vaccine deliveries. Tens of thousands of new daily cases have prompted new lockdown measures in Italy, caused hospitalizations in France to spike and led German officials to announce that a third wave of COVID-19 has begun.

Figures from the European Centers for Disease Prevention and Control this week show there are about 7 million unused AstraZeneca vaccines across the 27-nation EU.

The German government defended its decision to suspend the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine, saying it was based on expert advice.

Government spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer told reporters in Berlin on Wednesday that while she understood some might be worried by the move it should be seen as a sign that "trust in our control mechanisms is justified."

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"That's why this step could also strengthen trust" in the vaccines, she said. "Concerns are taken seriously and examined. And as soon as these concerns are cleared up, a vaccine can be used again without hesitation."

Germany would rely on the EMA decision for how to proceed, Health Ministry spokesman Hanno Kautz said.

"It's clear that the EMA decision is binding and of course we will follow the EMA decision too," Kautz said.

Any time vaccines are rolled out widely, scientists expect some serious health issues and deaths to be reported, simply because tens of millions of people are receiving the shots. Determining whether or not the vaccine is to blame can be difficult, since most of the people getting inoculated first are those most at risk of the coronavirus.

But because there are no long-term data on any of the COVID-19 vaccines, any potential signal of trouble must be thoroughly investigated.

Because clinical trials are only done in tens of thousands of people, extremely rare side effects often aren't detected until vaccines are used in many millions of people, long after they have been licensed. For example, it took nearly a year after vaccination campaigns began following the 2009 swine flu pandemic for European officials to notice an increase of narcolepsy in children and teenagers who got the GlaxoSmithKline vaccine.

And in the Philippines, the government in 2017 was forced to stop its national dengue vaccination program with a new shot developed by Sanofi Pasteur after about a year, when more than 130 children who were immunized died. It turned out the vaccine worsened the effects of dengue in any children who hadn't been previously infected.

"It's right to investigate any potential signals of problems, but you can do that while you continue immunization," said Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton. "The millions of doses being administered means we will see coincidental clusters of conditions," he said. "If we pause the vaccine rollout every time there's a possible signal, it won't be much of a rollout."

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Frank Jordans reported from Berlin.

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## **EXPLAINER: NKorea's anger to US may actually be an overture**

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — After giving the Biden administration the silent treatment for two months, North Korea this week marshalled two powerful women to warn Washington over combined military exercises with South Korea and the diplomatic consequences of its "hostile" policies toward Pyongyang.

The frustration and belligerence, however, may actually be an overture.

North Korea's first comments toward the new U.S. government, while filled with angry rhetoric, can be seen as the start of a diplomatic back-and-forth as the North angles to get back into stalled talks aimed at leveraging its nuclear weapons for badly needed economic benefits.

The timing of the North Korean statements was carefully chosen, with the comments landing on front pages and newscasts as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin traveled to Asia for talks with U.S. allies Tokyo and Seoul about the North Korean threat and other regional challenges.

Whether any negotiations happen may depend on the Biden administration's policy review on North Korea, which is expected to be completed in coming weeks.

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## WHAT NORTH KOREA IS SAYING

On Tuesday, Kim Jong Un's powerful sister berated the latest U.S.-South Korean military exercises, which were scheduled to end a nine-day run on Thursday.

Describing the drills as an invasion rehearsal, Kim Yo Jong warned Washington to "refrain from causing a stink" if it wants to "sleep in peace" for the next four years.

North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Sun Hui said in a statement Thursday that the North will continue to ignore U.S. offers for talks unless it abandons what the North describes as hostile policies.

Choe was responding to Blinken's comments this week that Washington reached out to the North through several channels starting in mid-February but hasn't received any response.

"What has been heard from the U.S. since the emergence of the new regime is only a lunatic theory of 'threat from North Korea' and groundless rhetoric about 'complete denuclearization,'" Choe said, calling the American offers for talks a "time-delaying trick."

## WHAT PYONGYANG WANTS

Choe's statement could be an attempt by the North to create an environment to reenter nuclear negotiations from a position of strength, according to Shin Beomchul, an analyst with the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

Negotiations between Washington and Seoul have stalled for more than two years since the collapse of nuclear summity between Kim Jong Un and former U.S. President Donald Trump in 2019. The two sides disagreed over the details of a plan to exchange sanctions relief for disarmament. Pyongyang has repeatedly claimed it won't engage in meaningful talks while Washington persists with sanctions and pressure.

"It's clear the North is trying to strengthen its bargaining power," Shin said.

But North Korea could also be gearing up for harsher words for the Biden administration over Blinken's repeated condemnation in Seoul of the North's human rights record, something Trump largely ignored while pursuing media-friendly summits with Kim. That could complicate any future negotiations

The North is extremely sensitive to outside criticism over its abysmal human rights conditions, which it sees as an attack on its leadership, and Choe's statement appeared to be crafted before the North could decide on a response to Blinken's remarks.

"There's probably going to be serious opposition from the North" over Blinken's human rights comments, said Park Won Gon, a professor of North Korea studies at Seoul's Ewha Womans University.

## TALKS AND PRESSURE

Most experts agree that the North will eventually attempt to return to negotiations to try to win aid, but they differ over when — and what it would take for talks to resume.

Kim has recently been defiant about advancing a nuclear arsenal he sees as his strongest guarantee of survival. He has also urged his people to be resilient in the struggle for economic self-reliance while launching a new multiyear plan to salvage his broken economy.

Kim's focus on his domestic economic drive could mean that the North stays away from talks for another year and comes back only after it becomes clear that Kim's new policies are failing, Shin said.

"If North Korea is really desperate for a quick resumption of talks, they would test-fire an intercontinental ballistic missile around April 15," the birthday of Kim's state-founding grandfather Kim Il Sung, to pressure Washington into talks, Shin said.

But he said it's more likely that the North will avoid provoking the Biden administration — and inviting more pressure — because Kim's priority is to quietly cement his country as a nuclear power, which is also a key purpose of his domestic economic drive.

The North might still try to conduct short-range test launches that threaten South Korea but not the American homeland. But, Shin said, "they will keep any dramatic action on hold at least until the Biden administration's North Korea policy review is out."

Kim must navigate the tricky relationship with Washington while his nation faces sanctions, pandemic border closures and crop-killing natural disasters that may be pushing the North toward worse economic

instability.

Whatever moves the North makes, its recent messages signal that it won't return to talks unless the United States offers at least some level of sanctions relief. That, however, is unlikely to happen without a meaningful cutback in Kim's nuclear capabilities.

## 'All my hopes were him': A migrant father's plight in Greece

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

VATHY, Greece (AP) — On a pine-covered hill above the sparkling blue Aegean lies a boy's grave, a teddy bear leaning against the white marble tombstone. His first boat ride was his last — the sea claimed him before his sixth birthday.

The Afghan child with a tuft of spiky hair stares out of a photo on his gravestone, a hint of a smile on his lips. "He drowned in a shipwreck," the inscription reads. "It wasn't the sea, it wasn't the wind, it is the policies and fear."

Those migration policies are now being called into question in the case of the boy's 25-year-old father, who is grieving the loss of his only child. Already devastated, the father has found himself charged with child endangerment for taking his son on the perilous journey from Turkey to the nearby Greek island of Samos. If convicted, he faces up to 10 years in prison.

The charges are a stark departure from Greece's previous treatment of migrant shipwreck survivors. This is believed to be the first time in the European Union that a surviving parent faces criminal prosecution for the death of their child in the pursuit of a better life in Europe.

The father's hopes were dashed on a cold November night against the rocks of Samos, a picturesque island that also houses Greece's most overcrowded refugee camp.

"Without him I don't know how to live," the young man said, his soft voice breaking as a tear rolled down his cheek. "He is the only one I had in my life. All my hopes were him."

Now, he says, he often thinks of killing himself. He no longer mentions the child's name. The father agreed speak to The Associated Press on condition he only be identified by his initials, N.A., and that his son wouldn't be named.

It is not entirely clear why Greek authorities took the extreme step of charging this man when so many others have been in his place. Activists suspect the move indicates a hardening of Greece's already restrictive migration policies, or suggest it could be an attempt to divert attention from possible negligence by the coast guard.

But Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi rejected the idea that the case heralded a change in policy.

"If there is the loss of human life, it must be investigated whether some people, through negligence or deliberately, acted outside the limits of the law," Mitarachi said, adding that each incident is treated according to its circumstances.

He noted that the lives of asylum-seekers aren't in danger in Turkey, a country the EU has deemed safe.

"The people who choose to get into boats which are unseaworthy, and are driven by people who have no experience of the sea, obviously put human lives at risk," he said.

The father said he had no choice but to make the journey. His asylum application in Turkey had been rejected twice and he feared deportation to Afghanistan, a country he fled at the age of 9. He wanted his son to go to school, where, unlike him, the boy could learn to read and write, and eventually fulfil his dream of becoming a police officer.

"I didn't come here for fun. I was compelled. I didn't have another way in my life," he said. "I decided to go for the future of my son, for my future, so we can go somewhere to live, and my son can study."

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At the southeastern edge of the EU and with thousands of kilometers of coastline bordering Turkey, Greece has found itself on the frontline of Europe's migration crisis. From 2014 to 2020, more than 1.2 million people traveled along the eastern Mediterranean migration route, the vast majority through Greece,

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according to figures from the U.N. refugee agency. More than 2,000 died or went missing.

Last March, as Greek-Turkish relations soured, Turkey announced its borders to the EU were open, sending thousands of migrants to the Greek border. Greece accused Turkey of weaponizing the desperation of migrants and temporarily suspended asylum applications.

Aid groups and asylum seekers have also complained of pushbacks, the illegal deportation of migrants without allowing them to apply for asylum. They accuse Greece's coast guard of picking up new arrivals and towing them in life rafts towards Turkish waters — a claim vehemently denied by Greek authorities.

The AP has pieced together what happened in the case of this mild-mannered father and his dead son from interviews with the father, another passenger, the man who first reported their arrival, the coast guard and legal documents.

Divorced and raising his son alone, N.A. said he obtained a smuggler's number from a neighbor after his second asylum rejection in Turkey, where he had lived for years.

Their journey to Europe began in the Turkish coastal town of Izmir, where the 24 passengers, all Afghans, gathered in a house. Among them were Ebrahim Haidari, a 29-year-old construction worker, and his wife.

Haidari remembers the little boy as an intelligent, sweet child who easily struck up conversations with the other passengers and joked with the smugglers in fluent Turkish. He was struck by the close relationship between the boy and his young father, who Haidari said was as much a big brother and friend to the child as a father.

On Nov. 7, a cold, cloudy, windy night, the group boarded a truck headed to a wooded part of the Turkish coast, arriving at around 10 p.m.

There were four smugglers in all, Haidari said. The sea wasn't particularly calm and the passengers were worried, especially since at least some couldn't swim. But the smugglers assured them the weather would improve.

The boy didn't share the adults' anxieties. He had never been to the sea before, his father said, and he was eager to sail in a boat.

The boat was an inflatable dinghy, the type preferred by smugglers on the Turkish coast. Cheap and dispensable, they are usually overloaded with people, and a passenger is made to steer so the smugglers avoid arrest. At least one of the smugglers was armed.

Once they donned lifejackets, everyone was forced into the boat, Haidari and the father said. One smuggler drove a short way before making a passenger take over the steering, telling him to head toward a light in the distance. In a flash, the smuggler dove overboard and swam away.

Sitting just in front of Haidari and his wife, the father held his son tightly in his arms.

As one hour turned into two and then three, the weather deteriorated. The wind whipped the sea into ever-larger waves, and the inexperienced designated captain struggled to control the boat.

"I don't know what the smugglers thought, leaving us in such a bad situation," Haidari said. "We didn't know anything about the sea."

Tossed by the waves, the dinghy took on water. People screamed they would die. To make matters worse, fuel was running out — the smugglers had provided barely enough to reach Greece.

Suddenly, the shape of a mountain loomed out of the darkness. Terrified of dying at sea, they turned toward it.

But the coastline was jagged with rocks. The waves smacked the dinghy against the rocks once, then twice. The boat broke in two. Before they knew it, the passengers were in the water.

As they tumbled into the inky sea, the child slipped out of his father's embrace. The waves closed over the man's head.

He didn't know how to swim, but eventually his lifejacket brought him to the surface. He scanned the waves for his boy, listening for his voice. He shouted until the salt water made him hoarse. Nothing.

He sank beneath the waves again. Out of seemingly nowhere, a hand grabbed his and dragged him toward a rock. He doesn't know who it was, but he is sure that person saved his life.

There was chaos all around. People were calling for their brothers, wives, sons. Haidari and his wife struggled in the waves to stay alive, crying and vomiting seawater.

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At one point, N.A. and Haidari said, a boat appeared and switched on a searchlight. The survivors raised their hands and shouted for help, but the boat passed on.

About 15 to 20 minutes later, Haidari said, a second boat appeared. Again, they hoped for a rescue, but again the vessel shone its searchlights and moved on.

"Maybe they didn't see us or didn't want to help us," Haidari said.

The father is certain the crew saw him and the people in the water. He said that when he shouted and waved, the patrol boat trained its searchlight on him.

"They didn't help," he said. "They were going around and coming back, going around and coming back."

The account of the coast guard is quite different in the crucial question of whether it acted fast enough, and whether its patrol boats saw the struggling migrants.

Legal documents obtained by the AP show the process of charging the father was initiated by the Samos coast guard, which informed the prosecutor of a man's arrest for "exposing his minor son to danger during the attempted illegal entry into the country by sea."

Greece's Shipping and Island Policy Ministry, under whose jurisdiction the coast guard falls, didn't grant permission for Samos coast guard officials to speak to the AP. The prosecutor didn't respond to an interview request.

However, a Samos coast guard official outlined authorities' account of events that night, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The coast guard was alerted at around midnight by an English-speaking man who provided coordinates for a possible migrant boat, the official said. The coordinates were on land on Cape Prasso, a mountainous, roughly five-kilometer-long (three-mile-long) peninsula of tough terrain, with steep rocky slopes.

That man was Tommy Olsen, founder of Aegean Boat Report, a Norwegian nonprofit which monitors and provides information on arrivals on the Greek islands. Olsen said people who are reluctant to contact Greek authorities for fear of pushbacks contact him instead.

On that night, Olsen said, he received a call from someone saying a group had arrived on Samos, but several people were missing. Olsen said he immediately informed the Samos coast guard and shared the coordinates.

The coast guard official said upon receiving the call, they immediately initiated emergency procedures, dispatching two coast guard vessels that left the main port of Vathy at around 12:20 a.m. The vessels arrived in the area at around 1 a.m., the official said, but saw nobody.

At around 6 a.m., one of the vessels spotted a heavily pregnant woman behind a rock in a treacherous part of the coast, the official added. While rescuing her, which took about an hour and a half, they found the boy's body nearby. Documents show the vessel carrying the woman and child returned to Vathy at around 9:30 a.m.

The woman and child weren't related. At around the same time as they were found, at roughly 6:40 a.m. on Nov. 8, a two-person coast guard foot patrol came across a group of 10 people on the hill of Cape Prasso, several hours' walk away. The group included the father.

"If you have a dead child, you try to figure out who he was with," the official said. "It's different when you have relatives there helping, and different when you find them alone."

The suggestion is, the fact the father wasn't with his son when they were found was a key reason for him being charged.

The indictment accuses him of "leaving your ... child helpless." It says the father allowed his son to board an unseaworthy boat in bad weather without wearing an appropriate lifejacket — although a photo in the case file of the boy's body clearly shows him in a child's lifejacket.

"These people have to rely on smugglers, and these smugglers decide when and where people take these journeys," said Nick van der Steenhoven, the Greece and Europe advocacy and policy officer for refugee rights charity Choose Love. The father and son, he said, "became victim of the failure of the European Union to provide safe and legal routes" for asylum-seekers.

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The father, his defense lawyer, Dimitris Choulis, and Olsen paint another picture of that night's events: one of delays and negligence by the coast guard. Choulis is filing an application with the Samos prosecutor requesting an investigation. The father, he said, is convinced his son would still be alive if the coast guard had acted faster.

The lawyer considers the charges "the product of panic and not the product of some broader policy ... But automatically we are creating one more obstacle to these people to claim asylum."

N.A. said he desperately sought help to find his son all night.

When he managed to drag himself ashore, he said, he searched and shouted for his son to no avail. Nobody had seen his boy. He wanted to dive back into the waves to look for him, but didn't know how to swim.

After searching for two hours, he decided to try to find help. He persuaded a group of survivors to go with him, and they trekked through the night across the tough terrain.

As dawn broke, they came upon the coast guard foot patrol. Court documents indicate the father managed to convey to the officers that his son was missing, showing them his possible location on a mobile phone.

The father said they soon realized the location was too far for a search on foot themselves, and that reinforcements were needed. The passengers were taken to the island's refugee camp for identification and coronavirus testing.

His recollection of the exact timeline of events from there on is somewhat vague. A woman came to the father with a photo and asked if it was his son. It was.

He was told the boy had been found but had been taken to the hospital and was in a coma. The missing pregnant woman had also been found alive, he heard.

At some point the pregnant woman also arrived at the camp, and the father's hopes were buoyed; if she had survived, perhaps his son would too.

Then he was separated from the others and taken for questioning. He asked to see his son, but was told he had to be interviewed first.

When the interview was over, he still wasn't allowed to see his child. Eventually, he said, the police called the hospital. They told him his son had been dead already when he arrived at the hospital.

"Why did they do this to me?" the father said, distraught at the idea he had held out false hope of his son surviving. "They should not have done that. They should have told me the truth."

The father was then jailed on charges of endangering his son's life.

"I was heartbroken," he said. "A person who loses his loved ones, his son, and then he goes to prison in that condition, alone ... Is it humane to do this thing?"

It took three days and pressure from his lawyer, Choulis, for him to be allowed to see his son's body.

The coast guard escorted him to the hospital morgue, handcuffed. When they came back up 15 minutes later, the man wasn't wearing handcuffs anymore and the coast guard officers were carrying him, Choulis said. He had collapsed.

The father was eventually released on the bail condition that he not leave the country. Refugee organizations put him up in a hotel.

The little boy's body lay in the morgue for weeks. His death certificate shows he was buried on Nov. 30, in the small cemetery above the village of Iraion, where other victims of migrant shipwrecks lie.

The father has since been granted temporary asylum in Greece. But without his son, he said, he doesn't much care where, or if, he lives.

"His son was his friend, he was everything to him," Haidari said. "He was his hope to be alive."

Theodora Tongas contributed to this report. Follow Becatoros at <https://twitter.com/ElenaBec> and Tongas at <https://twitter.com/theodoratongas>

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## **Suu Kyi payments claimed as Myanmar junta raises pressure**

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — A Myanmar construction magnate with links to military rulers said he personally gave more than half a million dollars in cash to deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a broadcast on state television aimed at discrediting the ousted civilian government.

The statement by Maung Waik could pave the way for more serious charges against Suu Kyi, who has been detained since the Feb. 1 military takeover while security forces increasingly use lethal force against a popular uprising demanding the restoration of democratically elected leaders.

The military has already tried to implicate Suu Kyi in corruption, alleging she was given \$600,000 plus gold bars by a political ally. She and President Win Myint have been charged so far with inciting unrest, possession of walkie-talkies and violating a pandemic order limiting public gatherings.

In the latest salvo of allegations, Maung Waik, who has previously been convicted of drug trafficking, told state TV he gave cash to government ministers to help his businesses. He said the money included \$100,000 given to Suu Kyi in 2018 for a charitable foundation named after her mother, \$150,000 in 2019 for which he did not specify a reason, \$50,000 last February and \$250,000 in April, again with no purpose specified.

The country's Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating the allegations and vowed to take action against Suu Kyi under the Anti-Corruption Law, the state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar reported Thursday.

Meanwhile, a court has issued an arrest warrant for the country's U.N. ambassador, Kyaw Moe Tun, on charges of treason, the newspaper reported.

The charge stems from his remarks Feb. 26 at U.N. headquarters, in which he condemned the coup and appealed for "the strongest possible action from the international community" to restore democracy in his country.

Also charged with treason was Mahn Win Khaing Than, the civilian leader of Myanmar's government in hiding, the newspaper said. The acting vice president and member of Suu Kyi's political party on Saturday had vowed to continue supporting a "revolution" to eject the military from power.

On Thursday, residents of a Yangon suburb set street barricades ablaze to block riot police.

Video showed large palls of smoke rising over the Tha Mine area in the city's Hlaing township, with another barricade burning fiercely in the middle of a residential area. One resident, who did not want to be named for fear of retaliation, told The Associated Press that protesters set them alight after hearing that a column of police trucks was on its way.

Building barricades – and occasionally burning them – are now established tactics by opponents of the junta all over the country to impede police and army movement. The barriers also provide some protection from the now-frequent use of live ammunition against them.

On Wednesday, at least two people were shot dead in Kalay in northwestern Myanmar, according to media and social media posts that included photos of the victims. More than 200 people have been killed by security forces since the coup, according to credible tallies.

## **Asian Americans grieve, organize in wake of Atlanta attacks**

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

Asian Americans were already worn down by a year of pandemic-fueled racist attacks when a white gunman was charged with attacking three Atlanta-area massage parlors and killing eight people, most of them Asian women.

Hundreds of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders turned to social media to air their anger, sadness, fear and hopelessness. The hashtag #StopAsianHate was a top trending topic on Twitter hours after the shootings that happened Tuesday evening.

"I think the reason why people are feeling so hopeless is because Asian Americans have been ringing

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the bell on this issue for so long ... We've been raising the red flag," said Aisha Yaqoob Mahmood, executive director of the Atlanta-based Asian American Advocacy Fund, which does political and advocacy work across Georgia.

Many were also outraged that the suspect, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, was not immediately charged with hate crimes. Authorities said Long told police the attack was not racially motivated, and he claimed that he targeted the spas because of a "sex addiction." Six of the seven slain women were identified as Asian.

Law enforcement needs "some training understanding what a hate crime is. This man identified targets owned by Asians," said Margaret Huang, president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups. The gunman "was very clearly going after a targeted group of people."

Being Asian American herself, Huang said the shootings felt personal. She is worried that not classifying the attack as a hate crime will "absolutely discourage others from coming forward and seeking help."

She also cringed at the comments of a sheriff's captain who said of the gunman, "It was a really bad day for him."

The remark "appeared to be trying to explain and justify" the suspect's actions. "Hopefully it was a misstatement," Huang said.

Mahmood said Asian American business owners in the Atlanta area were already fearful because of incidents like graffiti and break-ins. The shootings will raise that worry to new heights.

"A lot of Asian American business owners in the beauty parlor industry and food service — these are often the most visible front-line faces in the community," Mahmood said.

Her organization is partnering with other groups like the Atlanta chapter of Asian Americans Advancing Justice to offer resources in multiple languages, including mental health assistance, self-defense training and bystander training.

Meanwhile, from Phoenix to Philadelphia, Asian American organizations nationwide organized events aimed at showing unity.

Asian Americans United, the Asian Pacific Islander Political Alliance and several other partner groups held a vigil Wednesday afternoon in Philadelphia's Chinatown neighborhood.

"After the month and year we had, we knew our folks needed the time to come together safely just to grieve and heal and mourn and speak to what's happening," said Mohan Seshadri, Asian Pacific Islander Political Alliance co-executive director.

As much despair as Asian Americans feel, Seshadri said, the shootings also mark a flashpoint.

"Our folks are pissed off and ready to fight," Seshadri said. "The way we get through this is together by organizing our people and feeling solidarity."

Arizona Asian Chamber of Commerce CEO Vicente Reid is planning a vigil next week in the Phoenix suburb of Mesa, which has a high concentration of Asian American-owned shops and restaurants. He thinks the slayings have galvanized the local community to go beyond vigils.

"I think there is this whole outlet of this younger generation who's passionate and has the energy. They just need someone to step up and lead them," Reid said.

For the past several weeks, Asian Americans have questioned how to deal with a recent wave of assaults — many on the elderly — that coincided with the pandemic. The virus was first identified in China, and then-President Donald Trump and others have used racial terms to describe it.

Numerous Asian American organizations say Trump's rhetoric has emboldened people to express anti-Asian or anti-immigrant views. Nearly 3,800 incidents have been reported to Stop AAPI Hate, a California-based reporting center for Asian American Pacific Islanders, and its partner groups, since March 2020. Nationally, women reported hate crimes 2.3 times more than men.

Following the release Wednesday of a report showing a surge in white supremacist propaganda in 2020, the Anti-Defamation League told The Associated Press that a significant amount of the propaganda included anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The anti-hate group said 10% of propaganda descriptions in its inventory contained negative references to immigration, multiculturalism or diversity. The 522 physical flyers, stickers or banners included the use of words such as "invasion, deport, disease, illegal, infection and virus," the ADL said.

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There were also seven propaganda incidents with direct anti-China references to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the shootings have drawn support for Asian Americans from many non-Asians. Asian Americans need allies to continue speaking out against racism, Mahmood said.

"The path forward for us is really just standing together and making sure we don't let these types of tragedies divide our communities."

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Associated Press Writer Aaron Morrison in New York City contributed to this report.

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Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>.

## Jan. 6 commission stalls, for now, amid partisan dissension

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Legislation creating an independent, bipartisan panel to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is stalled, for now, with Democrats and Republicans split over the scope and structure of a review that would revisit the deadly attack and assess former President Donald Trump's role.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has pushed for the commission, which would be modeled after the panel that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. But unlike 9/11, which engendered some unity in Congress almost two decades ago, the insurrection by Trump's supporters has pulled Democrats and Republicans further apart, even on the basic question of what should be investigated.

It's a symptom not just of the partisan tensions that run high in Congress but of a legislative branch reeling from the fallout of the Trump era, with lawmakers unable to find common ground, or a common set of facts, even after a mob smashed into the Capitol and threatened their lives.

Democrats say Republicans helped provoke the attack by aiding and abetting Trump's falsehoods about the election — many signed onto a failed lawsuit challenging Joe Biden's victory — and question whether GOP lawmakers had ties to the rioters. Some Republicans, including Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, have downplayed the severity of the attack.

"The problem is the scope," Pelosi said Wednesday. "Are we going to seek the truth or are we going to say we're not stipulating that anything really happened that day?"

Republicans immediately objected last month to Pelosi's proposal for the commission, which would create a panel of four Republicans and seven Democrats to "conduct an investigation of the relevant facts and circumstances relating to the domestic terrorist attack on the Capitol." She has signaled she is open to negotiations on the commission's partisan makeup but has drawn a harder line on the scope.

The legislation does not mention Trump or his calls for his supporters who broke into the Capitol to "fight like hell" to overturn his presidential election defeat. But Republicans swiftly decried the broad latitude that the commission would have to investigate the causes of the insurrection. They also objected to a series of findings in the bill that quoted FBI Director Christopher Wray saying that racially motivated violent extremism, and especially white supremacy, is one of the biggest threats to domestic security.

The Republicans said the investigation should not just focus on what led to the Jan. 6 insurrection but also on violence in the summer of 2020 during protests over police brutality — a touchstone among GOP voters and an idea that Democrats say is a distraction from the real causes of the violent attack.

"We can pass a bill, but that's not the point," Pelosi said in an interview on MSNBC. "You want it to be bipartisan. And it cannot be bipartisan if the scope of it is to not draw any conclusion about what happened that day as the premise for how we would go forward and investigate it."

Failure to set up a commission would leave it to committees in the House and Senate to explore what went wrong on Jan. 6, which is what some lawmakers prefer. Those investigations are well underway on a bipartisan basis and have already identified problems with Capitol Police. But those probes are unlikely to attain the stature and credibility of an outside investigation.

It is unclear whether negotiations on the commission are active. A House GOP leadership aide said

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Wednesday that House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy is continuing to request that Republicans have equal representation on the panel and greater subpoena power, identical to the 9/11 commission. The aide, who was granted anonymity to discuss the private negotiations, did not comment on whether the scope of the probe was still a sticking point.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor last month that the language is “artificial cherry picking” and that the commission should either look narrowly at the specific security failures in the Capitol or “potentially do something broader to analyze the full scope of political violence here in our country.”

McConnell said an inquiry “with a hardwired partisan slant would never be legitimate in the eyes of the American people.”

If Pelosi did move forward on a partisan basis, the legislation would likely meet opposition in the Senate, where 60 votes — including 10 Republicans — would be needed for passage.

Senate Republicans cast doubt that there was enough support for the commission.

“My instinct is that is not happening, that the idea that speaker floated was so much in contrast to the way we handled this on 9/11,” said Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt, the top Republican on the Senate Rules Committee, which is conducting its own probe. “I think the better way to do it right now would be for the committees to continue to work on it and try to come to quicker conclusions.”

Blunt said a commission could take too long to make findings that could improve security around the Capitol.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Republican, said he doesn’t think the commission will happen if the legislation isn’t changed.

“I hope that it can get restarted, but I think they’re going to have to look at how they can restructure it,” Thune said.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

## Severe storms, tornadoes possible across the Deep South

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — The prospect of more tornadoes overnight and into Thursday across the Deep South had forecasters advising residents to take extra precautions after a wave of storms pounded the region throughout the day Wednesday, leaving a trail of splintered trees and damaged buildings.

Scattered severe thunderstorms are expected Thursday for portions of eastern Georgia, through the Carolinas into extreme southeast Virginia, according to the National Weather Service’s Storm Prediction Center. All severe hazards are possible. Other isolated severe storms are possible from southern Ohio into the central Appalachians.

The biggest overnight threat of tornadoes remained over Alabama, according to the weather service, but severe storms and tornadoes were possible from east-central Georgia and northeast across South and North Carolina later in the day Thursday.

“Significant tornadoes, wind damage and large hail will be possible from morning into afternoon,” the center advised late Wednesday. “Severe thunderstorms will also be possible from parts of the eastern Gulf Coast into the southern and central Appalachians.”

The weather service advised residents throughout the region to keep the volume up on cellphones to hear emergency alerts throughout the night.

Early Thursday there were no storm warnings across the metro Atlanta area but intense lightning, heavy rain and strong wind gusts of up to 40-50 mph were moving through the area.

Morehouse College tweeted that it was delaying the opening of its campus until 11 a.m. and that faculty and staff should not arrive until after that time. All classes before then were to be held virtually, it said.

While nearly 16 million people in the Southeast could see powerful storms, the prediction center said, a region of about 3 million stretching from southeastern Arkansas and northeastern Louisiana across Mis-

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Mississippi into Alabama was at high risk for big twisters that stay on the ground for miles, straight winds up to 80 mph (129 kph) and destructive hail.

In South Carolina, the severe weather threat led the state Senate president to caution senators to state home Thursday while urging staff to work remotely for their safety. House Speaker Jay Lucas said that chamber would meet less than an hour Thursday to take up routine motions in advance of a budget debate next week — then adjourn.

"If you are in a situation where it is perilous that you come, I'm asking you not to come," Lucas said. "If you can come, give us a quorum and do these few things we need to do, we will be out of here in a hurry."

Nearly all of South Carolina is under moderate risk of severe storms. The forecast led a number of the state's school systems to call off in-person classes Thursday and have students and teachers meet online.

Possible tornadoes on Wednesday knocked down trees, toppled power lines and damaged homes in rural Chilton County and the Alabama communities of Burnsville and Moundville, where power was out and trees blocked a main highway.

WTVM-TV reports that Jimmy Baker, whose home was one of at least three destroyed in Chilton, watched as the storm headed toward his house.

"Then about a minute before it got here, we jumped. . . in the hall closet, a little, small closet," Baker said. "And just we heard it. You know, the sound from the house coming down. We were saved. We thank the Lord for that," he said.

"Downtown Moundville got it. Some roofs and stuff got taken off houses," said Michael Brown, whose family owns Moundville Ace Hardware and Building. "There's a lot of trees down. I guess it had to be a tornado; it got out of here pretty fast."

Additional damage was reported in Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi, where video showed an apparent tornado at Brookhaven. High winds blew down signs and trees in northeast Texas, and hailstones the size of baseballs were reported near the Alabama-Mississippi line, the weather service said.

More than 70,000 homes and businesses were without power from Texas to Alabama, and radar showed additional storms moving across the region as initial cleanup work began.

Storms were possible all the way from northern Texas in the west to northern Illinois and as far east as the Carolinas, forecasters said, and the weather service issued more than 50 tornado warnings in Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi and Oklahoma. Tornado watches included parts of seven states.

Dozens of school systems in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi canceled classes, switched to online learning or dismissed students early, and Mississippi State University moved to virtual teaching because of the potential for danger at its campuses in Starkville and Meridian.

Large vaccination clinics where hundreds of people an hour can get shots without leaving their vehicles were canceled in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. In the Mississippi capital of Jackson, state employees were warned to head to stairwells if they hear weather sirens. Near Birmingham, labor organizers canceled an outdoor event at an Amazon facility where workers are voting on union representation.

At least two waves of storms were likely, forecasters said, and the worst might not hit until a cold front passes through overnight.

"The biggest question is how strong to severe these storms are going to be and if they're going to be tornadic right off the bat," Gary Goggins, a forecaster with the National Weather Service office for Birmingham, said Wednesday.

Gov. Kay Ivey placed Alabama under a state of emergency, and communities across the South used social media to share the location of tornado shelters. Dozens of people gathered in a gymnasium that was opened as a shelter in Tuscaloosa, where more than 50 people died in a twister during a weather outbreak that occurred 10 years ago next month.

In Jackson, Tennessee, officials said a civic center and the regional airport would be open for residents seeking shelter.

**Troubled US-China ties face new test in Alaska meeting**

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By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States and China will face a new test in their increasingly troubled relations when top officials from both countries meet in Alaska.

Ties between the world's two largest economies have been torn for years and the Biden administration has yet to signal it's ready or willing to back down on the hard-line stances taken under President Donald Trump. Nor has China signaled it's prepared to ease the pressure it has brought to bear. Thus, the stage is set for a contentious first face-to-face meeting Thursday.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan will meet China's top two diplomats, State Councilor Wang Yi and Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi in Anchorage, Alaska. Difficult discussions are anticipated over trade, human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong, China's western Xinjiang region, Taiwan, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, and the coronavirus pandemic.

No agreements are expected.

"This really is a one-off meeting," said a senior administration official. "This is not the resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or the beginning of a dialogue process." The official briefed reporters ahead of the meeting on the condition of anonymity.

Blinken will attend the meeting having just come from Japan and South Korea, where he and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin were promoting the Biden administration's commitment to its treaty allies in Asia.

Just a day before the meeting, Blinken announced new sanctions on officials over China's crackdown on pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong. In response, the Chinese stepped up their rhetoric opposing U.S. interference in domestic affairs.

China, not unexpectedly, slammed the U.S. criticism of the move to give a pro-Beijing committee power to appoint more of Hong Kong's lawmakers, which reduces 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 imposition of 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.

The White House set low expectations for Blinken and Sullivan's meeting, which officials say will be an initial opportunity to address intense disagreements.

The senior administration official described the talks as a chance for the two sides for "taking stock" in the relationship. The official said the two sides would not deliver a joint statement following the meeting and no major announcements are expected to come out of the talks.

China's ambassador to the U.S. also downplayed expectations for the Alaska meeting in comments to Chinese media on Wednesday, while holding out hopes it would pave the way for better communication.

"Naturally, we don't expect one round of dialogue will resolve all the issues between China and the U.S. and we don't hold overly high hopes," Cui Tiankai said in a transcript of his comments posted on the embassy's website.

"My wish is that this can be a start and that the two sides can begin a dialogue process that is candid, constructive and realistic," Cui said. "If we can achieve that, I think this exchange will be successful."

Blinken, in Japan before heading to South Korea and Alaska, said the U.S. "will push back if necessary when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way."

"The relationship with China is a very complex one," he said. "It has adversarial aspects; it has competitive aspects; it has cooperative aspects. But the common denominator in dealing with each of those is to make sure we're approaching China from a position of strength, and that strength starts with our alliance, with our solidarity, because it's really a unique asset that we have and China doesn't."

The Chinese are not backing down.

On Wednesday at the United Nations, they blasted the U.S. human rights record, citing what they called U.S. failures against COVID-19 that cost "hundreds of thousands of lives," as well as racial discrimination, police brutality and an "evil past of genocide." Jiang Duan, a counselor at the Chinese mission in Geneva,

voiced the criticism at the end of an examination of the U.S. rights record at the U.N. Human Rights Council.

The administration has held a series of talks with Pacific allies, including Biden's virtual summit with the leaders of the Quad — Australia, India, Japan and the United States — before engaging in the high-level talks with China.

Trump had taken pride in forging what he saw as a strong relationship with Xi Jinping. But the relationship disintegrated after the coronavirus pandemic spread from the Wuhan province across the globe and unleashed a public health and economic disaster.

In addition to pushing back on China's aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific and its human rights record, Biden faces other thorny issues in the relationship.

But so far, he's declined to rescind hundreds of billions of dollars in tariffs imposed by Trump against China or to lift bans on Chinese apps.

Biden is, however, looking for China's cooperation on pressing North Korea's Kim Jong Un over his nation's nuclear program.

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Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani in Washington, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, and Zen Soo in Hong Kong contributed to this report.

## **Yemeni rebel offensive threatens camps of those who fled war**

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Already displaced once in Yemen's grinding civil war, Mohammed Ali Saleh fled with his pregnant wife and their three children to central Marib province last year to seek refuge in a region that has known some relative peace and stability because of well-protected oil fields nearby.

But now the fighting is moving toward them again.

Iran-backed Houthi rebels are pushing to capture the province from the internationally recognized government to try to complete their control over the northern half of Yemen. If they succeed, the Houthis could claim a strategic win after a largely stalemated battle in almost seven years of fighting.

The sounds of war terrify Saleh and his family.

"It's a nightmare we are experiencing every night," he said from a camp for the displaced that had previously escaped violence.

The Houthis launched their Marib offensive in February. The new campaign, combined with increasing Houthi missile and drone attacks on neighboring Saudi Arabia, comes as the Biden administration tries to relaunch talks on ending the conflict in Yemen — the Arab world's poorest country that has been pushed to the brink of famine by the bloodshed.

The Houthi push in Marib also threatens to ignite more fighting elsewhere in Yemen. Government-allied forces, aided by a Saudi-led coalition, have ramped up attacks in other areas recently in an apparent attempt to force the Houthis to spread out their resources and make them more vulnerable.

The Marib offensive "is a fateful battle for the Houthis," said political analyst Abdel-Bari Taher. "It will determine the future of their ability to rule" in northern Yemen.

Marib houses a key oil refinery that produces 90% of liquefied petroleum gas, which is used for cooking and heating in almost all Yemeni households. Severe fuel shortages already plague many areas across the country.

The fighting in Marib could displace at least 385,000 people, according to the U.N. migration agency. Four displacement camps in the province have been abandoned since the start of the offensive, said Olivia Headon of the International Organization for Migration in Yemen.

Yemen has been convulsed by civil war since 2014 when the Houthis took control of the capital of Sanaa and much of the northern part of the country, forcing the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to flee to the south, then to Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-led coalition, backed at the time by the U.S., entered the war months later to try restore Hadi to power. Despite a relentless air campaign and ground fighting, the war has deteriorated into a stalemate,

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killing about 130,000 people and spawning the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The Biden administration last month officially withdrew its backing for the coalition but said the U.S. would continue to offer support to Saudi Arabia as it defends itself against Houthi attacks.

The latest offensive has been among the fiercest, with the Houthis moving heavy weapons toward Marib. They have yet to achieve major progress amid stiff resistance from local tribes and government forces aided by airstrikes from the coalition.

But the fighting is coming close to civilians and the displacement camps. Houthi forces have hit the provincial capital, also called Marib, and its outskirts with ballistic missiles, explosives-laden drones and shelling, according to aid workers.

Sheikh Sultan al-Aradah, the provincial governor, told reporters that the coalition's airstrikes helped fend off the Houthis. "Without their support, the situation would be very different," he said.

Hundreds of fighters, most of them Houthi rebels, have been killed in the Marib campaign, according to officials from both sides.

Houthi leaders have portrayed the offensive as a religious battle, a sign of its significance for them. The rebels have tried to take Marib for years, seizing towns and districts in neighboring provinces.

"There are probably multiple agendas at play in Marib but the most urgent is the Houthis' belief they can take Marib city and end the war for the north, while improving their economic sustainability and their bargaining position with Saudi Arabia," said Peter Salisbury, Yemen expert at the International Crisis Group.

But their offensive could be backfiring.

Government-backed forces managed to retake swaths of territory from the Houthis in Hajjah and Taiz provinces. The battle for Marib also could be used as a justification for Hadi's government to back out of previous partial cease-fires, such as the 2018 U.N.-brokered deal that ended fighting for the key Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida, which handles about 70% of Yemen's commercial and humanitarian imports.

The rebels began the Marib offensive shortly after President Joe Biden removed them from a U.S. terrorism list, reversing a Trump administration decision that brought a widespread outcry from the U.N. and aid groups on humanitarian grounds.

The escalation has left international observers at a loss on how to find a starting point for a long-sought peace. Tim Lenderking, the U.S. envoy to Yemen, noted that "tragically, and somewhat confusingly for me, it appears that the Houthis are prioritizing a military campaign." He has urged them to agree to a recent cease-fire proposal.

Mohammed Abdul-Salam, a spokesman for the Houthis, told the rebel-run al-Masirah satellite TV channel that they were studying the proposal, but he also criticized it. He alleged it didn't offer an acceptable way to end to the blockade imposed by the coalition on rebel-held areas, a reference to the closure of Sanaa's airport to commercial flights and restrictions on cargo ships at Hodeida.

At the same time, the Houthis have intensified their missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia. The coalition said the rebels were encouraged by Biden's moves, including his decision to halt U.S. support for the coalition in a dramatic break with the joint air campaign against them.

The warring parties have not held substantive negotiations since 2019. A deal brokered by the U.N. in 2018 after talks in Sweden has largely gone nowhere; only one of its components — prisoner exchanges — has made any progress, after multiple rounds of talks.

Meanwhile, displaced families in Marib live in fear of what comes next.

Saleh, 29, and his family fled his native Sanaa in 2017 for the city of Hazm, the provincial capital of Jawf, before the Houthis overran it last year. That forced them to flee to Marib, and they settled in one of the 125 displacement camps there, according to the IOM.

"We are tired. We have been displaced several times," said Saleh's wife Fatima, who gave birth to their youngest daughter in the camp.

—  
Associated Press writer Ahmed al-Haj in Sanaa, Yemen, contributed.

## Tokyo Olympics: yet another scandal over sexist comments

By STEPHEN WADE and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — In yet another setback for the postponed Tokyo Olympics — and another involving comments about women — games' creative director Hiroshi Sasaki resigned on Thursday after making demeaning comments about a well-known female celebrity in Japan.

The Tokyo Olympics are scheduled to open in just over four months, dogged by the coronavirus pandemic, record costs, and numerous scandals. And all of this converges as the Olympic torch relay starts next week from northeastern Japan, a risky venture with 10,000 runners set to crisscross Japan for four months.

When the International Olympic Committee awarded Japan the games 7 1/2 years ago, Tokyo billed itself as "a safe pair of hands." It has evolved into anything but that.

Japanese organizers did well with initial planning and organization. But they have been buffeted by the pandemic and seem snake-bitten with the Olympics causing new problems and more expenses almost daily. Support has plummeted with various polls suggesting about 80% of Japanese want the Olympics canceled or postponed again. They cite the costs and the risks of holding the mega-event during a pandemic.

"The IOC and Japanese politics are male-dominated territories," Dr. Barbara Holthus, deputy director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, told The Associated Press. "Japanese politicians have a long history of furthering gender inequalities — besides many other inequalities."

In February, the president of the organizing committee Yoshiro Mori was forced to resign after making sexist comments, saying women talk too much in meetings.

Two years ago, the head of the Japanese Olympic Committee Tsunekazu Takeda was also forced to step down in a bribery scandal connected to vote-buying involving IOC members.

Sasaki was in charge of the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics, which are scheduled to begin on July 23. He also designed the Tokyo handover ceremony at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, and arranged a one-year-to-go event in July at Tokyo's new National Stadium.

Last year he suggested to planning staff members in online "brainstorming exchanges" that well-known entertainer Naomi Watanabe could perform in the ceremony as an "Olympig."

Watanabe is a heavy-set young woman, a fashion icon, and very famous in Japan. Sasaki's "Olympig" reference was an obvious play on the word "Olympic."

The story was first reported by the weekly magazine Bunshun, and the corresponding controversy took off almost instantly.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike called Sasaki's comments "extremely embarrassing,"

"When we are talking about what we deliver from Tokyo, or from Japan, we shouldn't be sending a negative message," Koike said Thursday.

Sasaki released a statement saying he was stepping down. He said he had also called Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the organizing committee, and tendered his resignation.

"For Ms. Naomi Watanabe, my idea and comments are a big insult. And it is unforgivable," Sasaki said. "I offer my deepest regrets and apologize from the depth of my heart to her, and those who may have been offended by this."

"It is truly regrettable, and I apologize from the bottom of my heart,"

Hashimoto said in a Thursday news conference that she had accepted his resignation. She said a replacement would come quickly, and also indicated she had tried to persuade him to stay.

"I did feel that way but he explained, and his intention was very strong," Hashimoto said. "That is how I felt. For those reasons I decided to accept his resignation."

Hashimoto also said she talked with IOC member John Coates, who oversees preparations for Tokyo.

"The IOC also received the (magazine) article and they were quite concerned," Hashimoto said.

Hashimoto, who has appeared in seven Olympics and won a bronze medal in 1992, took over a month ago when Mori made similar sexist comments and was forced out. Hashimoto has acted quickly and appointed 12 women to the organizing committee's executive board, increasing female membership to 42%. It had been 20%.

Sasaki formerly worked for the giant Japanese advertising company Dentsu Inc., which has been a key supporter of these Olympics. It is the official marketing partner and has helped to raise a record of \$3.5 billion in local sponsorship, almost three times as much as any previous Olympics.

The torch relay for the Olympics kicks off next week from northeastern Japan and will be a severe test with 10,000 runners crisscrossing Japan for four months, heading to the opening ceremony and trying to avoid spreading COVID-19. Japan has controlled the virus better than most countries and has attributed about 8,700 deaths to the virus.

Organizers and the IOC insist the Olympics will go forward during the pandemic with 11,000 Olympic and 4,400 Paralympic athletes entering Japan. Official costs for Tokyo are \$15.4 billion but several government audits show the real cost might be twice that much.

A University of Oxford study says Tokyo is the most expensive Olympics on record.

AP reporter Mari Yamaguchi also contributed to this story.

P Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## Australian police boss suggests app to prove sexual consent

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — A senior Australian policeman suggested on Thursday a phone app be developed to document sexual consent in a bid to improve conviction rates in sex crime cases.

New South Wales state Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said dating apps have brought couples together and the same technology could also provide clarity on the question of consent.

"Technology doesn't fix everything, but ... it plays such a big role in people meeting at the moment. I'm just suggesting: is it part of the solution?" Fuller said.

Fuller said the number of sexual assaults reported in Australia's most populous state was increasing while a prosecution success rate of only 2% stemming from those reports showed the system was failing.

"Consent can't be implied," Fuller wrote in News Corp. newspapers. "Consent must be active and ongoing throughout a sexual encounter."

Responses to the consent app suggestion have been largely negative or skeptical.

State Premier Gladys Berejiklian congratulated Fuller on "taking a leadership position on having the conversation" about the sexual assault problem, but declined to share her opinion on the app.

Lesley-Anne Ey, a University of South Australia expert on harmful sexual behavior involving children, said she didn't think the app would work.

"I don't think they're going to interrupt the romance to put details into an app," Ey told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

Catharine Lumby, a Sydney University specialist in ethics and accountability, described the app as a quick-fix that misunderstood the circumstances of sexual assaults.

"Fundamentally what we are now having a reckoning with is the fact that there is a very small minority of men in this society who are opportunists, who make the decision to sexually assault women," Lumby said.

"They don't care where, how or why they do it. They will take the opportunity and I'm sure they are more than capable of manipulating technology," Lumby said.

More than 100,000 women protested in rallies across Australia on Monday demanding justice while calling out misogyny and dangerous workplace cultures.

The public anger erupted after the Australian attorney general denied an allegation that he raped a 16-year-old girl 33 years ago, and a former government staffer alleged that she was raped two years ago by a colleague in a minister's Parliament House office.

Fuller said his suggestion could gain popularity in time.

"To be honest with you, the app idea could be the worst idea I have in 2021, but the reality is in five years, perhaps it won't be," he said. "If you think about dating 10 years ago, this concept of single people

swiping left and right was a term that we didn't even know."

A consent app similar to Fuller's proposal was launched in Denmark last month. But the app hasn't been widely adopted, with fewer than 5,000 downloads, according to mobile intelligence site Sensor Tower.

## Breyer mum as some liberals urge him to quit Supreme Court

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Forgive progressives who aren't looking forward to the sequel of their personal "Nightmare on First Street," a Supreme Court succession story.

The original followed Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's decision to forgo retirement from the high court, located on First Street in Washington, when Democrats controlled the White House and the Senate during six years of Barack Obama's presidency, until 2015.

Despite some pointed warnings of what might happen, Ginsburg remained on the bench until her death last year at age 87. President Donald Trump replaced the liberal icon with a young conservative, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, and cemented a 6-3 conservative majority on the court just over a month before he lost his bid for a second term.

In the updated version, 82-year-old Justice Stephen Breyer plays the leading role. He is the oldest member of the court and has served more than 26 years since his appointment by President Bill Clinton.

With spring comes the start of the period in which many justices have announced their retirement. Some progressives say it is time for Breyer to go, without delay. Other liberal voices have said Breyer should retire when the court finishes its work for the term, usually by early summer.

"He should announce his retirement immediately, effective upon the confirmation of his successor," University of Colorado law professor Paul Campos wrote in The New York Times on Monday.

Campos' plea stems from the Democrats' tenuous hold on power.

A Democrat, President Joe Biden, lives in the White House and his party runs the evenly divided Senate only because the tie-breaking 51st vote belongs to Vice President Kamala Harris.

But there is no margin for a senator's death or incapacitating illness that could instantly flip control to Republicans. Campos noted that the party composition of the Senate has changed more often than not in each two-year session of Congress since the end of World War II.

Breyer has remained mum about his plans, at least publicly. His last comment on the topic of retirement was made to Slate's Dahlia Lithwick in an interview published in December. "I mean, eventually I'll retire, sure I will," Breyer said. "And it's hard to know exactly when."

The justice, through a court spokeswoman, declined to comment for this story. Breyer's predecessors have tended to time their retirements so that they can be replaced by justices with similar views of the law.

Some of those who asked Ginsburg to retire also said Breyer, five years younger than Ginsburg, should have contemplated quitting, too.

Biden already has pledged to name the first Black woman to the court, if he gets the chance. Among the names being circulated are California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, U.S. District Court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson and U.S. District Court Judge Michelle Childs. She is a favorite of Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., who made a crucial endorsement of Biden just before the state's presidential primary last year.

Breyer could announce his plans at any time, or say nothing and remain on the court. Justices Harry Blackmun, David Souter and John Paul Stevens announced their plans in April or May. Justices Anthony Kennedy and Sandra Day O'Connor waited until early summer.

Breyer's departure wouldn't do anything to change the conservatives' 6-3 edge on the Supreme Court. Republicans firmed up and expanded conservative control of the court during Trump's presidency.

First, they refused to consider Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland, after Justice Antonin Scalia died in 2016. Trump picked Justice Neil Gorsuch, 53, for the seat less than two weeks after he took office. Kennedy's retirement in 2018 and Ginsburg's death in September led to pitched confirmation battles that ended with Justice Brett Kavanaugh, 56, and Barrett, 49, on the court.

But while the ideological makeup would stay the same, Breyer's retirement would allow Biden to reju-

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venate the liberal side of the court, where Justice Sonia Sotomayor is 66 and Justice Elena Kagan is 60.

If Breyer steps down, Clarence Thomas, 72, would be the court's oldest justice.

Ginsburg maintained a steely, though ultimately mistaken, confidence that Democrats would retain the White House in 2016. She also doubted that Democrats could confirm someone as progressive as she was under existing rules that allowed the minority party to block, or at least delay, Supreme Court nominations.

"So who do you think could be nominated now that would get through the Senate that you would rather see on the court than me?" Ginsburg asked rhetorically in an interview with The Associated Press in August 2014.

Republicans changed those rules in 2017 to prevent a Democratic filibuster of Gorsuch's nomination.

But in private, Ginsburg did seek advice about what she should do, Ohio State University law professor Deborah Merritt said Monday in an online commemoration of what would have been Ginsburg's 88th birthday.

Ginsburg asked Merritt, her onetime law clerk, what she thought about people suggesting she retire while Obama still held office "just in case the next president is not a Democrat," Merritt said.

"Who the next president is, is our job, not your job. I think you should stay on the court as long as you can feel capable to do your job. The rest of us will do our job," Merritt recalled telling the justice in a conversation in 2015.

Law clerks are perhaps the least likely people to tell judges they once served that it's time to retire.

The topic provokes equally strong reactions from people who say it's presumptuous to ask a justice to step down for political reasons and those who say it's naive to do otherwise.

## Republicans seize on immigration as border crossings surge

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Delegation trips to the border. Apocalyptic warnings. A flurry of new conferences.

Republicans still divided over former President Donald Trump's legacy are seizing on his signature campaign issue, turning their focus to immigration as they try to regain the political upper hand.

Faced with President Joe Biden's early popularity, good news about vaccinations, and Americans' embrace of the COVID-19 relief bill Washington Republicans opposed, the GOP is leaning in on the highly charged issue amid a spike in border crossings. They hope immigration can unite the party heading into next year's elections, when control of Congress is at stake.

"Heading into the midterms, I think that Republicans are increasingly realizing that this can be one of the most potent issues, both to motivate our voters, but equally as important, to appeal to" swing voters — especially in suburban swing districts — who voted for Democrats in 2020, said former Trump aide Stephen Miller, the architect of his immigration policies. He said the issue has been a subject of discussion in his recent conversations with lawmakers as child border crossings have surged, straining U.S. facilities.

The situation at the southern border is complex. Since Biden's inauguration, the country has seen a dramatic spike in the number of people encountered by border officials, with 18,945 family members and 9,297 unaccompanied children encountered in February — an increase of 168% and 63% from the month before, according to the Pew Research Center. That creates an enormous logistical challenge, since children, in particular, require higher standards of care and coordination across agencies.

Still, the encounters of both unaccompanied minors and families remain lower than at various points during the Trump administration, including in spring 2019. That May, authorities encountered more than 55,000 migrant children, including 11,500 unaccompanied minors, and around 84,500 migrants traveling in family units.

But that hasn't stopped Republicans from seizing on the issue, led by Trump himself. They blame Biden, who has been deeply critical of Trump's approach, for rolling back many of the former president's hard-line deterrence policies. And they liken Biden's new, kinder tone to an invitation to would-be border crossers.

"They're destroying our country. People are coming in by the hundreds of thousands," warned Trump in an interview Tuesday night with Fox News Channel. "And, frankly, our country can't handle it. It is a crisis like we have rarely had and, certainly, we have never had on the border."

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"It's more than a crisis. This is a human heartbreak," said House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, who led a delegation of a dozen fellow House Republicans to El Paso, Texas, on Monday.

"This crisis is created by the presidential policies of this new administration," he said.

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, a potential 2024 presidential candidate who is planning to lead his own Senate delegation tour to the Texas-Mexico border next Friday, accused the administration of having, "in effect, issued an invitation for unaccompanied children to come to this country."

Even Sen. Mitt Romney, one of Trump's most prominent Republican critics, faulted Biden's moves, including the halting of construction of Trump's signature border wall project.

"What's happening at our southern border is a real crisis, and the Administration is making it worse by unlawfully freezing border wall funding appropriated by Congress," Romney tweeted after signing onto a letter with 39 other Republican senators criticizing the new approach to the border.

Democrats and immigration activists see it differently. They deride the policies Trump implemented to deter asylum as cruel and inhumane and an abdication of the country's humanitarian responsibilities. That includes the decision to forcibly separate more than 3,000 children from their parents, with no system in place to reunite them.

But policies like "Remain in Mexico," which forced asylum seekers to wait across the border as their cases were being adjudicated, and the expulsion of unaccompanied children were effective, and the number of migrants crossing the southern border declined precipitously, further slowed by the pandemic.

Beds were taken offline and staff downsized even as immigration experts on both sides of the aisle and career Homeland Security officials cautioned the numbers would likely begin to rise again once the pandemic subsided.

Advocates also note that apprehensions of single adults have been spiking since April 2020, long before Trump left office. And they accuse the last administration of enacting policies that clogged the immigration system — making it take longer to move people through the system — and failing to build capacity when numbers began rising. Biden transition officials, for instance, urged the outgoing administration to increase capacity, but were met with inaction. Miller said career officials they'd chosen to work with the incoming administration warned numbers would rise exponentially if policies were reversed.

"This was purposeful. They made it harder for the process to work efficiently ... there's no question," said Peter Boogaard of FWD.us, a pro-immigration reform group. "The Trump administration did everything in their power for four years to make the already broken immigration system as cumbersome and ineffective as possible. And once they lost, they went out of their way to do as little as humanly possible to make sure the next administration was set up to succeed on this at all."

In an interview with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos on Tuesday, Biden defended his handling of the situation. He said his administration was working with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to add more bed space, putting together new systems for connecting arriving children with relatives already in the country, and setting up a system for people to apply for asylum in their own countries.

In the meantime, he urged those considering the journey to stay put. "Yes, I can say quite clearly: Don't come over," he said. "Don't leave your town or city or community."

In the meantime, Republicans see Biden as boxed-in politically, with limited options for dealing with the border.

"The administration has said that basically, everything that we did — you name the policy ... they said that all of them are fill-in-the-blank adjective. They've described them in the most incendiary and condemnatory fashion possible," said Miller. "And obviously my view is, of course, the opposite. But the point that I'm making is when you do that you give yourself no room to adjust course. ... You leave yourself nowhere to go."

"They're kind of stuck in a corner," agreed Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies think tank, which advocates on behalf of more restrictive immigration policies. Because Biden ran as the anti-Trump, he argued, the president has few options for deterring future migrants.

"And that's why you're seeing so much glee, in some respect," he said. "It is a kind of delicious irony

that Biden's having to reopen detention centers that Trump had closed because he succeeded in shutting down the traffic."

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a longtime Trump ally, said he expects the border to become a top issue if the numbers continue to grow.

"If they don't control this, it'll be a huge issue this year, and it's an issue that gets you into public health, into the issue of defending America and whether there are borders," he said.

\_\_\_ Associated Press writers Colleen Long and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

## Man charged with killing 8 people at Georgia massage parlors

By KATE BRUMBACK and ANGIE WANG Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A white gunman was charged Wednesday with killing eight people at three Atlanta-area massage parlors in an attack that sent terror through the Asian American community, which has increasingly been targeted during the coronavirus pandemic.

A day after the shootings, investigators were trying to unravel what might have compelled 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long to commit the worst mass killing in the U.S. in almost two years.

Long told police that Tuesday's attack was not racially motivated. He claimed to have a "sex addiction," and authorities said he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation. But those statements spurred outrage and widespread skepticism given the locations and that six of the eight victims were women of Asian descent.

The shootings appear to be at the "intersection of gender-based violence, misogyny and xenophobia," said state Rep. Bee Nguyen, the first Vietnamese American to serve in the Georgia House and a frequent advocate for women and communities of color.

Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said that regardless of the shooter's motivation, "it is unacceptable, it is hateful and it has to stop."

Authorities said they didn't know if Long ever went to the massage parlors where the shootings occurred but that he was heading to Florida to attack "some type of porn industry."

"He apparently has an issue, what he considers a sex addiction, and sees these locations as something that allows him to go to these places, and it's a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate," Cherokee County sheriff's Capt. Jay Baker told reporters.

Baker drew criticism for saying Long had "a really bad day" and "this is what he did." A Facebook page appearing to belong to Baker promoted a T-shirt with racist language about China and the coronavirus last year.

The Facebook account featured numerous photos of Baker going back months, including one of him in uniform outside the sheriff's office. The account was deleted Wednesday night, and Baker did not immediately respond to voicemails and an email seeking comment. The sheriff's office also did not respond to a message.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Frank Reynolds said it was too early to tell if the attack was racially motivated — "but the indicators right now are it may not be."

The Atlanta mayor said police have not been to the massage parlors in her city beyond a minor potential theft.

"We certainly will not begin to blame victims," Bottoms said.

The attack was the sixth mass killing this year in the U.S., and the deadliest since the August 2019 Dayton, Ohio, shooting that left nine people dead, according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University.

It follows a lull in mass killings during the pandemic in 2020, which had the smallest number of such attacks in more than a decade, according to the database, which tracks mass killings defined as four or more dead, not including the shooter.

The killings horrified the Asian American community, which saw the shootings as an attack on them, given a recent wave of assaults that coincided with the spread of the coronavirus across the United States.

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The virus was first identified in China, and then-President Donald Trump and others have used racially charged terms to describe it.

The attacks began when five people were shot at Youngs Asian Massage Parlor near Woodstock, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Atlanta, authorities said. Four died: 33-year-old Delaina Ashley Yaun, 54-year-old Paul Andre Michels, 44-year-old Daoyou Feng and 49-year-old Xiaojie Tan, who owned the business.

Yaun and her husband came to the spa on a date, her mother, Margaret Rushing, told WAGA-TV. Yaun leaves behind a 13-year-old son and 8-month-old daughter.

Her half-sister, Dana Toole, said Yaun's husband locked himself in a room and wasn't injured.

"He's taking it hard," Toole said. "He was there. He heard the gunshots and everything. You can't escape that when you're in a room and gunshots are flying — what do you do?"

The manager of a boutique next door said her husband watched surveillance video after the shooting and the suspect was sitting in his car for as long as an hour before going inside.

They heard screaming and women running from the business, said Rita Barron, manager of Gabby's Boutique.

The same car was then spotted about 30 miles (48 kilometers) away in Atlanta, where a call came in about a robbery at Gold Spa and three women were shot to death. Another woman was fatally shot at the Aromatherapy Spa across the street.

Long was arrested hours later by Crisp County deputies and state troopers. He refused to stop on a highway and officers bumped the back of his car, causing him to crash, Sheriff Billy Hancock said.

Officers found Long thanks to help from his parents, who recognized him from surveillance footage posted by authorities and gave investigators his cellphone information, which they used to track him, said Reynolds, the Cherokee County sheriff.

"They're very distraught, and they were very helpful in this apprehension," he said.

President Joe Biden called the attack "very, very troublesome."

"We don't yet know the motive, but what we do know is that the Asian-American community is feeling enormous pain tonight. The recent attacks against the community are un-American. They must stop," Biden tweeted Wednesday.

Vice President Kamala Harris, the first Black and South Asian woman in that office, expressed support to the Asian American community, saying, "We stand with you and understand how this has frightened and shocked and outraged all people."

Over the past year, thousands of incidents of abuse have been reported to an anti-hate group that tracks incidents against Asian Americans, and hate crimes in general are at the highest level in more than a decade.

"While the details of the shootings are still emerging, the broader context cannot be ignored," Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Atlanta said in a statement. "The shootings happened under the trauma of increasing violence against Asian Americans nationwide, fueled by white supremacy and systemic racism."

Nico Straughan met Long when he moved to the area in seventh grade, saying Long brought a Bible to school every day and was "super nice, super Christian, very quiet."

"I don't know what turn of heart he might have had, but he went from one of the nicest kids I ever knew in high school to being on the news," Straughan said. "I mean, all my friends, we were flabbergasted."

The American Psychiatric Association does not recognize sex addiction in its main reference guide for mental disorders. While some people struggle to control their sexual behaviors, it's often linked to other recognized disorders or moral views about sexuality, said David Ley, clinical psychologist and author of "The Myth of Sex Addiction."

"These sexual behaviors getting this label are a symptom, not a cause," Ley said.

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Associated Press writers Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul; Colleen Long and Zeke Miller in Washington; Sudhin Thanawala in Woodstock, Georgia; Michael Warren, Jeff Amy, Ben Nadler and R.J. Rico in Atlanta, Jeff Martin in Marietta, Georgia; Anila Yoganathan in Cherokee County, Georgia; and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt

Lake City contributed to this story.

## Homeland Security head spars with Congress over border surge

By BEN FOX and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's head of Homeland Security sparred Wednesday with members of Congress over the surge of migrants at the Southwest border, refusing to concede the situation was a crisis or even much different from what the two previous administrations faced.

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas gave ground on two Republican points as he acknowledged the administration may not have adequately notified communities chosen to host facilities for migrant teens and children and said some people were released without being tested for COVID-19, though a new testing policy has been implemented.

But Mayorkas, who remained largely unflappable during nearly four hours of often hostile interrogation, repeatedly deflected Republicans who sought to cast the situation along the U.S.-Mexico border as out of control.

"We have a very serious challenge, and I don't think the difficulty of that challenge can be overstated," Mayorkas said. "We also have a plan to address it. We are executing on our plan and we will succeed."

It was the first high-profile immigration showdown for the new administration, which is facing political blowback as it copes with the sharp increase in migrants at the same time it attempts to undo some of President Donald Trump's signature actions to reduce both legal and illegal entry.

Republicans contend that the rising number of people attempting to cross the Southwest border have been inspired by Biden's early moves on immigration policy, which have included halting construction on the border wall and ending a program that forced asylum seekers to make their claims in Mexico and Central America.

"This administration's actions have had a direct cause and effect on this humanitarian and border crisis," said Rep. Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican.

The number of people caught attempting to cross the border has been rising since April and last month surpassed 100,000, the highest level since before the pandemic and on track to hit a 20-year high.

U.S. authorities are still turning most people away under a public health order issued at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. But the Biden administration, reversing Trump, has decided to allow unaccompanied teens and children to enter the country to pursue claims for legal residency, either through asylum or for some other reason.

That has created a strain for federal authorities. Under a court order, the minors must be removed from the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection within 72 hours and then moved to shelters run by the Health and Human Services Department until a relative or other approved sponsor can claim them.

Homeland Security enlisted the Federal Emergency Management Agency to set up temporary facilities for several thousand minors, a decision that Republicans pointedly noted suggests a crisis.

"They deal with emergencies and they are now being deployed to the border and it's not an emergency," said Florida Rep. Kat Cammack. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

Mayorkas refused to give ground. He noted that Trump, despite his anti-immigration rhetoric and measures, faced a surge of migrants, as did President Barack Obama. The solution, he argued, is immigration legislation, which Biden supports, as well as support for Central American countries and improvements to the asylum process.

"It is a reflection of the fact that our system is broken," said the secretary, whose family brought him to the U.S. from Cuba as a child. He is the first refugee to lead Homeland Security.

Faced with questions about whether migrants are spreading COVID-19, Mayorkas said his department has implemented a policy that requires testing for anyone in Customs and Border Protection custody and quarantine for anyone with the virus. But he did not say when that started and he admitted that an unspecified number of migrants who could not be removed from the country, for reasons he did not make clear, were released into the United States before they were tested.

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"We have addressed that situation," he said.

He also noted that Homeland Security has expanded an effort to vaccinate Border Patrol members. They have covered about 25% of frontline CBP personnel.

Mayorkas also appeared to acknowledge that some communities may not have been given adequate notice that they would be hosting one of the emergency shelters for migrant teens and children.

"If there was a failure to communicate with local officials with respect to our plans to open a facility in Midland, Texas, to shelter unaccompanied children, then that's a failure on our part and I'll follow up and make sure that doesn't happen again," he told Texas Rep. August Pfluger.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has complained that the apparent scramble to set up the location in Midland suggested an administration that was not ready or capable of handling the situation. "The Biden administration is completely not prepared for the number of children coming across this border," he said at a news conference.

The surge in migrant children has overwhelmed facilities and coincided with the arrival of immigrant families fleeing poverty and violence in Central America.

At a bus station Wednesday in Brownsville, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, dozens of immigrants recently released from government custody connected with a volunteer humanitarian organization to get legal services, clothing, water, food and toys for the children. About 50 people, including many children who held the hands of parents, waited to connect with the volunteer organization.

Naciel Marin of Nicaragua arrived last week at the border with her 15-month-old baby after a month-and-a-half journey to the U.S., where she was held for a few days before being released. She held the baby on her lap as they played with a toy xylophone that they were given, relieved to be in the U.S. before heading to Wisconsin to stay with in-laws. Marin said she would have made the trip to the U.S. regardless of who was president.

"Everything we've done is for the boy," she said of her baby, Matias.

During Wednesday's hearing before the House Homeland Security Committee, Mayorkas and some members of Congress attempted to shift the focus to non-border issues handled by his department. Those included the rise of domestic violent extremism, which the secretary said "now poses the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat" to the country, and the response to the suspected Russian hack of government computer networks.

But the hearing kept coming back to the border, where the new administration's policy is in sharp contrast to the preceding one.

Pressed on the "crisis" question, Mayorkas parried by reminding the committee of the Trump administration's decision to forcibly separate migrant children from their families as part of a zero-tolerance campaign, prompting national outrage.

"A crisis is when a nation is willing to rip a 9-year-old child out of the hands of his or her parent and separate that family to deter future migration," Mayorkas said. "That, to me, is a humanitarian crisis."

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Merchant reported from Houston.

## **EXPLAINER: Why Georgia attack spurs fears in Asian Americans**

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO and TERRY TANG Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The shootings at three Georgia massage parlors and spas that left eight people dead, six of them women of Asian descent, come on the heels of a recent wave of attacks against Asian Americans since the coronavirus entered the United States.

As details emerge, many members of the Asian American community see the Georgia killings as a haunting reminder of harassment and assaults that have been occurring from coast to coast.

### **WHAT HAPPENED IN ATLANTA?**

Five people were shot Tuesday at a massage parlor about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Atlanta, four of whom died. Police found three women shot to death at Gold Spa in Atlanta, and another woman dead

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at Aromatherapy Spa across the street.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Wednesday that its diplomats have confirmed that four of the victims who died were women of Korean descent.

A 21-year-old white man, Robert Aaron Long, suspected in the shooting has been taken into custody and charged with murder.

## IS THERE A MOTIVE?

As many raised concerns that the shootings are the latest in a string of hate crimes against Asian Americans, police suggested the suspect may have had other motives.

Long told police the attack was not racially motivated. He claimed to have a "sex addiction," and authorities said he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation.

But those statements spurred outrage and widespread skepticism given the locations and that most of the victims were women of Asian descent.

## HOW HAVE SOME ASIAN AMERICANS RESPONDED?

Asian American lawmakers have expressed heartbreak on social media and emphasized the need to support Asian American communities during this moment. The official Twitter account of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus wrote that its members are "horrified by the news ... at a time when we're already seeing a spike in anti-Asian violence."

Many lawmakers acknowledged a heightened sense of fear among Asian Americans as a result of the increasing number of hate incidents.

Rep. Judy Chu of California reminded people of the effect of anti-Asian rhetoric.

"As we wait for more details to emerge, I ask everyone to remember that hurtful words and rhetoric have real life consequences," she wrote on Twitter. "Please stand up, condemn this violence, and help us #StopAsianHate."

## HOW PREVALENT HAVE ASSAULTS AGAINST ASIAN AMERICANS BEEN?

Recent attacks, including the killing of an 84-year-old San Francisco man in February, have raised concerns about worsening hostilities toward Asian Americans. Nearly 3,800 incidents have been reported to Stop AAPI Hate, a California-based reporting center for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and its partner advocacy groups, since March 2020. Nationally, women reported more than double the number of hate incidents compared with men.

Police in several major cities saw a sharp uptick in Asian-targeted hate crimes between 2019 and 2020, according to data collected by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino. New York City went from three incidents to 27, Los Angeles from seven to 15, and Denver had three incidents in 2020 — the first reported there in six years.

## HOW FAR BACK DOES ANTI-ASIAN RACISM GO IN THE UNITED STATES?

Racism against Asian Americans has long been an ugly thread of U.S. history and was enshrined into law in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was designed to prevent Chinese American laborers from entering the U.S. as a result of widespread xenophobia.

Asian Americans have also long been used as medical scapegoats in the U.S. and falsely blamed for public health problems, including a smallpox outbreak in San Francisco in the 1870s. This racist association between Asian Americans and illness and uncleanness has also affected views of Asian food and contributes to the "perpetual foreigner" trope that suggests Asian people are fundamentally outsiders.

This fueled suspicions of Japanese Americans during World War II, when many were sent to detention camps solely due to their ethnicity, as well as Islamophobia and prejudice toward Muslim and South Asian Americans following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In 1982, 100 years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, a 27-year-old Chinese American, Vincent Chin, died after being attacked in Detroit because of his race. At the time, a growing Japanese auto industry was leading to major job losses in the city's auto sector. His killers, two autoworkers, mistook him for Japanese, using racial slurs as they beat him outside a club where he was celebrating his bachelor party. His death led to protests from Asian Americans nationwide.

## WHAT ARE POLITICIANS DOING ABOUT THE RECENT UPTICK?

President Joe Biden signed an executive order in January condemning anti-Asian xenophobia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The directive acknowledges the role rhetoric from politicians, including the use of derogatory names for the coronavirus, has played in the rise of anti-Asian sentiment and hate incidents targeting Asian Americans. Former President Donald Trump, for example, has repeatedly used racial terms to describe the virus, including during a Tuesday night interview with Fox News.

The rash of attacks in the past two months has renewed attention from politicians, including California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who signed legislation allocating \$1.4 million to Stop AAPI Hate and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center for community resources and tracking of anti-Asian hate incidents.

Initiatives such as increased police presence, volunteer patrols and special crime hot lines have also been suggested by local officials and citizens, with big-name brands like the NBA's Golden State Warriors and Apple, based in the Bay Area, promising to donate to the cause.

Tang reported from Phoenix. Fernando and Tang are members of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team.

## IRS will delay tax filing due date until May 17

By SARAH SKIDMORE SELL AP Business Writer

Americans will be getting extra time to prepare their taxes. The Internal Revenue Service says it's delaying the traditional tax filing deadline from April 15 until May 17.

The IRS announced the decision Wednesday and said it would provide further guidance in the coming days. The move provides more breathing room for taxpayers and the IRS alike to cope with changes brought on by the pandemic.

"The IRS wants to continue to do everything possible to help taxpayers navigate the unusual circumstances related to the pandemic, while also working on important tax administration responsibilities," IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig said in a statement.

The decision postpones when individual taxpayers must file their return and when their payment is due. The IRS said taxpayers who owe money would not face any further penalties or interest if they pay by May 17. The new deadline also applies to individuals who pay self-employment tax.

Taxpayers do not need to take any action to take advantage of the new deadline. Those who need more time beyond May 17 can request an extension until October 15.

The new deadline does not apply to estimated tax payments that are due on April 15; those remain due by that day.

The decision to extend the deadline comes after an intense year for the chronically underfunded IRS. The pandemic hit in the middle of last year's tax filing season, setting the agency back in terms of processing. The IRS has also been a key player in doling out government relief payments, and is currently helping to send out the third round of payments in the middle of the current tax filing season.

Additionally, the extension gives the IRS time to issue guidance on recent tax law changes. The American Rescue Plan excludes the first \$10,200 of unemployment benefits from federal taxes for those making less than \$150,000.

"Never before has the law changed so substantially in the middle of tax filing season," Patrick Thomas, director of Notre Dame Law School's Tax Clinic, said in a statement.

The IRS must issue guidance for taxpayers and tax preparers alike as millions of returns already filed likely do not account for this change.

A number of lawmakers and professionals from the tax community have urged the tax filing season be extended to accommodate for these pressures. The House Ways and Means Committee applauded the move.

"This extension is absolutely necessary to give Americans some needed flexibility in a time of unprecedented crisis," said Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass. and Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-N.J., chairman of the panel's oversight subcommittee.

Rettig is expected to speak to the committee tomorrow about how the IRS is managing this filing season and the need for this extension.

The IRS continues to urge people to file as soon as possible, particularly those who are owed refunds. In some cases filing will help taxpayers more quickly get any remaining relief payments they are entitled to.

AP Economics Writer Martin Crutsinger contributed to this report from Washington.

## No cigar: Interstellar object is cookie-shaped planet shard

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Our solar system's first known interstellar visitor is neither a comet nor asteroid as first suspected and looks nothing like a cigar. A new study says the mystery object is likely a remnant of a Pluto-like world and shaped like a cookie.

Arizona State University astronomers reported this week that the strange 148-foot (45-meter) object that appears to be made of frozen nitrogen, just like the surface of Pluto and Neptune's largest moon Triton.

The study's authors, Alan Jackson and Steven Desch, think an impact knocked a chunk off an icy nitrogen-covered planet 500 million years ago and sent the piece tumbling out of its own star system, toward ours. The reddish remnant is believed to be a sliver of its original self, its outer layers evaporated by cosmic radiation and, more recently, the sun.

It's named Oumuamua, Hawaiian for scout, in honor of the observatory in Hawaii that discovered it in 2017.

Visible only as a pinpoint of light millions of miles away at its closest approach, it was determined to have originated beyond our solar system because its speed and path suggested it wasn't orbiting the sun or anything else.

The only other object confirmed to have strayed from another star system into our own is the comet 21/Borisov, discovered in 2019.

But what is Oumuamua? It didn't fit into known categories — it looked like an asteroid but sped along like a comet. Unlike a comet, though, it didn't have a visible tail. Speculation flipped back and forth between comet and asteroid — and it was even suggested it could be an alien artifact.

"Everybody is interested in aliens, and it was inevitable that this first object outside the solar system would make people think of aliens," Desch said in a statement. "But it's important in science not to jump to conclusions."

Using its shininess, size and shape — and that it was propelled by escaping substances that didn't produce a visible tail — Jackson and Desch devised computer models that helped them determine Oumuamua was most likely a chunk of nitrogen ice being gradually eroded, the way a bar of soap thins with use.

Their two papers were published Tuesday by the American Geophysical Union and also presented at the Lunar and Planetary Sciences Conference, typically held in Houston but virtual this year.

Not all scientists buy the new explanation. Harvard University's Avi Loeb disputes the findings and stands by his premise that the object appears to be more artificial than natural — in other words, something from an alien civilization, perhaps a light sail. His newly published book "Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth," addresses the subject.

Given that Oumuamua is unlike comets and asteroids — and something not seen before — "we cannot assume 'business as usual,' as many scientists argue," Loeb wrote in an email Wednesday. "If we contemplate 'something that we had not seen before,' we must leave the artificial origin hypothesis on the table and collect more evidence on objects from the same class."

When Oumuamua was at its closest approach to Earth, it appeared to have a width six times larger than its thickness. Those are the rough proportions of one wafer of an Oreo cookie, Desch noted.

It's now long gone, beyond the orbit of Uranus, more than 2 billion miles (3.2 billion kilometers) away — and far too small to be seen, even by the Hubble Space Telescope. As a result, astronomers will need to rely on the original observations and, hopefully, continue to refine their analyses, Jackson said.

By the time the object starts leaving our solar system around 2040, the width-to-thickness ratio will have

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dropped to 10-to-1, according to Desch.

"So maybe Oumuamua was consistent with a cookie when we saw it, but will soon be literally as flat as a pancake," Desch said in an email.

That's the way the cosmic cookie — this one anyway — crumbles.

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

## **EXPLAINER: What's the Senate filibuster and why change it?**

BY LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not that different from the movies. President Joe Biden said the Senate should operate like it did in the "old days," with senators forced to stand up and speak all day and night if they plan to object to his legislative agenda with a filibuster.

Changing the filibuster rules is an idea backed by some Senate Democrats eager to advance Biden's agenda in the evenly split 50-50 Senate. But Republicans are warning Democrats off any changes.

Here's a look at how the filibuster works in the Senate.

### **WHAT'S A FILIBUSTER?**

The filibuster is among the Senate's "most distinctive procedural features," according to the Congressional Research Service.

The Senate has a longstanding practice of allowing any one senator to object to the proceedings, what's generally referred to as a filibuster that can halt action or votes.

Senators have famously stood at their desks for hours making their case, as the character played by Jimmy Stewart did in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" or as South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond did to stall the 1957 Civil Rights Act.

Today, senators can merely signal their intent to object, even privately, and that's enough for Senate leaders to take action. Leaders sometimes just drop the issue from floor consideration. At other times, they push ahead, taking cumbersome steps to cut off the filibuster and move forward with the proceedings.

### **HOW TO END A FILIBUSTER?**

Over time, senators grew tired of the endless filibusters and set rules for ending debate.

At the start of the 20th century, a two-thirds vote was needed to end a filibuster. By 1975, the Senate agreed to lower it to 60 votes.

Once debate is brought to a close, senators can move forward with consideration of the measure at hand, amendments or even final votes.

### **WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?**

As the country, and Congress, has grown more partisan, the filibuster has become a key weapon in what is often described as a procedural arms race in the Senate.

Year by year, more and more senators threaten to wage filibusters to block legislation. Overcoming filibusters can take days, if not weeks.

Even without a senator holding the floor, filibusters have forced senators into all-night and weekend votes to advance legislation, as happened during passage of the Affordable Care Act.

"Filibusters and the prospect of filibusters shape much of the way in which the Senate does its work," the CRS report said.

### **CAN THE SENATE CHANGE THE FILIBUSTER?**

It takes 51 votes to change the Senate rules, a tall order at most times but especially in the now evenly split 50-50 Senate. Democrats hold a slim majority because Vice President Kamala Harris can be a tie-breaking vote.

But senators have changed the filibuster rules before.

Fed up with the Republicans stonewalling Barack Obama's executive and judicial branch nominees, Democrats led by then-Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada changed the rules to set a simple 51-vote threshold for

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confirming people in those positions. `

Republicans under Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky went a step further, eliminating the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees, which allowed Donald Trump's three high-court justices to be confirmed.

While several Democrats and advocacy groups call for ridding the Senate of the filibuster on legislation, there does not appear to be enough support from Democratic senators at this time to do so.

**BACK TO 'TALKING' FILIBUSTER?**

Biden supports a return to the "old days," as he put it, of the talking filibuster, forcing senators to stand at their desks and articulate their opposition to the proceedings, as was the practice when he first joined the Senate decades ago.

"You've got to work for the filibuster," he said in an ABC News interview that aired Wednesday.

The idea has support from Democrats who see it as a possible alternative to fully ending the filibuster practice. But it still poses risks, and Democratic leaders have been reluctant to move toward that option.

Several Republican senators, particularly those considering running for president in 2024, might see political advantage to seizing the floor to rail endlessly against White House priorities. The filibusters could also stall action on other Democratic priorities, including Biden's nominees.

McConnell has warned of a "scorched earth" reaction if Democrats eliminate the filibuster.

At the same time, many Democrats are ready to take that chance to end the filibuster, realizing their slim majority is fragile, and Republicans might do away with it anyway to advance their priorities the next time they control the Senate and the White House.

## Treasury says state tax cuts OK if separated from virus aid

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Responding to concerns from state officials, the U.S. Treasury Department said Wednesday that states can cut taxes without penalty under a new federal pandemic relief law — so long as they use their own funds to offset those cuts.

Republican governors, lawmakers and attorneys general have expressed apprehension about a provision in the wide-ranging relief act signed by President Joe Biden that prohibits states from using \$195 billion of federal aid "to either directly or indirectly offset a reduction" in net tax revenue. The restriction could apply through 2024.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, a Republican, on Wednesday asked a federal judge to block the tax-cut provision. Republican attorneys general from 21 other states wrote to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen seeking clarification on the prohibition, which they said could be construed "to deny states the ability to cut taxes in any manner whatsoever."

A treasury spokesperson told The Associated Press that the provision isn't meant as a blanket prohibition on tax cuts. States can still offset tax reductions through other means.

"In other words, states are free to make policy decisions to cut taxes — they just cannot use the pandemic relief funds to pay for those tax cuts," the Treasury Department said.

The treasury's application of the law could provide clearance for some tax cuts, such as Missouri legislation that would expand online sales taxes to offset proposed income tax reductions in 2023. Republican Sen. Andrew Koenig said he thinks his legislation is OK but has asked the state attorney general for guidance on whether it could run afoul of the federal law.

"To say that we're cutting taxes because of the (federal) money would be a ridiculous argument," Koenig said, "because this is an entire package that is completely separate."

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson said formal guidance from the Treasury Department will be critical in determining how much flexibility exists for states. The Republican governor, however, wants lawmakers to move forward with his proposal to set aside \$50 million for tax reductions, including a cut to sales taxes on used vehicles.

"We should not let federal restrictions weigh in on that direction we're going as a state," Hutchinson said.

The nonprofit Tax Foundation said in an analysis last week that state tax cuts financed by natural growth

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in state revenue or new tax hikes likely are fine under the federal law. But it said questions could arise if states use the aid to pay public health workers, freeing existing state revenue and contributing to a surplus that helps finance a tax cut.

Yost said he sued because "the federal government should be encouraging states to innovate and grow business, not holding vital relief funding hostage to its preferred pro-tax policies."

Legislatures in numerous states are considering tax cuts this year.

The Republican-led Oklahoma House last week passed bills to reduce the corporate and individual income tax rates and restore the ability for a refund of the earned income tax credit. The Oklahoma Tax Commission estimates those bills could cost the state \$103 million next year and \$284 million the following year. But the House speaker's office said a \$1 billion surplus gives the state plenty of room to offset potential tax cuts.

The Republican-controlled Mississippi House has passed legislation that would phase out the state income tax, cut the grocery tax in half and increase the sales tax on most items. The plan faces opposition in the GOP-led Senate, but so does the federal limitation on state tax reductions.

"Our tax policy needs to be formulated on what's best for Mississippi, not ... as the winds blow from D.C.," said Sen. Josh Harkins, a Republican who is chairman of the state Senate Finance Committee.

Georgia Republicans are working on a \$140 million annual cut that would raise the income threshold at which taxes begin. Some Republicans also are maneuvering to cut the top income tax rate. That plan, which was shelved last year among fears of a sharp drop in state revenue, would forgo more than \$500 million a year. Proposed business tax incentives also are moving through the Legislature.

Louisiana's Republican-led Legislature plans to debate a tax overhaul during its session that begins in mid-April. GOP leaders have said they want to keep it as close to "revenue neutral" as possible, and Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards has said he won't support any package that cuts revenue.

"But we fear the provisions in the federal law could put this work in jeopardy," said Dawn Starns McVea, the Louisiana director of the National Federation of Independent Business.

The federal law's tax cut provision also has created uncertainty in Utah, where the Republican-led Legislature passed \$100 million in tax cuts this year benefitting families, veterans and older residents receiving Social Security. The state Tax Commission chairman said the reductions would have happened regardless of whether Utah received federal coronavirus relief, but Republican Attorney General Sean Reyes said those tax cuts are "now at risk" because of the federal law.

Under the law, states that use part of their aid to offset tax reductions could have to repay an equal amount to the federal government. Because of uncertainty over what could trigger that, the Republican chairman of South Carolina's House budget-writing committee said he plans to move slowly in using the federal money.

"If you put it toward replenishing unemployment, is that considered a tax cut for businesses?" Rep. Murrell Smith said. "If you wanted to set up a small business grant program, is that going to be ... a tax cut for small business owners?"

Top Republicans in the Kansas Legislature have made income tax cuts a priority for several years. House Speaker Pro Tem Blaine Finch recently decried the federal government's attempts to guide state tax policy.

"It absolutely should be up to the states to decide what their tax rates are and how much their citizens have to pay in taxes," Finch said.

But Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly, who vetoed two GOP tax-cutting bills in 2019, welcomed the restrictions on using federal pandemic aid to offset tax cuts. She said Kansas is still "digging out" from budget shortfalls that followed a tax-cutting experiment in 2012-13 under former GOP Gov. Sam Brownback.

"I'm glad that we can't use this money for tax cuts," Kelly said. "I don't think we should do tax cuts anyway at this point as we are recovering from this pandemic."

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Associated Press writers Josh Boak in Washington, D.C.; Jeff Amy in Atlanta; Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina; Andrew DeMillo in Little Rock, Arkansas; Sophia Eppolito in Salt Lake City; Melinda

Deslatte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; and Emily Wagster Pettus in Jackson, Mississippi, contributed to this report.

## **EXPLAINER: Role of alternate jurors in ex-officer's trial**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

Attorneys in the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death are wrangling over not just the 12 jurors who will decide the verdict but also two alternates.

Derek Chauvin's trial is moving forward amid national attention around Floyd's death, plus a pandemic that could potentially disrupt proceedings expected to last several weeks. That's why the two alternates will play an important role, ready to sub in for other jurors who are unable to continue with the trial.

Here's a look at how alternate jurors will work in the trial of the former officer charged with murder and manslaughter:

### **WHAT ARE ALTERNATE JURORS?**

During the criminal trial, alternate jurors will be indistinguishable from their peers. In fact, they won't even know they are alternates. The judge won't reveal who the alternative jurors are until attorneys have finished making their cases. That's so that the alternates don't yawn off during proceedings and are ready to step in if another juror is unable to continue.

The alternate jurors will be the final two selected for the 14-person panel. Opening statements are expected March 29 unless the process isn't complete by then.

### **WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?**

Alternate jurors will step in if a juror can't continue in the trial for reasons such as illness, a family emergency, or further exposure to information on Floyd's death that would taint their decision.

"In any long trial, there are just things that come up in people's personal lives," said Mary Moriarty, a former Hennepin County chief public defender.

But Moriarty said alternate jurors will be even more important in this trial, given the high-profile nature of Floyd's death and the ongoing pandemic.

Even finding 14 people to serve on the jury has been a challenge for such a well-known case. Attorneys have questioned potential jurors about their ability to keep an open mind, how they resolve conflicts, their views on the criminal justice system, and whether they felt safe serving on the jury.

### **WHAT DO THEY DO DURING JURY DELIBERATIONS?**

After attorneys present their arguments, criminal prosecution rules stipulate that alternate jurors "must be discharged" when the jury goes into deliberations. But Minnesota criminal defense attorneys said the judge could make sure that alternates maintain their ability to rejoin the jury if needed.

Joe Friedberg, a defense attorney, said he expected the judge to make the call to sequester alternates during jury deliberations. He said in his experience, alternates are called upon once in every four or five trials.

But Moriarty said the judge could also just instruct alternates to refrain from researching the trial on their own during deliberations, while stopping short of sequestering them with the rest of the jury.

Just six sentences are devoted to alternate jurors in Minnesota's Rules of Criminal Procedure, the rules that govern how criminal prosecutions work in the state. The rules state that if a juror can't continue during deliberations, a mistrial must be declared unless the parties agree that the jury can proceed with fewer members.

Moriarty said she "could not imagine" a defense attorney agreeing to allow a jury to reach a verdict without the full 12 members.

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

## **Tanzania's populist President John Magufuli has died at 61**

By TOM ODULA and RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

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NAKURU, Kenya (AP) — President John Magufuli of Tanzania, a prominent COVID-19 skeptic in Africa whose populist rule often cast his East African country in a harsh international spotlight, has died. He was 61 years old.

Magufuli's death was announced on Wednesday by Vice President Samia Suluhu, who said the president died of heart failure.

"Our beloved president passed on at 6 p.m. this evening," said Suluhu on national television. "All flags will be flown at half-mast for 14 days. It is sad news. The president has had this illness for the past 10 years."

The vice president said that Magufuli died at a hospital in Dar es Salaam, the Indian Ocean port that is Tanzania's largest city.

Although the vice president said the cause of Magufuli's death was heart failure, opposition politicians had earlier alleged that he was sick from COVID-19.

Magufuli had not been seen in public since the end of February and top government officials had denied that he was in ill health even as rumors swirled online that he was sick and possibly incapacitated from illness.

Magufuli was one of Africa's most prominent deniers of COVID-19. He had said last year that Tanzania had eradicated the disease through three days of national prayer. Tanzania has not reported its COVID-19 tallies of confirmed cases and deaths to African health authorities since April 2020.

But the number of deaths of people experiencing breathing problems reportedly grew and earlier this month the U.S. embassy warned of a significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Tanzania since January. Days later the presidency announced the death of John Kijazi, Magufuli's chief secretary. Soon after the death was announced of the vice president of the semi-autonomous island region of Zanzibar, whose political party had earlier reported that he had COVID-19.

Critics charged that Magufuli's dismissal of the threat from COVID-19, as well as his refusal to lock down the country as others in the region had done, may have contributed to many unknown deaths.

It is hard to gauge how most Tanzanians regarded Magufuli's COVID-19 skepticism, in a country where he remained genuinely popular among many for his seemingly frank talk against corruption even as he curtailed political freedoms and increasingly asserted an authoritarian streak. Police arrested at least one man earlier this week who was accused of spreading false information about Magufuli's health.

First elected to the presidency in 2015, Magufuli was serving a second five-year term won in 2020 elections that the opposition and some rights groups said were neither free nor fair. His main opponent in that race, Tundu Lissu, had to relocate to Belgium after the vote, fearing for his safety. Lissu, who was among the first to raise questions about the whereabouts of Magufuli after he went missing for several days, had been shot 16 times back in 2017, an attack he blamed on government agents because of his criticism of the president.

Magufuli had become so powerful by the start of the COVID-19 outbreak that he could deny the existence of a pandemic without incurring the criticism of his predecessor and other prominent people within Tanzania. In early 2021, amid speculation that Magufuli would seek an unconstitutional third term when his mandate expired in 2025, his ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party was compelled to deny such a thing could happen.

John Pombe Magufuli was born on Oct. 29, 1959, in the rural area of Chato in the country's northwest. The son of a subsistence farmer, he tended his father's cattle but was a good student, seeing classroom studies as a way out of poverty. Magufuli earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics and chemistry at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1988. Much later, in 2009, he earned a doctorate in chemistry from the same university.

For years he was a secondary school teacher and then a chemist with a farmers' cooperative union before entering politics as a lawmaker representing Chato in the National Assembly. The legislative role was a springboard to a career in national politics, and he served in several Cabinet positions, notably as the hardworking public works minister nicknamed "the bulldozer" in the administration of predecessor Jakaya Kikwete.

A reputation as an incorruptible man was widely seen as one reason for his selection as the new leader of Chama Cha Mapinduzi, the party that had dominated Tanzania since independence but whose popular-

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ity was declining in large part because of allegations of rampant corruption.

In 2015, the newly elected Magufuli made news on his first day in office. He showed up unannounced in the morning at the Ministry of Finance offices to see how many officials had come to work on time. That week he also banned unnecessary trips by government officials, as an austerity measure. He soon canceled Independence Day celebrations and said the funds budgeted for the event would be used to improve roads and infrastructure in Dar es Salaam, the commercial capital. Magufuli also fired a number of top government officials in his anti-corruption crusade.

At least in the early days of his presidency, Magufuli was seen as the leader Tanzania needed. He was widely admired by Tanzanians but also by others in East Africa who, citing his tough stance against corruption, wished for a leader like him. But very quickly others saw signs of intolerance as Magufuli cracked down on dissenters and those who criticized his work methods.

In early 2016 Magufuli stopped live broadcasts of parliamentary debates in which the opposition criticized the government, and in July that year he banned political rallies.

Magufuli's harsh rule was extended to the country's LGBT community, with his government preventing aid agencies from supporting same-sex groups to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Amnesty International criticized several bills supported by Magufuli and passed into laws as designed to "stifle all forms of dissent and effectively clamp down on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly."

But it was Magufuli's denial of COVID-19 that brought him intense international attention.

Soon after the first case of the disease was confirmed in Tanzania in March 2020, Magufuli urged people to go to churches and mosques to pray. Magufuli, a devout Catholic, pronounced that "coronavirus is a devil ... and cannot sit in the body of Christ." Then in April the country stopped cooperating with the international community regarding its COVID-19 caseload.

Magufuli announced in June that COVID-19 had been eradicated from Tanzania by three days of national prayer. He spoke against social distancing and the wearing of masks and questioned the efficacy of vaccines. He even sent samples from bicycle lubricant, papaya fruit and a quail bird to be tested for the coronavirus in his bid to discredit testing.

"Countries in Africa will be coming here to buy food in the years to come ... they will be suffering because of shutting down their economy," he said of others imposing lockdowns.

Magufuli promoted herbs and exercise as COVID-19 remedies.

However, people leaving Tanzania reported that intensive care units in hospitals were filling up with people with severe respiratory illness. Others said that burials were being held at night to hide the numbers of deaths. Migrants from Tanzania were found to have COVID-19. Government officials denied most of these accounts, and health officials who reported problems related to COVID-19 were fired.

Critics say Magufuli's legacy will be turning a country previously praised for its tolerance and relative stability into a more repressive state. Under founding president Julius Nyerere, Tanzania was an influential country as the host of pan-African liberation groups including Nelson Mandela's African National Congress.

"Tanzania has weaponized the law to the point that no one really knows when they are on the right or wrong side of it," Deprose Muchena, an Amnesty International official in Africa, said of Magufuli's rule in an October 2020 report.

Politicians were arrested for holding or attending meetings, online activism was criminalized and non-governmental organizations were stifled with endless regulations, that report said.

Zitto Kabwe, leader of the opposition Alliance for Change and Transparency party, said he had been arrested 16 times since Magufuli came to power.

Lissu, Magufuli's main opponent and challenger in the 2020 polls, complained that security forces interfered with his campaign. His party's offices were fire-bombed and dozens of parliamentary candidates were disqualified. Tens of thousands of opposition electoral agents were not accredited by the electoral commission, effectively denying them access to poll centers to verify results. On the eve of the election 11 people were shot dead by security forces, nine of them in Zanzibar as they protested alleged election fraud.

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Despite the repression, Magufuli's supporters say he was focused on Tanzania's economic success and sought to implement ambitious projects that would lift more of his people out of poverty. Scores of infrastructure programs, including trains and the revival of Air Tanzania, were launched under Magufuli's reign. Tanzania is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and in July the World Bank categorized it as a middle-income country five years ahead of schedule.

"We had envisaged achieving this status by 2025 but, with strong determination, this has been possible in 2020," Magufuli tweeted at the time.

Magufuli's survivors include a wife and two children.

Muhumuza contributed from Kampala, Uganda.

## **EXPLAINER: Is the US border with Mexico in crisis?**

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Monday during a visit to El Paso, Texas, that, "It's more than a crisis. This is human heartbreak." Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Tuesday called the wave of migrants a difficult challenge but nothing new.

Spin and semantics aside, migration flows to the U.S. from Mexico are surging in a major way for the third time in seven years under Republican and Democratic presidents — and for similar reasons.

**HOW HAVE FLOWS CHANGED SINCE JOE BIDEN BECAME PRESIDENT?**

Border encounters — a widely-used but imperfect gauge that tells how many times U.S. authorities came across migrants — rose sharply during Donald Trump's final months as president, from an unusually low 17,106 last April to 74,108 in December. Last month, encounters topped 100,000 for the first time since a four-month streak in 2019.

That's only part of the picture, though. Who's crossing is just as important a gauge as how many are making the attempt, if not even more.

Mexican adults fueled last year's rise, a throwback to one of the largest immigration waves in U.S. history, from 1965 through the Great Recession of 2008. Last March, the Trump administration introduced pandemic-related powers to immediately expel people from the United States without an opportunity to seek asylum. Facing no consequences, Mexican men kept trying until they made it.

The percentage of encounters that were repeat crossers hit 38% in January, compared to a 7% rate in the 12-month period that ended in September 2019. The recidivism rate was 48% among Mexican adults during one two-week stretch last year in San Diego.

Families and children traveling alone, who enjoy more legal protections and require greater care, became a bigger part of the mix after Biden took office. They accounted for 29% of all encounters in February, up from 13% two months earlier.

The Border Patrol encountered 561 unaccompanied children on Monday, up from an average daily peak of 370 during Trump's presidency in May 2019 and 354 during a peak in Barack Obama's presidency in June 2014. A U.S. official provided Monday's total to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because it was not intended for public release. The daily average was 332 in February, up 60% from a month earlier.

**WHY ARE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN SUDDENLY COMING NOW?**

Trump, responding to a massive increase in Central American families and children that peaked in May 2019, expanded his "Migrant Protection Protocols" policy to force asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court. It was unquestionably effective at deterring asylum — less than 1% have won their cases, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse — but asylum-seekers were exposed to violence in Mexico, as documented by advocacy group Human Rights First and others. Attorneys were extremely difficult to find in Mexico.

Other Trump-era policies included fast-track asylum proceedings inside U.S. Customs and Border Protection holding facilities, where access to attorneys was next to impossible. Agreements were struck with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador for the U.S. to send asylum-seekers to the Central American

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countries with an opportunity to seek protection there instead.

Biden quickly jettisoned those Trump policies as cruel and inhumane, making good on campaign promises. He has kept in place Trump's pandemic-related expulsion powers but exempted children traveling alone.

Biden wants Congress to give \$4 billion to address root causes of migration in Central America such as poverty and violence, which have driven people to the U.S. for decades, including a surge of children in 2014.

## WHAT IS THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DOING?

In addition to ending Trump policies and seeking foreign aid, the Biden administration wants to speed the release of children to parents, relatives and others in the United States, avoiding detention conditions that drew widespread criticism during surges in 2014 and 2019.

The administration was scheduled to begin processing unaccompanied children as early as Wednesday at the Dallas Convention Center, days after establishing a makeshift facility in Midland, Texas. The U.S. official who spoke to the AP said the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services was looking at additional holding facilities at Moffett Federal Airfield, near San Francisco, and in Pecos, Texas, as well as expanding into Donna, Texas, in a joint effort with Customs and Border Protection.

Nearly 1,900 of about 2,500 unaccompanied children in custody in the Rio Grande Valley on Monday were there longer than the 72-hour limit established in agency policy, the official said.

About seven of every 10 encounters in February resulted in expulsion under pandemic powers, limiting need for detention space. Mexican and Central American adults and families were sent back to Mexico. Mexican authorities have resisted taking back Central American families from Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings, prompting U.S. authorities to fly them to El Paso, Texas, and San Diego to be expelled.

Others picked up at the border may be released in the United States with notices to appear in immigration court.

The Biden administration is also stepping up efforts to have children apply for asylum from their homes in Central America instead of making the dangerous journey to the U.S. border.

## Fed expects to keep its key rate near zero through 2023

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve foresees the economy accelerating quickly this year yet still expects to keep its benchmark interest rate pinned near zero through 2023, despite concerns in financial markets about potentially higher inflation.

With its brightening outlook, the Fed on Wednesday significantly upgraded its forecasts for growth and inflation. It now expects the economy to expand 6.5% this year, up sharply from its previous projection in December of 4.2%. And the Fed raised its forecast for inflation by the end of this year from 1.8% to 2.4% after years of chronically low price increases.

The Fed also said it would continue its monthly purchases of \$120 billion in bonds, which are intended to keep longer-term borrowing costs low.

On Wall Street, investors registered their approval of the Fed's low-rate message, sending stock indexes higher. And the closely watched yield on the 10-year Treasury note, which has surged in recent weeks on inflation concerns, declined slightly.

Still, the Fed's upgraded forecasts raised questions about what would cause it eventually to raise its key short-term rate, which affects many consumer and business loans. As the economy strengthens, the policymakers think the unemployment rate will drop faster than they thought in December: They foresee unemployment falling from its current 6.2% to 4.5% by year's end and to 3.9%, near a healthy level, at the end of 2022.

That suggests that the central bank will be close to meeting its goals by 2023, when it expects inflation to exceed its 2% target level and for unemployment to be at 3.5%, which is where it was before the pandemic struck. Yet it still doesn't project a rate hike then.

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At a news conference after the Fed's latest policy meeting, Chair Jerome Powell stressed that the central bank wants to see substantial improvement in the job market and economy and won't reverse its low-rate policies based solely on forecasts. Last year, the Fed altered its policy framework to make clear that it would eventually raise rates only after annual inflation had exceeded its 2% target "for some time" — and not just when higher inflation appeared likely.

On Wednesday, Powell appeared intent on emphasizing that shift.

"We're going to wait to see actual data," he said. "And I think it will take people time to adjust to that new practice. And the only way we can really build the credibility of that is by doing it."

Brian Bethune, an economics professor at Tufts University, said: "The message here is that the Fed is not concerned about inflation right now. The trend around the world is toward lower inflation. Since that is the case, the Fed is saying, why worry about it? This low inflation trend is the Fed's friend."

There were signs, though, that at least some Fed officials are edging closer to reining in the central bank's ultra-low-rate policies. The central bank indicated that four of the 18 policymakers now expect a rate hike in 2022, up from just one in December. And seven predict a hike in 2023, up from five in December. The Fed doesn't name which officials make which projections.

At the same time, Powell downplayed the notion that Fed officials can accurately project their policies well past this year.

"The state of the economy in two or three years is highly uncertain," he said, "and I wouldn't want to focus too much on the exact timing of a potential rate increase that far into the future."

The Fed chair also credited the government's emergency spending, including substantial relief packages approved by both Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden, with preventing an even worse downturn from shuttered small businesses and workers losing jobs permanently.

Still, the Fed doesn't expect the unemployment rate to return to its pre-pandemic level of 3.5% until late 2023.

"The faster the better," Powell said, "but realistically, given the numbers, it's going to take some time."

At the moment, Powell faces a delicate balancing act: The economy is clearly improving. But if the chairman is perceived to be too optimistic, investors might assume the Fed will reverse its low-rate policies prematurely. That could send bond yields rising and weaken the economy as borrowing becomes costlier for companies and households.

Yet if Powell sounds worried that the job market is recovering only slowly, it might spark concerns that the Fed won't be watchful enough about inflation pressures. That perception, too, could send bond yields rising as investors anticipate rising inflation.

On Wednesday, the chairman downplayed the prospect that inflation could eventually surge out of control.

"There was a time when inflation went up, it would stay up," he said at the news conference. "And that time is not now. That hasn't been the case for some decades."

This week's Fed policy meeting came as the economy's outlook has improved significantly since it last met in late January. Job gains accelerated in February, sales at retail stores jumped after \$600 relief checks were distributed at the start of the year and Biden signed his economic relief package into law. Average daily COVID infections have also dropped precipitously. And vaccinations have accelerated, raising hopes that Americans will increasingly travel, shop, eat out and spend freely after a year of virus-induced restraint.

As a consequence, economists have been upgrading their outlooks, with many predicting that the economy will expand as much as 7% for all of 2021. That would be the fastest annual growth since 1984. The brighter outlook has sent the yield on the 10-year Treasury note climbing as investors have dumped bonds, which are typically safe-haven investments during downturns.

Still, the job market has a long way to go to a full recovery. With unemployment at 6.2%, the economy still has 9.5 million fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic struck a year ago.

## Florida bill seeks to block trans athletes from girls teams

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Transgender women and girls couldn't play on girls and women's school sports teams under a bill passed by a Florida House committee on Wednesday.

The bill, called the Fairness in Women's Sports Act, would require that anyone participating in girls and women's sports at the K-12 and college level be biologically eligible to do so. If challenged, they would have to get confirmation from a health care provider that they are female. That could include a doctor examining their genitals.

"The act is pro-women and pro-girls and only acknowledges the biological differences between men and women," said Republican Rep. Kaylee Tuck, the bill's sponsor.

But Democrats slammed the proposal, calling it discriminatory against transgender girls and women.

Republicans in Congress and more than 20 state legislatures are pushing for similar bans, though supporters, including Tuck, largely haven't been able to cite examples of transgender students' participation causing problems.

The House Secondary Education & Career Development Subcommittee voted 13-4 to approve the bill, with all "no" votes cast by Democrats. The measure is based on an Idaho law that has been blocked by a federal court while a lawsuit challenging its legality proceeds.

Tuck used Allyson Felix as an example. Felix is the only woman to win six track and field gold medals in the Olympics.

"Allyson Felix is the fastest woman in the world... but yet the personal best in the 400 meters can be beaten by hundreds of high school boys," Tuck said. "If we allow biological males to compete in athletic events against biological females, we may never see another Allyson Felix again."

Democrats who opposed the bill said there wasn't an existing problem in Florida, and Tuck acknowledged she was unaware of any disputes about transgender students participating in female athletics.

Democratic Rep. Marie Paule Woodson said the bill is a dangerous piece of legislation that could lead to an attack on a group that is already vulnerable.

"Transgender have been ridiculed, they have been bullied, they are hated by so many, and if we're talking about love — loving each other — it should not be based on condition of who you are," Woodson said. "This bill will only marginalize and demonize the transgender community."

Conservative lawmakers across the nation are responding to an executive order by Democratic President Joe Biden that bans discrimination based on gender identity in school sports and elsewhere, which he signed the day he took office. Mississippi became the first state this year to enact such a ban when the state's governor signed it into law last week.

The Florida bill has two more committee stops in the House. A similar Senate bill hasn't received its first hearing.

## Experts: Virus surge in Europe a cautionary tale for US

By JOHN SEEWER and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

Optimism is spreading in the U.S. as COVID-19 deaths plummet and states ease restrictions and open vaccinations to younger adults. But across Europe, dread is setting in with another wave of infections that is closing schools and cafes and bringing new lockdowns.

The pandemic's diverging paths on the two continents can be linked in part to the much more successful vaccine rollout in the U.S. and the spread of more contagious variants in Europe.

Health experts in the U.S., though, say what's happening in Europe should serve as a warning against ignoring social distancing or dropping other safeguards too early.

"Each of these countries has had nadirs like we are having now, and each took an upward trend after they disregarded known mitigation strategies," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "They simply took their eye off the ball."

The result has been a sharp spike in new infections and hospitalizations in several European countries over the past few weeks.

Poland's rate of new COVID-19 cases has more than doubled since February, straining its health care

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system and leading to a three-week nationwide lockdown announced Wednesday for shopping malls, theaters, galleries and sports centers.

Italy closed most of its classrooms at the beginning of this week and expanded areas where restaurants and cafes can do only takeout or delivery. The country's health experts say they're seeing an increasing number of patients who are middle-aged and younger.

In France, officials imposed weekend lockdowns around the French Riviera in the south and the English Channel in the north, and are preparing new restrictions for the Paris region and perhaps beyond to be announced Thursday.

COVID-19 patients occupy 100% of standard intensive care hospital beds in the area surrounding the nation's capital.

"If we don't do anything, we're heading toward catastrophe," Remi Salomon, a top official in the Paris public hospital authority, told BFM television.

Serbia announced a nationwide lockdown for the rest of the week, closing all nonessential shops and businesses. The country of 7 million people reported more than 5,000 new cases on Tuesday, its highest number in months.

The trends are far more encouraging in the U.S., which has recorded about 537,000 deaths overall, more than any other country.

Deaths per day in the U.S. have plunged to an average of just under 1,300, down from a high of about 3,400 two months ago. New cases are running at about 55,000 per day on average after peaking at more than a quarter-million per day in early January.

An empty hallway and a row of unused face shields inside the closed COVID-19 ICU unit at Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, California, tell the story of the improved outlook in the U.S.

The wing was teeming with the patients at the beginning of the year.

"It gives me goosebumps. It's really just surreal because, you know, a month and a half ago, our unit was full of super, super sick COVID patients, many of which didn't survive," said ICU nurse Christina Anderson.

The European Union's overall vaccination efforts lag far behind those of Britain and the U.S. because of shortages and other hurdles. Roughly 1 in every 5 people in the U.S. has received at least one dose, while in most of the European countries, it's fewer than 1 of every 10.

In another troubling turn, many European countries — including Germany, France, Spain and Italy — have suspended use of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine over reports of dangerous blood clots in a small number of recipients, though regulators say there is no evidence the shot is to blame.

European nations haven't vaccinated quickly enough to stay ahead of the more contagious variants, said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in Baltimore, Maryland. Those variants are also taking hold in the U.S.

"Vaccination with no speed limit, 24/7, that's what's going to protect us from what's happening in Europe," Adalja said.

He believes it is too early for states to drop mask mandates but OK to allow restaurants and other places to increase capacity gradually.

"You don't have to do what Texas did," Adalja said. "You can increase capacity while keeping the masks in place."

Texas and a few other states have lifted their statewide mask requirements or plan to do so soon, while governors in more than half the states have moved to ease other restrictions in the coming weeks for restaurants, gyms and movie theaters.

Disneyland in Southern California announced it will reopen with limited crowds at the end of April for the first time since the start of the pandemic. And airlines have had their best weeks since the crisis began and say more people are booking flights for spring and summer.

Amelia Fowler, among a stream of people getting their shots Wednesday at Medgar Evers College in New York City, is looking forward to grocery shopping and returning to a normal routine in her acting job after a dark year.

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"It was just literally terror: terror going out of the house, terror going down the street, terror dealing with other people, and the terror has been removed," she said.

Yusuf Lamont, who got his second dose, worries the threat is not over, saying, "It's not a time to just start whipping masks off and dancing around."

"There's a false sense of security with numbers going down and people getting vaccinated. It's like, 'Oh, it's safe to go do whatever.' No. It's a big country. There's 330 million people," he said.

Josh Michaud, associate director of global health policy with the Kaiser Family Foundation in Washington, said the optimism in the U.S. should come with caution.

Europe's "rapid relaxation of distancing requirements in a lot of places, combined with populations letting their guard down as they look ahead to the light at the end of the long pandemic tunnel, helped set the stage for the current surges," he said.

The lesson for the the U.S., he said, is to keep vaccinating those at risk as fast as possible, keep an eye on variants, and "keep slow and steady with the easing of social distancing requirements."

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Associated Press video journalist Eugene Garcia in California, reporter Thalia Beaty in New York and AP reporters across Europe contributed to this report.

## After vaccine freeze, European countries seek a quick thaw

By ANGELA CHARLTON and LORNE COOK Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — First, France abruptly halted AstraZeneca vaccinations. Now, the French prime minister wants to get one as soon as he can.

With the virus rebounding from Paris to Budapest and beyond, European governments that rushed to suspend use of AstraZeneca vaccines after reports of blood clots are realizing the far-reaching impact of the move. And they suddenly seem eager for any signal — or fig leaf — that allows them to resume the shots.

That could come as soon as Thursday, when the European Medicines Agency releases initial results of its investigations into whether there is a connection between the vaccine and the blood clots. So far, the EMA and World Health Organization have said there's no evidence the vaccine is to blame.

But experts worry that the damage already has been done. The suspensions by Germany, France, Italy, Spain and others have fueled doubts about the oft-maligned AstraZeneca vaccine, and vaccination efforts in general, as the world struggles to vanquish the pandemic.

"There are thousands of new cases in Germany, France, Italy, etc. every day. If you are halting vaccination during this ongoing pandemic, you know that people will die," Michael Head, senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, told The Associated Press.

While stressing the importance of investigating potentially dangerous side effects, he said, "It's totally possible to investigate the signals without stopping the vaccine rollout."

Some countries are sticking to the AstraZeneca vaccines. India vowed Wednesday to continue vaccinations, hours before Brazil's health minister celebrated the first doses of AstraZeneca bottled in the country.

New coronavirus cases grew 10% globally last week, driven by surges in Europe and the Americas, the WHO reported Wednesday, urging continued vaccinations.

"The disease is turning the corner in the wrong direction, and we need to get that under control," said Dr. Michael Ryan, the WHO emergencies chief. "We're going to fall behind the virus again."

Even before Thursday's announcement by Europe's medicines watchdog, the president of the European Commission made it clear that the AstraZeneca vaccine will remain a pillar of the EU's vaccine strategy.

"I trust AstraZeneca, I trust the vaccines," Ursula von der Leyen said.

Instead of addressing the vaccination suspensions that have divided the EU, von der Leyen focused on the drug company's supply problems and revived talk of export bans on vaccines made in the EU.

"AstraZeneca has unfortunately under-produced and under-delivered, and this painfully, of course, reduced the speed of the vaccination campaign," she told reporters. She said the EU still aims to vaccinate

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70% of all adults by September.

But the suspensions of AstraZeneca shots in a cascading number of countries have served another setback to the EU's vaccination drive, which has been plagued by shortages and other hurdles and is lagging well behind the campaigns in Britain and the U.S. More than half of the EU's 15 million AstraZeneca doses so far are still in storage because of prior problems.

Almost as soon as France's president froze the vaccinations Monday, top French officials started worrying about the impact on public opinion in a country where many already viewed the AstraZeneca vaccine as second-class and where vaccine skepticism is broad.

The government now hopes to announce resumed vaccinations as soon as Thursday. The Paris region is facing new lockdown measures this week as more contagious, more damaging virus variants have pushed intensive care units beyond capacity and sent infections resurging, despite a 6 p.m. nationwide curfew and the long-term closure of restaurants and many businesses.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex, who at age 55 and with no known underlying health problems is not eligible yet for a vaccination, said on national television Tuesday night that "it would be wise that I get vaccinated very quickly, as soon as the suspension is, I hope, lifted."

Castex said he wants to demonstrate to his fellow citizens "that vaccination is the exit door from this crisis."

Italy is toeing a similar line. Health Minister Roberto Speranza says European countries are hoping that the EMA on Thursday will deliver "the clarifications and reassurances necessary" to be able to resume administering the AstraZeneca vaccine "without hesitation."

In Germany, where eight cases of blood clots are under investigation, officials defended the decision to suspend vaccinations for further investigation, but appeared ready to resume them soon. Health Ministry spokesman Hanno Kautz said, "It's clear that the EMA decision is binding, and of course we will follow the EMA decision too."

Lithuania's president criticized its health minister's decision to suspend the shots, saying it causes "enormous damage to entire vaccination process."

The impact has reached beyond Europe, with some people snubbing the AstraZeneca vaccine as subpar even when it is the only one available.

Amós García, president of the Spanish Vaccinology Association, said it will be difficult for governments to rebuild trust in the overall coronavirus vaccination program, no matter what the EMA announces.

"The problem when a vaccine is put in doubt is not that it affects that vaccine, but that it affects the whole vaccination world," he said.

"Possibly there has been an excess of zeal" among governments like Spain's that suspended vaccinations, he said. But he praised Europe's vaccine surveillance systems for quickly identifying and investigating the blood clot issues. Spain is examining three such cases.

Spanish Health Minister Carolina Darias defended the decision to put a hold on the AstraZeneca vaccine, saying it is necessary to "continue building confidence" in efforts to fight COVID-19.

The EMA says 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 clinical studies of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The company says 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.

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Cook reported from Brussels. Maria Cheng in London, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Aritz Parra in Madrid, Colleen Barry in Milan and Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed.

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## Will work from home outlast virus? Ford's move suggests yes

By TOM KRISHER and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Business Writers

DETROIT (AP) — It's a question occupying the minds of millions of employees who have worked from home the past year: Will they still be allowed to work remotely — at least some days — once the pandemic has faded?

On Wednesday, one of America's corporate titans, Ford Motor Co., supplied its own answer: It told about 30,000 of its employees worldwide who have worked from home that they can continue to do so indefinitely, with flexible hours approved by their managers. Their schedules will become a work-office "hybrid": They'll commute to work mainly for group meetings and projects best-suited for face-to-face interaction.

Ford's announcement sent one of the clearest signals to date that the pandemic has hastened a cultural shift in Americans' work lives by erasing any stigma around remote work and encouraging the adoption of technology that enables it. Broader evidence about the post-pandemic workplace suggests that what was long called tele-commuting will remain far more common than it was a year ago.

A report this week from the employment website Indeed says postings for jobs that mention "remote work" have more than doubled since the pandemic began. Such job postings are still increasing even while vaccinations are accelerating and the pace of new confirmed COVID cases is declining.

"If job postings are a guide, employers are increasingly open to remote work, even as some employees return to the workplace," said Jed Kolko, chief economist at Indeed.

The share of Indeed's job postings that mention "remote work" or "work from home" reached 7% last month, up from just below 3% a year ago. But in some industries, the gains were far more dramatic, including those that haven't traditionally welcomed remote work.

In legal services, for example, remote-work postings for jobs including paralegals and legal assistants jumped from under 5% in the second half of 2019 to 16% in the second half of 2020, according to Indeed data. In banking and finance, for such jobs as actuaries and loan underwriters, remote-work postings surged from 4% to nearly 16%. For mental health therapists, they rose from 1% to nearly 7%.

Such shifts could, in turn, trigger changes in where people live and affect the varying economic health of metro areas. Some highly skilled workers could migrate from high-cost coastal cities, where they had clustered in the decade after the Great Recession, to more affordable cities or small towns. Downtown offices could shrink and exist mainly for collaborative work. The tax revenue of large cities could tumble as fewer workers patronize downtown bars, restaurants and coffee shops.

"The pandemic has broken the social and cultural norms for how we work," said Timothy Golden, a professor of management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "Remote work has become much more accepted."

Ford is just the latest company to allow more work from home after the pandemic. Salesforce, Facebook, Google and other tech firms have said they'll continue work-from-home policies indefinitely. Target Corp. will leave one of four downtown Minneapolis office locations because it's moving to a hybrid model for 3,500 workers. It will keep other downtown offices.

Flexible remote work is hardly an equal opportunity perk. It is disproportionately concentrated among more educated, well-paid workers. The jobs of lesser-paid employees generally require on-site work or face-to-face contact with the public.

More than one-third of Asian employees and a quarter of whites worked from home because of the pandemic in January, according to an analysis of government data by the Conference Board, a business research group. Just 19% of Black workers and 14% of Hispanics were able to do so.

Ford has found over the past year that employees and supervisors believe that more work can be done remotely, that they can still connect with each other and that they have the means to do their jobs, said Kiersten Robinson, chief people and employee experiences officer. So when its hybrid schedule begins in July or soon thereafter, Ford will give teams a choice of when to come to the office.

Robinson said a flexible schedule will also help Ford compete for talent.

"I do think we're seeing a real shift in expectations among candidates," she said.

Among the employees pleased by the new policy is Kelly Keller, Ford's chemistry and material compliance manager. Keller, who has been working a hybrid schedule since the pandemic erupted a year ago,

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wouldn't want to go back to commuting to work each day. Now she generally works three days from home and then commutes for the next three workdays, an hour each way, to a lab in Dearborn, Michigan.

Sometimes when she's home, she gets to take her daughter to elementary school and start work a little late before finishing later in the day.

"I definitely enjoy the flexibility," Keller said. "I would be grateful for the opportunity to continue the hybrid arrangement, for sure."

Of the workers she supervises, seven commute to the lab every day; four work from home. The at-home workers, Keller said, have been more productive than they were before the coronavirus struck because they often work during the time they would have been commuting.

"For most," she said, "I think they put in longer days."

A study last month by Alexander Bick, an economist at Arizona State University, and two colleagues found that nearly 13% of workers they surveyed plan to work from home full time after the pandemic — nearly double the 7.6% who did so in February 2020. An additional 25% expect to do so at least one day a week, up from 17% before the pandemic.

Company executives overwhelmingly report that remote work has succeeded during the pandemic, according to research by consulting firm PwC. About 55% said they envision allowing continued remote work, according to the survey of 133 executives of mostly large companies. Just 17% said they wanted employees back in the office as soon as possible. An additional 26% said they preferred only limited remote work but recognized that it's become popular with employees.

Ford and other companies have been redesigning their offices, or considering doing so, to reflect fewer cubicles and personal offices and more conference rooms and other spaces for workers, who may be on-site for just part of the week, to collaborate.

A more flexible attitude about workplaces could deal a blow to the largest U.S. cities. Many Americans are already capitalizing on remote work to leave New York, Los Angeles, Boston and the San Francisco Bay Area in favor of Phoenix; Tampa, Florida; Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; and other less expensive areas, real estate data shows.

One telling detail: Even as the number of homes for sale has tumbled nationally in the past year, the supply of for-sale houses in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles has actually increased, according to the real estate brokerage Redfin. And the drop in available homes has been much smaller than the national average in other large coastal cities, such as Seattle, Boston and Washington.

Many cities may also absorb a financial hit even if remote workers don't move. One academic study estimates that spending by workers at downtown businesses will shrink 5% to 10% after the pandemic.

Daryl Fairweather, chief economist at Redfin, said the pandemic has accelerated a trend that predated the virus: More Americans have sought cheaper homes in lesser-known cities and suburbs.

Fairweather herself left Seattle last summer after wildfires in Oregon turned the city's skies smoky and dark. Originally, she, her husband and two small children planned to stay for just a month in a small town in Wisconsin, near his family. Soon, though, they decided to make it permanent, and Fairweather has been able to work remotely.

"We liked the pace of life — we liked being near family," she said. "It's so affordable here."

Rugaber reported from Washington. AP Business Writer Alexandra Olson contributed to this report from New York.

## Treasury: \$242 billion in new relief payments already sent

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Treasury Department says it has sent out 90 million economic impact payments totaling \$242 billion since President Joe Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief plan last week.

The bulk of those payments were made by the IRS as direct deposits, which recipients starting seeing in their bank accounts last weekend, officials said Wednesday.

In addition, Treasury has mailed out roughly 150,000 checks worth about \$442 million.

Processing of the payments began last Friday, the day after Biden signed the American Rescue Plan, which authorized direct payments of up to \$1,400 to qualifying individuals.

Treasury said the first batch of payments went to eligible taxpayers who provided direct-deposit information on their 2019 or 2020 tax returns. Included were people who don't typically file a return but who used a non-filers tool at IRS.gov last year to be included in two earlier rounds of COVID-19 relief payments.

Officials said additional batches of payments will be sent in coming weeks by direct deposit and through the mail as a check or debit card.

No action is needed by most taxpayers to receive the payments, which will be automatic and similar to how people received their first and second round of economic impact payments in 2020.

The payments, which are being made to cushion the blow from the coronavirus pandemic, started with \$1,200 payments in the first round last spring and \$600 payments in a second round of payments approved by Congress in December.

## NCAA teams hit by COVID pauses take hope from antibodies

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Baylor coach Scott Drew could sympathize with Kansas counterpart Bill Self when the Jayhawks had a positive COVID-19 test during the Big 12 Tournament, forcing them to withdraw and putting their NCAA Tournament hopes in limbo.

After all, the Bears went through their own pause this season. Twice.

They struggled mightily coming out of it, too, barely squeaking by Iowa State before Kansas dealt them their only regular-season loss. They still have not looked like the national title contender they were before the pauses.

"My heart went out to them," Drew said of the Jayhawks, "because I know how the players feel about that, and how tough it is on them, and I know the concerns the coaching staff will have to have with safety going forward."

Then again, maybe coaches won't be quite as concerned.

All those pauses that 27 of the 68 teams in the NCAA Tournament went through during the season could end up benefitting them now that they've arrived in Indianapolis. Players, coaches and staff members who tested positive still have lingering antibodies, making them less susceptible to getting COVID-19 again — and potentially forcing their team to withdraw from the biggest tournament of their lives.

"While you can become reinfected with COVID, and it looks like new variants may be able to evade some of the immune response, reinfections are not that frequent," said Dr. Tara Kirk Sell, a former Olympic swimmer and an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Health and Engineering at Johns Hopkins. "I'd imagine players who have had COVID-19 are less likely to get it now."

Nobody knows quite how effective antibodies are, nor how long they last. But recent research suggests someone who has recovered from COVID-19 has a measure of immunity for eight months, possibly longer.

That could be good news for nearly half the field, and especially good for Baylor, Florida State, Drexel, Grand Canyon, Iona and Norfolk State. Those six schools endured two pauses; the Gaels of coach Rick Pitino went 16 days during one and 51 days during the other, the longest that any team was inactive this season.

Those who got the virus felt lousy for days or weeks. When they came back, it often took several games for teams to get their legs — and lungs — back in shape.

Evan Miyakawa, a doctoral candidate in statistics at Baylor, broke down how teams fared this season when they emerged from pauses. He found an average drop in adjusted efficiency margin for teams following outbreaks was 0.016, which corresponds to a point-margin drop of 1.12 in a typical game.

In other words, a team that analytics projected to win by 4.2 points before the pause was projected to win by 3.1 afterward. The Bears wound up being one of the most negatively affected teams.

Other teams, such as Iona, actually fared better coming out of pauses. But regardless of how they performed — better or worse — what they all have in common are the antibodies that those teams brought

with them to the dance.

"We would hope if a group has been exposed and infected previous, their probability of experiencing an outbreak or several members being infected would be less," said Dr. Dana Hawkinson, medical director of infection prevention and control at the University of Kansas Health System. "People who have been infected still have a possibility of being reinfected; we just hope they have less risk of disease, severe disease, death and transmitting the virus to others."

That's why teams that have had COVID-19 still don't have freedom to run amok in Indianapolis.

Having had the disease might lower the amount of stress on some players and coaches, but every member of a team's travel party must still test daily. They remain confined largely to their hotel rooms, unless they are headed to practice or some other approved event. Masks remain ubiquitous, hand-washing pervasive.

"It's how the world is right now," Oklahoma State forward Cade Cunningham said with a shrug. "We just try to take care of ourselves, test negative as many times as we can and stay positive, I guess."

Even then, the virus can slip through the best-laid plans. That was the case when a referee tested positive early this week. He and five others who went out to dinner were sent home before the tournament even began.

"It's not ever going to be perfect in a pandemic," NCAA vice president Dan Gavitt said. "I don't think there's something that can be pinpointed as a kind of failure here. Just an unfortunate set of circumstances."

Perhaps the COVID-19 pauses throughout the season will turn out to have delivered some measure of protection for March Madness.

"The whole season has given us pause, right? But you can only do so much," Oklahoma State coach Mike Boynton said. "It is not like the virus is going to just disappear. You respect it, you try to be diligent but you can't really hide from it."

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and [http://www.twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](http://www.twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Warnock: GOP voting restrictions resurrect 'Jim Crow era'

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

Sen. Raphael Warnock, whose election as Georgia's first Black senator gave control of the chamber to Democrats, used his first floor speech on Capitol Hill to blast a wave of Republican-backed measures that would make it harder to cast ballots in states around the country.

Warnock noted Georgia's and the country's history of allowing voter suppression against minorities and the poor, and he warned that some Republican lawmakers are trying to reopen those chapters with "draconian" restrictions he cast as a reaction against Democratic victories like his.

"We are witnessing right now a massive and unabashed assault on voting rights and voter access unlike anything we have seen since the Jim Crow era," Warnock said Wednesday. "One person, one vote is being threatened right now. Politicians in my home state and all across America, in their craven lust for power, have launched a full-fledged assault on voting rights" and on "democracy itself."

The first-term senator's speech followed Senate Democrats' introduction of a sweeping election law overhaul, called the "For the People Act," that could override many of the restrictive measures that Republicans are pushing at the state level. Warnock is the Senate bill's lead sponsor. The House passed its version in the previous Congress and again last month on a 220-210 vote that fell along party lines.

Democrats cast their legislation as a way to render most of the state GOP moves moot. Republican leaders insist their approach, which follows former President Donald Trump's false assertions that the 2020 elections were "rigged," is needed to prevent voter fraud and reassure voters that U.S. elections are legitimate.

Warnock blasted that reasoning Wednesday as part of a "big lie of voter fraud as a pretext for voter suppression." He added that "the same big lie led to a violent insurrection on this very Capitol," as Congress met Jan. 6 to certify President Joe Biden's victory.

Republican lawmakers in Georgia and other states are considering severely curtailing absentee voting;

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eliminating automatic and same-day voter registration; and cutting back on early voting opportunities, including Sunday "souls to the polls" voting days that are especially important to Black churches where parishioners lean overwhelmingly Democratic.

Democrats' federal bill, among other provisions, would make automatic voter registration the norm nationwide, effectively forbid racial and partisan gerrymandering of district lines, establish national baselines for absentee voting, make it harder for states to remove irregular voters from the rolls and expand public financing of elections.

Separately, Democrats in Congress want to restore key sections of the Voting Rights Act that required certain states and local jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination to receive federal approval for their local voting procedures. The Supreme Court gutted those provisions in 2013.

Both the Voting Rights Act restoration and the wider bill face an uphill path in the 50-50 Senate as long as the current filibuster rule requires major legislation to get 60 votes to pass.

Warnock's selection as Senate sponsor for the overarching bill is both symbolic and practical because of Warnock's historical significance as a Black senator from the Deep South and because of how much minority voters could be affected by various voting law changes.

"He knows what voter suppression is like in Georgia. He knows what they're doing now," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "I think he's going to be a very persuasive voice for Democrats and Republicans" on the issue.

Elevating Warnock also is a recognition from Schumer of how important Georgia is in the national balance of power, with Warnock and his fellow first-term Democratic senator Jon Ossoff winning Jan. 5 runoffs in the state to force an evenly divided Senate that allowed Vice President Kamala Harris to become the tiebreaking vote.

Warnock, who won a special election, must seek reelection for a full term in 2022. His bid will test whether Democrats have staying power in Georgia after decades of Republican dominance in federal elections.

At the least, the outcome of the legislative tussle over voting laws will shape voter turnout strategies for Democrats if they aren't able to lean as heavily on absentee voting as they did in 2020.

Warnock didn't acknowledge his own future political fortunes but used a considerable portion of his 22 minutes in the Senate well to weave his success and the ongoing legislative fights into the nation's civil rights history.

A 51-year-old native of Savannah, Georgia, Warnock noted that Georgia's two U.S. senators at the time of his birth, Richard Russell and Herman Talmadge, were "arch-segregationists and unabashed adversaries of the civil rights movement." Warnock quoted violent, racist rhetoric from Talmadge and his father, Eugene, a Georgia governor.

In that same era, Warnock said, his mother worked in tobacco and cotton fields — generations after the Civil War and the 13th Amendment had ended slavery.

"Because this is America, the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton went to the polls in January and picked her youngest son to be a United States senator," Warnock said, reprising a line he used in his victory speech.

Later, he noted: "I now hold the seat, the Senate seat, where Herman E. Talmadge sat. That's why I love America."

## South Africa headmaster charged for sending boy into latrine

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) —

A school headmaster in South Africa has been charged with child abuse after lowering an 11-year-old student into a pit latrine to search for the official's cellphone, according to local news reports.

The headmaster of Luthuthu Junior Secondary School in the Eastern Cape province, Lubeko Mgandela, appeared in court and was released on bail Wednesday. He has been suspended from his job while officials investigate the incident before taking him to a disciplinary hearing. There are also calls for his educator's

license to be withdrawn.

The incident happened early this month after Mgandela accidentally dropped his cell phone into a latrine at the school.

It is alleged that he then used a thick rope to secure the boy, who may not be identified, and lowered him into the latrine to search for the phone with his hands. The boy was unable to find the phone and when he was pulled back he was covered in feces.

Fellow students made so much fun of him that the ashamed boy has not returned to school, according to his family.

He was apparently paid Rand 50 (\$3) for his efforts even though the headmaster had promised to pay him Rand 200 (\$13) if he found the phone.

The boy's grandmother told the South African news outlet GroundUp that she is happy the matter is being investigated.

"It has been hard for my grandchild to go to school because he has been laughed at by other pupils," she told GroundUp.

The incident has highlighted the South African government's failure to eradicate pit latrines at its schools, most of which are based in the country's poor, rural areas.

At least two students have fallen into school latrines and drowned, one in 2014 and another in 2018.

President Cyril Ramaphosa was so appalled by the deaths and the substandard toilet facilities in many of South Africa's schools that he vowed all schools would have proper toilets within two years. But today more than 3,800 schools across the country still use pit latrines, according to official figures.

## Pre-embryos made in lab could spur research, ethics debates

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time, scientists have used human cells to make structures that mimic the earliest stages of development, which they say will pave the way for more research without running afoul of restrictions on using real embryos.

Two papers published Wednesday in the journal Nature detail how two teams of scientists independently made such structures.

They stressed that their work is only for research, not reproduction, but it likely will pose new ethical questions.

"Studying early human development is really difficult. It's basically a black box," said Jun Wu, a stem cell biologist at the University of Texas, Southwestern Medical Center.

"We believe our model can open up this field," he said, if "you can test your hypothesis without using human embryos."

Wu's team used embryonic stem cells and the second team used reprogrammed skin cells to produce balls of cells that resemble one of the earliest stages of human development.

These balls, called blastocysts, form a few days after an egg has been fertilized but before the cells attach to the uterus to become an embryo. To differentiate their models from blastocysts created through fertilization, the researchers refer to the structures as "iBlastoids" and "human blastoids."

"They shouldn't be considered as equal to a blastocyst, although they are an excellent model for some aspects of biology," said Jose Polo, an epigeneticist at Monash University in Australia who led the second research team.

Both groups stressed that the structures they made were not the same as naturally occurring embryos, and it's unclear whether they could develop into viable embryos.

"The blastoids are less efficient in terms of generating structures mimicking later stage human embryos," said Wu, whose team stopped growing the structure in a culture after four days.

Scientists previously generated similar structures of mouse cells in a lab, but this is the first time they have been made from human cells. The new models correspond to about three to 10 days after fertilization, Wu said. Last year, researchers unveiled structures that model cells 18 to 21 days after fertilization.

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Research involving human embryos and blastocysts is currently ineligible for federal funding in the U.S., and several states prohibit it outright.

Some scientists now use blastocysts donated from fertility clinics for research into the causes of infertility and congenital diseases. The new work should allow them to do such research at much larger scales, Polo said.

"This capacity to work at scale will revolutionize our understanding of these early stages of human development," said Polo.

The scientists stressed that their creations were not intended to be used for human reproduction.

"There is no implantation," said Amander Clark, a stem cell biologist at the University of California, Los Angeles who co-authored the paper with Polo. "These structures are not transferred to a uterus or uterus-like structure," she said. "There is no pregnancy."

The distinction between blastocysts derived from fertilization and the structures created in a lab may not be so clear-cut, said Shoukhrat Mitalipov, a human embryologist at Oregon Health and Science University who was not involved in the research.

"Both groups show how closely they resemble real embryos," he said. "If they are really as good as embryos, should they be treated as embryos?"

"This brings new ethical issues," he said. "Are they going to be covered as human embryos? Should restrictions apply?"

Scientists previously tried to turn the lab-generated mouse cell structures into embryos, but they were not successful.

The optimal scenario for research is to "get as close to a real embryo as possible so you can learn from it, but not a real embryo so you don't get into debates about the moral status of embryos," said Alta Charo, a professor emerita of law and bioethics at University of Wisconsin who was not involved in the papers.

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## UConn frosh Paige Bueckers leads women's AP All-America team

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Paige Bueckers came to Connecticut with a lot of hype surrounding her.

The freshman guard has lived up to it so far, delivering record-breaking performances and earning a spot on The Associated Press women's basketball All-American team Wednesday. She's only the third freshman to make the AP team, joining Oklahoma's Courtney Paris and UConn's Maya Moore.

Bueckers received 28 first place votes from the national panel of 30 media members that vote each week in the AP Top 25 poll. She was joined by Dana Evans of Louisville, Aliyah Boston of South Carolina, Rhyne Howard of Kentucky and NaLyssa Smith of Baylor.

"Name one player that has taken a team this young to where we are today," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "Who's done more than her? And if you can give me a better argument, then I would say I'll vote for them, too. But I don't think you can."

Bueckers averaged 19.7 points, 6.1 assists and shot nearly 54% from the field and a remarkable 47% from 3-point range. She became the first UConn player to score 30 or more points in three straight games, including a 31-point effort against South Carolina. She also set the school record for assists in a game (14) and the freshman mark.

"You see some of the things that Paige does with the ball, and you realize that if somebody told you she was a senior, you wouldn't be surprised," Auriemma said. "She handles the ball like one and she sees the floor like one."

Evans was a key to Louisville's regular-season ACC championship. She averaged 20 points and saved her best effort for the fourth quarter when she consistently would take over games to give the Cardinals the victory. She shot 92% from the free throw line.

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"It's a kid who's worked from day one, trusted the process, came here as a freshman and played important minutes on the team that went to the Final Four but wasn't the focal point," Louisville coach Jeff Walz said. "As her career evolved, more responsibility came and she stepped up to it each and every year."

Boston had a solid sophomore season for the Gamecocks, averaging 13.7 points, 11.7 rebounds and blocking 2.8 shots a game. She was a key reason that the Gamecocks won the SEC Tournament.

"We talked about (Alaina Coates and A'ja Wilson) in the same breath in their sophomore years. (Aliyah) is in the conversation by far," South Carolina coach Dawn Staley. "Some things she does better, honestly, being able to communicate and defensively I think overall she sees a lot more than Alaina and A'ja saw. ... We're asking Aliyah to do it all. Be a passer, scorer, rebounder, defender, be all things and she's handled it extremely well."

Out of the five players, only Howard was a first-team All-American last season. Evans and Boston earned second-team honors in 2020.

Howard had a strong junior year, averaging 20.7 points and 2.3 steals for the Wildcats. She became the school's first women's basketball All-American last season.

"I think what makes Rhyne special is she can play the one through the five on both ends of the floor," Kentucky coach Kyra Elzy said. "She also makes the people around her better, upping her averages this year in rebounding, assists and steals."

Smith has been a key reason for Baylor's continued success. The junior forward led the team in scoring and rebounding as the Lady Bears won their 11th regular-season Big 12 title in a row. She averaged 18.1 points and shot 54% from the field.

"This year she started out, I felt like trying to to just be a big-time scoring player and maybe sometimes feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders," Baylor coach Kim Mulkey said. "She finally realized, I'm on a good team and I'm going to shine and I'm going to relax here and I'm going to start shooting the basketball better. She's just an athlete."

The second team was headlined by N.C. State's Elissa Cunane. She was joined by Naz Hillmon, who is the first women's player at Michigan to earn All-America honors. Aari McDonald of Arizona was on the second team for the second straight year. Iowa freshman Caitlin Clark, who led the nation in scoring and Charli Collier of Texas rounded out the squad.

The third team was Oklahoma State's Natasha Mack, Maryland's Ashley Owusu, UCLA's Michaela Onyenwere, Stanford's Kiana Williams and Arkansas' Chelsea Dungee.

Howard, Evans, Onyenwere, Boston and McDonald made up the preseason All-America team.

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and [http://www.twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](http://www.twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## **EXPLAINER: Stakes high as Moscow opens 1st of 3 Afghan meets**

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Russia is to host on Thursday the first of three international conferences aimed at jump-starting a stalled Afghanistan peace process ahead of a May 1 deadline for the final withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from the country.

The withdrawal date was set under a year-old agreement between the Trump administration and the Taliban. President Joe Biden told ABC in an interview aired Wednesday that he is consulting with allies on the pace of the drawdown. Meeting the May 1 deadline "could happen, but it is tough," he said. If the deadline is extended, he added, it won't be by "a lot longer."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has tried to convey a sense of urgency to Afghanistan's rival factions. After Thursday's meeting in Moscow, he wants the United Nations to convene a conference of foreign ministers from Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, China and the United States "to provide a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan." In a third step, he wants a peace deal signed at the third conference, to be held in Turkey by the time of the U.S. withdrawal.

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But many seemingly unsolvable problems remain. Rival Afghan leaders have checkered and violent histories. Caught in the middle are ordinary Afghans, wary their uncertain future is to be determined by warlords, a corrupt administration, and the fundamentalist Taliban.

The Moscow conference is seen as a critical first step. Key players are attending, including U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who will lead a 10-member delegation. Representatives of Pakistan, Iran, India and China are also participating.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

America's main goal is an Afghanistan peace deal that guarantees its national security and that of its allies. Washington has been at war in Afghanistan for 20 years following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks masterminded by al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden from his headquarters in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

After the U.S. spent nearly \$1 trillion, militant groups remain powerful. Al-Qaida is still present in Afghanistan and an affiliate of the Islamic State group has taken root in the east of the country. Other groups include the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehreek-e-Taliban, threatening Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a threat to Russia, and the Turkistan Islamic Movement founded by Uighur separatists, which threatens China.

The Trump administration agreement included a commitment from the Taliban to disavow terrorist groups and ensure Afghanistan will not be used against the U.S or its allies. It's not clear how the insurgents plan to do that — or if they even can.

## WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The Afghan government is corrupt and morale is low among Afghan troops. The National Afghan Security Forces are rife with so-called ghost soldiers, who exist only on paper, while enlisted men often don't get paid. Compensation to widows and veterans is stolen by crooked government officials. Such practices were detailed on Tuesday by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko at a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on National Security.

Sopko said the widespread corruption is strengthening the Taliban, has driven a deep wedge between Afghans and the government, and weakened the Afghan security forces, which Washington pays \$4 billion a year to sustain.

Warlords with heavily armed militias, who were allies with the U.S. to oust the Taliban, are power brokers in today's Kabul. Yet, they have deep seated animosities that in the early 1990s resulted in four years of brutal fighting that destroyed much of Kabul and killed 50,000 Afghans, mostly civilians. Afghans fear the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops could result in a return to the fighting. Some members of the Senate subcommittee on Tuesday expressed fears that if chaos akin to those years followed a withdrawal of American soldiers, it would again make Afghanistan an attractive staging ground for terrorist groups to attack the U.S. and its allies.

Among the most powerful warlords in Kabul is Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who when last in power between 1992-96 used Afghanistan's national Ariana airlines to bring bin Laden to Afghanistan from Sudan in May 1996, before the Taliban took power. Also in Kabul is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who was a U.S.-designated terrorist until 2017, when he struck a deal with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whom he loudly opposes today.

The Taliban — who during their rule imposed a harsh brand of Islam on Afghanistan that denied girls school and women the right to work and participate in public life — now control or hold sway in roughly 50% of the country. Blinken has warned that without U.S. and NATO troops, it is likely the Taliban would make quick territorial gains.

## WHAT CHALLENGES LIE AHEAD?

Roughly 80% of the Afghan budget is financed by international donors, including a major chunk by the U.S. Without international financing the government would likely collapse.

The Taliban demanding that the Trump-era agreement be the basis for negotiations; they want more prisoners released from Afghan prisons and their leaders removed from the U.N.'s so-called black list.

Sopko on Tuesday stressed the need for accountability. At least one member of the Senate subcommittee pointed out that all sides in the Afghan imbroglio are vulnerable. America fears a chaos that would make Afghanistan a free-for-all once again for terrorists while the government in Kabul fears withdrawal of foreign money that sustains it. The Taliban fear losing diplomatic and political gains they made in the deal with the U.S. and also losing the international interaction and high-profile role they had during peace talks with major world powers.

## **Movement for Black Lives opposes George Floyd Justice Act**

By KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The Movement for Black Lives is opposing the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, arguing the bill doubles down on reform strategies that have historically failed to center marginalized communities and address police violence nationwide, according to a blistering letter to congressional leaders, first shared with The Associated Press.

The movement, which was formed in 2014, is a coalition of 150 organizations nationwide that helped drive the global protests against racial inequity last summer. It is demanding Congress create new, comprehensive legislation to confront disinvestment, mass incarceration and systemic racism in America.

While the Justice in Policing Act has been called one of the most ambitious efforts in decades to overhaul policing, the movement is concerned it doesn't address the root causes that have led to Black Americans dying at the hands of police. The House passed the bill earlier this month, but the movement's opposition presents a new roadblock for Democrats. Even though the party controls both chambers of Congress, a tough road lies ahead for Senate approval.

"Over this summer, communities lifted up solutions that would truly address the root causes of police violence and terror," the movement wrote in a letter addressed to the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Jerry Nadler, D-N.Y., and to Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, and Karen Bass, D-Calif., and Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., and shared with the AP on Wednesday. "Justice in Policing, by its very name, centers investments in policing rather than what should be front and center — upfront investments in communities and people."

The bill, which is named for the man whose killing by police in Minnesota last Memorial Day sparked global protests against racial inequity, would ban chokeholds and "qualified immunity" for law enforcement while creating national standards for policing in a bid to bolster accountability. The bill is supported by President Joe Biden and has received support from some of the nation's leading civil rights organizations.

"The officer that killed George Floyd was looking at the camera as he killed him," said Bass, who authored the bill, prior to the House vote in an interview with the AP. "Why? Because he felt he could operate with impunity."

The movement said that while it does support the end of qualified immunity, which shields law enforcement from certain lawsuits, it believes the bill in its current form focuses on reactive measures and "incrementalist reforms."

Instead, the movement is pushing political leaders to enact the BREATHE Act, which it proposed last July and believes addresses the fundamental causes of police violence.

The AP first reported that the BREATHE Act would transform the nation's criminal justice system through sweeping changes, such as eliminating the Drug Enforcement Administration and the use of surveillance technology, abolishing mandatory minimums and ending life sentences.

The bill, designed by the Movement for Black Lives' Electoral Justice Project, would also redirect funding toward communities to address the nation's systemic racial injustices.

"It's not just about after the fact accountability," said Gina Clayton-Johnson, the lead BREATHE Act architect and leadership team member of the Movement for Black Lives' Policy Table. "There's this thought that Black people are dying at the hands of police officers because individual officers are bad actors, but it is actually a systemic issue, and if you understand it to be systemic, then the solutions must also be systemic."

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The letter lists five central concerns driving the opposition, including the fact that the movement believes the act will provide new money to the “very systems that have always served to kill, cage, and destroy the families of Black people.” The movement also criticizes the act for failing to center the voices of “community members who are closest to the problem.”

“The bill bans federal use of chokeholds, ignoring the reality that police have killed Black people in this manner regardless of whether these bans are in place,” the letter states. “A no knock warrant ban would not have saved Breonna Taylor’s life, just like a ban on chokeholds did not save Eric Garner’s life. The JPA fails to address the root causes and realities of policing in this country.”

Individual organizations are still signing onto the letter, but organizers said the movement is mobilizing 165,000 active supporters to contact their elected officials, as part of their push against the Justice in Policing Act.

But the movement faces a significant uphill battle in securing needed political support from lawmakers who will be key in pushing forward the BREATHE Act or revamping the Justice in Policing Act.

“This is a radical transformation, challenging the very tenets of the system,” said Nadia Brown, a Purdue University political science professor, who added that change is often incremental in politics. “And that’s a tough act to get Americans to believe — even those who stand with and understand policing in the United States as being a wholly racist and unjust system.”

But the stakes are equally as high for Democratic leaders who were elected in part because of the organizing led by many Black activists on the ground seeking transformative change, Brown said, including some younger generations of voters.

“There are large and vocal populations that will not be satisfied,” Brown said. “You can’t divorce racism and the liberty of Black bodies from policing. And that’s what the Movement for Black Lives is trying to get us to think about.”

And Clayton-Johnson believes transformative change is what’s owed to all Black Americans, including Black organizers and voters who turned out in significant numbers to help elect Biden and other Democrats last year.

“Black people have organized, have pushed and created the pathways for you to sit in the seat that you are in and it is because there has been a hope and an understanding that you will deliver on a commitment to race justice and equality,” said Clayton-Johnson, also executive director of the Essie Justice Group.

“We are owed the opportunity to be safe and that includes first and foremost to be safe from a criminal legal system that has been harming us and taking the lives of Black people and of our loved ones for years,” she said.

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Stafford is an investigative reporter on The Associated Press’ Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at [https://twitter.com/kat\\_\\_stafford](https://twitter.com/kat__stafford).

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Associated Press writers Will Weissert and Padmananda Rama contributed to this report.

## EU sets out virus pass plan to allow free travel by summer

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union’s executive body proposed Wednesday issuing certificates that would allow EU residents to travel freely across the 27-nation bloc by the summer as long as they have been vaccinated, tested negative for COVID-19 or recovered from the disease.

With summer looming and tourism-reliant countries anxiously waiting for the return of visitors amid the coronavirus pandemic, the European Commission foresees the creation of certificates aimed at facilitating travel between EU member nations. The plan is set to be discussed during a summit of EU leaders next week,

“We all want the tourist season to start. We can’t afford to lose another season,” European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova told Czech public radio. “Tourism, and also culture and other sectors that are

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dependent on tourism, terribly suffer. We're talking about tens of millions of jobs."

The topic of vaccine certificates has been under discussion for weeks in the EU, where it proved to be divisive. The travel industry and southern European countries with tourism-dependent economies like Greece and Spain have pushed for the quick introduction of a program that would help eliminate quarantines and testing requirements for tourists.

But several other EU members, including France, argued that it would be premature and discriminatory to introduce such passes since a large majority of EU citizens haven't had access to vaccines so far.

To secure the participation of all member countries, the commission proposed delivering free "Digital Green Certificates" to EU residents who can prove they have been vaccinated against COVID-19, but also to those who have tested negative for the virus or can prove they recovered from it.

"Being vaccinated will not be a precondition to travel," the European Commission said. "All EU citizens have a fundamental right to free movement in the EU, and this applies regardless of whether they are vaccinated or not. The Digital Green Certificate will make it easier to exercise that right, also through testing and recovery certificates."

According to data compiled by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, less than 5% of European citizens have been fully vaccinated amid delays in the delivery and production of vaccines. The European Commission says it remains confident that it can achieve its goal of having 70% of the EU's adult population vaccinated by the end of the summer.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the travel certificates "will help boost tourism and the economies that rely heavily on it." Europe's aviation industry urged EU governments to ensure the passes are operational in time for the peak of the summer travel season.

The commission proposed that all vaccines rubberstamped by the European Medicines Agency should be automatically recognized, but also offered governments the possibility to include other vaccines like Russia's Sputnik or China's Sinovac, which haven't received EU market authorization.

The European Commission guaranteed that "a very high level of data protection will be ensured" and said the certificates will be issued in digital format to be shown either on smartphones or paper.

EU officials also hope that vaccine certificates will convince the member states which have introduced travel restrictions aimed at slowing down the pace of new infections to lift their measures. The EU's executive arm has previously warned six countries that their travel-limiting measures, which in Belgium go as far as a ban on nonessential trips, could undermine the core EU principle of free travel and damage the single market.

The commission said the certificates should be suspended once the World Health Organization declares the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

If agreed by the EU leaders, the proposal will need to be approved by EU lawmakers to enter into force.

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Karel Janicek in Prague contributed to this story.

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## 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

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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 expected rubber bullets and tear gas against the protests — not gunfire seemingly aimed at the head and chest. In this age, he had 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.

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.

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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 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.

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The organized opposition presence gives a margin for protests and overt 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.

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.

## Japan court says same-sex marriage should be allowed

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court for the first time ruled Wednesday that same-sex marriage should be allowed under the country's constitution, a moral victory that does not have any immediate legal consequence but could bolster efforts for legalization.

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,(asterisk) the court said, according to a copy of the summary of the ruling.

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Judge Tomoko Takebe said in the ruling that not allowing same-sex marriages violates Article 14 of the Japanese constitution, which prohibits discrimination "because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin."

The court was hearing a case brought by three same-sex couples who were seeking government compensation for the difficulties they had to suffer from not being able to legally marry. The court declined to financially compensate the plaintiffs.

The court's ruling has no immediate legal effect and same-sex couples are still not allowed to marry. Nevertheless, activists say the ruling is a major victory that could influence similar court cases and help their efforts to push for parliamentary debate and changes to the law to allow same-sex marriage.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told reporters that the government disagreed with Wednesday's ruling. He said the government seeks to achieve a society more tolerant to diversity, but did not say how it would respond to the ruling, except that it will watch pending court cases.

Outside the court, the plaintiffs' lawyers and their supporters held up rainbow flags and a banner saying "a big first step toward equality."

"I hope this ruling serves as a first step for Japan to change," said one woman who only identified herself as "Plaintiff No. 5."

Lawyers representing the plaintiffs said they planned to appeal the ruling, because it did not hold the government responsible for the damages sought.

"We need to make clear that the parliament has left alone the unconstitutional situation by abandoning its legislative duties, and have them take action promptly," they said in a statement.

Japan is the only country in the Group of Seven — a group of major industrialized nations — where same-sex marriages are not legal. But it is not an outlier in Asia, where Taiwan is the only place where same-sex marriage is legal following legislation passed in May 2019.

While support for LGBTQ people is rising in Japan, discrimination persists. In a society where pressure for conformity is strong, many LGBTQ people hide their sexuality, fearing prejudice at home, school or work.

For same-sex couples there are many specific legal barriers they face that married couples don't. 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.

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.

Four other lawsuits similar to the one decided Wednesday are pending in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka.

Follow Mari Yamaguchi on Twitter at <https://www.twitter.com/mariyamaguchi>

## Top US diplomat slams North Korea's rights condition

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — America's top diplomat on Wednesday criticized North Korea's human rights record and reiterated a vow to strip the country of its nuclear program, a day after Pyongyang warned Washington to "refrain from causing a stink" amid deadlocked nuclear negotiations.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in South Korea with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin earlier Wednesday as part of their regional tour aimed at boosting America's Asian alliances to better deal with growing challenges from China and North Korea.

"The authoritarian regime in North Korea continues to commit systematic and widespread abuses against its own people," Blinken said at the start of his meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-

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yong. "We must stand with people demanding their fundamental rights and freedoms and against those who repress them."

Blinken called North Korea's nuclear and missile programs "a threat to the region and to the world." He said the United States will work with South Korea, Japan and other allies to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea.

How to get North Korea to return to talks was sure to be a major focus of meetings between Blinken and Austin and South Korean officials.

When Austin separately met his South Korean counterpart Suh Wook on Wednesday, he said their countries' alliance "has never been more important" given "the unprecedented challenges posed by" North Korea and China.

The two top U.S. officials are to hold a joint "two plus two" meeting with Chung and Suh on Thursday in the first such contact between the two countries in five years.

U.S.-led diplomacy on North Korea's nuclear program 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 was a pressure tactic and that Pyongyang may try to further raise animosities with weapons tests to boost its leverage in future negotiations with Washington.

North Korea didn't immediately react to Blinken's comments Wednesday.

While in Tokyo on Tuesday, 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 was 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."

Blinken and Austin also joined forces with Japanese officials to criticize China's "coercion and aggression" and reaffirm their commitment to ridding North Korea of all its nuclear weapons.

China on Wednesday said the U.S.-Japan statement "maliciously attacked" its foreign policy and seriously interfered in China's internal affairs. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China was "strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed" to the statement.

With North Korea's arsenal believed to be growing amid the deadlocked diplomacy, experts are debating over whether 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.

Shin 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

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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 this week's 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.

Suh, the South Korean defense minister, said Tuesday that the United States 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.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 18, the 77th day of 2021. There are 288 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 18, 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, ruled unanimously that state courts were required to provide legal counsel to criminal defendants who could not afford to hire an attorney on their own.

On this date:

In 1910, the first filmed adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein," a silent short produced by Thomas Edison's New York movie studio, was released.

In 1911, Irving Berlin's first major hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," was first published by Ted Snyder & Co. of New York.

In 1922, Mohandas K. Gandhi was sentenced in India to six years' imprisonment for civil disobedience. (He was released after serving two years.)

In 1925, the Tri-State Tornado struck southeastern Missouri, southern Illinois and southwestern Indiana, resulting in some 700 deaths.

In 1937, in America's worst school disaster, nearly 300 people, most of them children, were killed in a natural gas explosion at the New London Consolidated School in Rusk County, Texas.

In 1940, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini met at the Brenner Pass, where the Italian dictator agreed to join Germany's war against France and Britain.

In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order authorizing the War Relocation Authority, which was put in charge of interning Japanese-Americans, with Milton S. Eisenhower (the younger brother of Dwight D. Eisenhower) as its director.

In 1965, the first spacewalk took place as Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov went outside his Voskhod 2 capsule, secured by a tether.

In 1974, most of the Arab oil-producing nations ended their 5-month-old embargo against the United States that had been sparked by American support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War.

In 1996, rejecting an insanity defense, a jury in Dedham, Massachusetts, convicted John C. Salvi III of murdering two women in attacks at two Boston-area abortion clinics in December 1994. (Salvi later committed suicide in his prison cell.)

In 2017, Chuck Berry, rock 'n' roll's founding guitar hero and storyteller who defined the music's joy and rebellion in such classics as "Johnny B. Goode," "Sweet Little Sixteen" and "Roll Over Beethoven," died at

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his home west of St. Louis at age 90.

In 2018, Vladimir Putin rolled to a crushing reelection victory for six more years as Russia's president.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama demanded that Moammar Gadhafi halt all military attacks on civilians and said that if the Libyan leader did not stand down, the United States would join other nations in launching military action against him. At a massive demonstration against Yemen's government, snipers fired on protesters and police blocked an escape route; dozens were killed, including children. Former Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher died in Los Angeles at 85. Princess Antoinette of Monaco, the late Prince Rainier III's oldest sister and a prominent advocate for animal rights, died at 90.

Five years ago: A jury in St. Petersburg, Florida, sided with ex-pro wrestler Hulk Hogan, awarding him \$115 million in compensatory damages in his sex tape lawsuit against Gawker Media. (Three days later, the jury awarded \$25 million in punitive damages; Gawker, which ended up going bankrupt, finally settled with Hogan for \$31 million.) Police in Brussels captured Europe's most wanted fugitive, Salah Abdeslam, who was the prime suspect in the deadly 2015 Paris attacks. North Korea ignored U.N. resolutions by firing a medium-range ballistic missile into the sea.

One year ago: The U.S. and Canada agreed to temporarily close their shared border to nonessential travel. Describing himself as a "wartime president," President Donald Trump said he would invoke emergency powers to let the government steer production of needed medical supplies by private companies. Trump signed a \$100 billion aid package to boost testing for the coronavirus and guarantee sick leave to workers who become ill. As fears of a prolonged recession caused by the virus took hold, the S&P 500 sank 5%; the Dow shed more than 1,300 points and had lost nearly all of the big gains posted since Trump's inauguration.

Today's Birthdays: Composer John Kander is 94. Nobel peace laureate and former South African president F.W. de Klerk is 85. Actor Brad Dourif is 71. Jazz musician Bill Frisell is 70. Singer Irene Cara is 62. Alt-country musician Karen Grotberg (The Jayhawks) is 62. Movie writer-director Luc Besson is 62. Actor Geoffrey Owens is 60. Actor Thomas Ian Griffith is 59. Singer-songwriter James McMurtry is 59. TV personality Mike Rowe is 59. Singer-actor Vanessa L. Williams is 58. Olympic gold medal speedskater Bonnie Blair is 57. Actor David Cubitt is 56. Rock musician Jerry Cantrell (Alice in Chains) is 55. Rock singer-musician Miki Berenyi (ber-EN'-ee) is 54. Actor Michael Bergin is 52. Rapper-actor-talk show host Queen Latifah is 51. Former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus (ryns PREE'-bus) is 49. Actor-comedian Dane Cook is 49. Country singer Philip Sweet (Little Big Town) is 47. Rock musician Stuart Zender is 47. Singers Evan and Jaron Lowenstein are 47. Actor-singer-dancer Sutton Foster is 46. Rock singer Adam Levine (Maroon 5) is 42. Rock musician Daren Taylor (Airborne Toxic Event) is 41. Olympic gold medal figure skater Alexei Yagudin is 41. Actor Adam Pally is 39. Actor Cornelius Smith Jr. is 39. Actor Duane Henry (TV: "NCIS") is 36. Actor Lily Collins is 32. Actor-dancer Julia Goldani Telles is 26. Actor Ciara Bravo is 24. Actor Blake Garrett Rosenthal is 17.