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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

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OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Governor Noem Returns HB 1217 to Legislature, Suggests Style and Form Changes

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Noem returned HB 1217 to the South Dakota Legislature with Style and Form suggestions. Specifically, the Governor suggests four Style and Form changes to address the potential unintended consequences of HB 1217 as originally enrolled.

Governor Noem's Full Letter:

Dear Legislators,

I respectfully return to you House Bill 1217 with the following recommendations as to STYLE and FORM.

I believe that boys should play boys' sports, and girls should play girls' sports. As the legislative findings in the original version of the bill set out, "[w]ith respect to biological sex, one is either male or female[,]"" and "[p]hysiological differences between males and females include 'those most important for success in sport: categorically different strength, speed, and endurance.'"

That is why House Bill 1217 properly provides that females should have opportunities to play youth sports on teams comprised of females and against teams of females. Unfortunately, as I have studied this legislation and conferred with legal experts over the past several days, I have become concerned that this bill's vague and overly broad language could have significant unintended consequences.

For example, Section 2 of House Bill 1217 requires a student athlete to verify, each year, that the student "is not taking and has not taken, during the preceding twelve months, any performance enhancing drugs, including anabolic steroids."

Presumably, this requirement was included to address a student taking these drugs as a part of a gender transition, but House Bill 1217 is not limited in this way. Rather, if a male student athlete failed to make the football team, and later learned that another student on the team was taking steroids without disclosing it, the student who didn't make the team would be entitled to sue both the school and the steroid-using student for damages.

In addition, Section 2 creates an unworkable administrative burden on schools, who under its terms must collect verification forms from every student athlete, every year, as to age, biological sex, and use of performance-enhancing drugs; and furthermore must monitor these disclosures throughout the year so that if "reasonable cause" is found of a false or misleading form, the school can take action to avoid civil liability.

I am also concerned that the approach House Bill 1217 takes is unrealistic in the context of collegiate athletics. In South Dakota, we are proud of our universities' athletic programs, and in particular the great strides we have taken to gain national exposure and increase opportunities for our next generation over the past two decades.

South Dakota has shown that our student athletes can compete with anyone in the country, but competing on the national stage means compliance with the national governing bodies that oversee collegiate athletics. While I certainly do not always agree with the actions these sanctioning bodies take, I understand that collegiate athletics requires such a system – a fifty-state patchwork is not workable.

To achieve the legislative intent of protecting girls' sports, while simultaneously avoiding potential un-

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intended consequences, I recommend the following Style and Form changes to the Enrolled version of House Bill 1217:

Revise Section 1 to read:

13-67-1 Athletic teams and sports--Designation by sex--Participation.

Any athletic team or sport that is sponsored or sanctioned by **an accredited elementary or secondary school** ~~public school, a school district, or an association meeting the requirements of § 13-36-4, or an institution of higher education under the control of the Board of Regents or the South Dakota Board of Technical Education~~ must be expressly designated as being:

- (1) A male team or sport;
- (2) A female team or sport; or
- (3) A coeducational team or sport.

A team or sport designated as being female is available only to participants who are female, based on their biological sex, **as reflected on the birth certificate or affidavit provided upon initial enrollment in accordance with** ~~verified in accordance with § 13-27-3.1 13-67-2.~~

2. Strike Section 2;

3. Revise former Section 3 to read:

13-67-2 ~~3~~ Complaint—Investigation—Adverse Action.

A governmental entity, licensing or accrediting organization, or athletic association or organization may not entertain a complaint, open an investigation, or take any adverse action against **an accredited elementary or secondary school**, or a school district, **or an association meeting the requirements of § 13-36-4** ~~or an institution of higher education~~, or against any person employed by, or a governing board member of, such an **elementary or secondary school**, or school district, ~~or institution~~, **or an association meeting the requirements of § 13-36-4**, for maintaining athletic teams or sports in accordance with § 13-67-1.

4. Strike Section 4.

The proposed revisions limit House Bill 1217 to elementary and secondary school athletics, which are primarily conducted among South Dakota schools and at the high school level are governed by the South Dakota High School Activities Association, a creature of South Dakota law. The proposed revisions will also remedy the vague language regarding civil liability and the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

Overall, these style and form clarifications protect women sports while also showing empathy for youths struggling with what they understand to be their gender identity. But showing empathy does not mean a biologically-female-at birth woman should face an unbalanced playing field that effectively undermines the advances made by women and for women since the implementation of Title IX in 1972. The Supreme Court of the United States has recognized that the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment allows for the law to treat women and men differently, and in this instance that equal protection afforded women absolutely should apply on our state's elementary and high school playing fields.

I support this legislation and hope that House Bill 1217, with the changes I am proposing, becomes law. I respectfully request that you concur with my recommendations as to STYLE and FORM.

Respectfully submitted,
Governor Kristi Noem

Thune Secures Several Key Agriculture Subcommittee Assignments

"With the next farm bill right around the corner, I am ready to get to work."

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), a longtime member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, was recently chosen to serve on several key agriculture subcommittees: the Subcommittee on Commodities, Risk Management; the Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources; and the Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, Poultry, Local Food Systems, and Food Safety and Security.

"As long as I've served in Congress, I've fought for South Dakota's hardworking farmers and ranchers," said Thune. "With these key subcommittee assignments, I can continue building off the work I've done in previous farm bills to ensure farmers and ranchers have a strong safety net through programs like the Agriculture Risk Coverage Program and the Livestock Indemnity Program as they continue to feed the world. I'll also keep working to improve conservation programs like the Conservation Reserve Program, among many other important provisions. With the next farm bill right around the corner, I am ready to get to work."

South Dakota Students Get Chance to Send Art to Washington

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) announced the 2021 Congressional Art Competition, which puts the artwork of South Dakota students in the nation's Capitol building. The South Dakota Arts Council (SDAC) is now accepting entries on behalf of Rep. Johnson's office.

The contest is open to all South Dakota high school students, and the first-place winning entry will be displayed in the Cannon Tunnel of the United States Capitol for one year. The second-place winning entry will be displayed in Johnson's Washington, D.C., office.

"Year after year, it's awesome to see the talent of our high school students and have the chance to show our appreciation and support of their artwork," said Johnson. "As I walk by the artwork of so many talented students each day, I'm reminded of home every time I pass South Dakota's unique creation. Please reach out to the South Dakota Arts Council if you need any help, and get your artwork submitted by the deadline."

The Arts Council will accept only digital submissions on behalf of Rep. Johnson. Students should send one email including a high-resolution JPEG image, along with a completed, typed PDF of the student release form to rebecca.cruse@state.sd.us. Submissions must be received by Tuesday, April 27. Winners will be notified by Thursday, April 29, and will be responsible for shipping their artwork and student release forms to the SDAC offices. The South Dakota Arts Council will have the artwork framed and will ship it to Washington, D.C., for the student.

Please review the artwork specifications and guidelines before submitting and download the student release form at <https://artscouncil.sd.gov/CAC/index.aspx>.

The Congressional Art Competition is sponsored by the U.S. House of Representatives. It's an opportunity to recognize and encourage the artistic talent in the nation, as well as in each congressional district. The South Dakota Arts Council partners with Johnson's office to carry out this initiative.

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The following was released by Kayla Duncan to music parents of Groton Area

Good Morning Parents!

On Tuesday, Mrs. Yeigh and I talked with the Show Choir about how there was a discussion about the staffing in our instrumental music department at the last School Board Meeting.

We told the students that there is a possibility of a reduction in the instrumental staff. It has been proposed that Mr. Fordham and Mrs. Yeigh's jobs are combined from 2 positions into 1 position.

As you are probably aware, our students did not handle the news very well. I want to clarify that we have the best encouragement from our administration, and they support everything we do for our music department. We are truly blessed to have them.

After speaking with the students, and even some of you, it sounds like there will be a big attendance of support at this meeting. We are truly grateful for this. I am going to speak with my students again when I see them on Monday and make sure they understand they we are asking that they do not "riot" in this meeting. A lot of them are upset and very emotional, but we also have approach this in a professional manner.

I am willing to speak with any of you if you have any questions about further information about this matter. It was requested by the students and some of you that I sent out an e-mail to our "music family."

Thank you all for your support- I am truly blessed to be a part of the Groton Music Department!
Mrs. Yeigh & Mrs. Duncan

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Spotlight on Groton Area Staff

Name: Kristen Gonsoir

Occupation: High School Science Instructor

Length of Employment: 1992-Present

Kristen Gonsoir graduated from Northern State University with a master's degree in Education, with majors in Chemistry and Education and minors in Political Science and Biology. Before teaching at Groton, Mrs. Gonsoir was a substitute teacher at Aberdeen Central High School.

Mrs. Gonsoir teaches General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, and Physics for students ranging from Freshmen to Seniors. She enjoys provoking thought in her students through hands on activities and discussions. Along with her skill for relaying knowledge to students, Kristen Gonsoir is a learned individual who loves reading about the advances of modern science.

In her classroom, Mrs. Gonsoir has expectations of respect and common decency from her students. This ideal is exemplified by the poster on the wall depicting John Wooden's "Two Sets of 3's" which includes the principles of "Never lie, cheat, or steal," and "Don't whine, complain, or make excuses."

In Groton, teachers are often supervisors or coaches for various extracurricular activities along with being traditional instructors. In addition to teaching various Science classes, Mrs. Gonsoir is also the coach for Groton's Oral Interpretation and Debate clubs. In this club, she coaches students on how to properly construct debates and form counterpoints. Outside of extracurriculars, Kristen Gonsoir is a prominent member and certified judge for the American Quarter Horse Association, a group dedicated to the appreciation and registration of American Quarter Horses.



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



**Happy 80th
Birthday**

**Patrick
Stoebner**

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#390 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

No real change. We're up to 29,746,800 total cases in the US thus far in this pandemic, 0.2% more than yesterday. I was hoping we'd never get there, but it looks as though we'll be at 30 million by midweek. There were 56,500 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations ticked downward today to 40,568, near our late-winter low, but not there. And we reported 1353 deaths today. The total is now 540,520, some 0.3% more than yesterday.

March 29, 2020, one year ago today, was not a great day. In the US, we passed the 10,000-case mark like it was standing still, ending the day with 12,326, a second consecutive day with an almost 50 percent increase in case numbers. Remember the day, not all that long before, when the first state passed 100 cases? Wasn't that quaint? We now had three states over 1000 and 16 more over 100. This thing blew up fast. We'd had 194 deaths in 26 states. A good chunk of California had been ordered to shelter in place. The governor of Florida let spring break revelers know the party was over when he issued an order limiting beach gatherings to 10 or fewer people. The US State Department issued a worldwide Level 4: Do Not Travel Advisory that applied to all international travel. Airlines around the world were grounding flights and hemorrhaging red ink—cruise and lodging industries likewise.

Hospital workers were sewing masks for staff use because they were out and had no idea when more would be arriving. It's no wonder so many of them became sick, no wonder so many of them died. We were getting a clue this wasn't going to be a one-and-done sort of thing as experts began to warn us this could last 18 months or longer. Be nice if they'd been wrong; but here we are, some 12 months later, facing another possible surge. Haven't learned to control ourselves in that time, have we? Not sure how many bodies have to pile up before our learning curve accelerates.

There were more than 215,000 cases worldwide and over 8700 deaths. For the first time since the pandemic began, China reported no new locally transmitted cases; the only new cases reported were in people traveling from overseas. Italy was still on fire with over 4000 new cases in 24 hours and a total of 35,713 with almost 3000 deaths. Finally, an Olympic Committee board member and an IOC member suggested the Tokyo Games should be postponed.

I also wrote in that day's post, Update #25, about just why it is so difficult to treat viral diseases. If you weren't with us back then and have been sort of wondering about that, here's a link to the Update, written on March 19 and posted (in the wee hours of) March 20 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3443290772353971>.

The CDC made formal a change in guidance for schools that's been roiling the masses ever since hints of it surfaced a while back: They have relaxed the six-foot distancing recommendation for children in classrooms in schools where everyone is masked. This applies to K-12 children in areas where community transmission meets standards and does not apply to adults in the schools who should still maintain the six-foot distance. I'm not an infectious disease expert, but it does not seem unreasonable to me to make this change. There is research support for it. A thing I wonder about though is how difficult it would be to have kids get used to three feet and then, if community transmission blows up, move them to six-foot distancing and then back again when the threat has passed. I expect this would be challenging for high school kids, much less second-graders. And I do hope schools are paying as much attention to the ventilation guidelines as they are to the distancing guidelines; there's where we can really have an impact on safety, and we're definitely moving into the time of year where, if nothing else, we can open the windows and let the air move through, perhaps with the help of a good fan or two in each room.

We talked a few days ago about the countries, largely in Europe, that had suspended administration of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine due to fears about blood clots, and then we talked a few days after that about the risks that created as new variants were sweeping across that continent. Well, it appears most of the reasons for those fears have been put to rest: Both the WHO and the EU's European Medicines Agency have ruled the vaccine is safe, and vaccination has resumed. Doesn't look like it was soon enough, though, as this has set back their vaccination effort at a pretty bad time. Most of them are reimposing or

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tightening restrictions once again as this new wave builds. I do not want to see this again. Anywhere. At all.

Europe isn't alone. There are disquieting signs here too. We talked last night about states showing increases in new cases. That's a real worry. The steep declines we were seeing a month ago have pretty much leveled off; meanwhile states are easing restrictions all over the place—bars, restaurants, casinos, gyms—even while new variants are growing as a proportion of new cases reported. This is not a great combination either. And we have been so hostile to any sort of mitigation measures that we tend to push the boundaries anyhow. I am seeing people booking travel, heedless of the possibility they'll haul these variants around the country with them; planning big gatherings, no concern about the unvaccinated who will be exposed; whining about "Why did I even bother to get vaccinated if I still can't do whatever the hell I want?" Because the concept that vaccination and precautions might protect someone else is still beyond the boundaries of our compassion, I guess.

We do still have going for us that vaccination is going along very well. We've administered close to 120 million doses of vaccine and are averaging around 2.5 million shots per day. Daily vaccination numbers are 12 percent higher than they were just a week ago. Two-thirds of our olds have received at least one dose. Nearly half of the states have said they will be able to expand eligibility to the general population on or before May 1, some quite a bit before. According to the Times, I'm not the only one characterizing the current moment as a race between vaccination and new variants: Dr. Stephen J. Thomas, SUNY Upstate Medical University's infectious disease chief, told them, "I think it is a race against time. Every single person that we can get vaccinated or every single person that we can get a mask on is one less opportunity that a variant has." It's not that we're in the kind of trouble we were in last spring or last summer or over the winter; but we should recognize how close we are to getting to the other side of this thing, if only we don't mess it up here at the last minute. I am simply seeing too many signals we might just be messing it up after all. That would mean another wave, more sick people, more deaths. And I remain concerned.

Another matter we might soon start bumping up against is vaccine hesitancy. Right now, as long as the supply of vaccine is far outstripped by the eager demand, that doesn't seem like much of a problem; in fact, I've heard people say they are glad so many in the groups ahead of them are reluctant because it means these folks will get their turn sooner. I want to say I understand the feeling; I believe it was here I confessed my own willingness to knock over little old ladies as I shove my way to the front of the line. (I was only kidding a little.) But those folks who don't want, don't plan to, would refuse to get a vaccination are going to become a problem for all of us one of these not-too-far-off days. A substantial share of the country refuses vaccine, and we're not going to get past this. That happens, the folks who can't be vaccinated and those for whom the vaccine didn't work so well—remember our discussion of immunosuppressed people last night?—will never be free of the threat. The virus will continue to circulate and continue to mutate and continue to produce new variants, so the rest of us will never really be free of the threat either. Ever. This is not where we wanted to end up.

So where does that leave us? I think there are a number of fronts for action here. One is education. We need to make sure people have solid information about the vaccines. This includes dispelling misinformation that circulates. I've been hearing a number of whoppers here and there, some old and some new; but talking about each of them as it comes up is a good start.

First is an old one: "The vaccine makes you sterile," specifically, that it makes women unable to carry a pregnancy to term. We've talked about this one twice before, but because it keeps coming up, I'll briefly summarize what we have here and then link an earlier, more thorough, discussion below: The basis for this claim is the assertion the vaccine contains a part of the virus that elicit antibodies which will attack the placenta, the organ that connects a fetus with its mother during pregnancy. If this happened, it would be bad; the placenta is an organ essential to maintaining a pregnancy. Thing is, the vaccine doesn't contain anything like this. In fact, there isn't a viral part that would elicit placenta-damaging antibodies, even if we wanted to include it in the vaccines (which we definitely do not). This is a fabricated claim—no basis in fact or science. We've been giving these vaccines long enough now and following up well enough that we have some track record of women becoming—and staying—pregnant after vaccination, both from the clinical trials and since we've begun public vaccination. For more information, see my Update #287 posted

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December 6 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4237138519635855>.

Whopper #2: "I've had Covid-19, so I don't need vaccine; I'm covered. My doctor told me I shouldn't get vaccinated." Nope. If your doctor's saying that, get a new doctor. We have growing evidence that the immunity that results from vaccination is broader and stronger than immunity resulting from natural infection. This is a particular concern with the B.1.351 variant, the one first detected in South Africa. There, people are becoming reinfected with this variant irrespective of a history of prior infection. While the current vaccines do seem to show reduced efficacy against this variant, it looks very much as though they'll still have enough in the tank to handle this one too. Natural infection, not so much. But even with the current D614G variant, we see some small rate of reinfection, some of which develop very severe disease and some of whom have died. But no one who's been fully vaccinated has died of Covid-19. Makes vaccination look like a very good bet, even if you have already been infected. If you elect to wait up to 90 days after recovery, that is not necessarily a mistake because we are quite sure you have reasonable protection for that time; but you do not need to wait if you don't want to. Just get vaccinated.

Whopper #3: "The vaccine will change your DNA." Also nope. It can't. You see, your cells keep their DNA all tucked away in a special cell compartment called a nucleus. This is enclosed in its own separate membrane which is pretty fussy about what it lets through. Large molecules like the mRNA in the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines and the DNA in the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine are enormous molecules, and nothing that big is allowed in. So the vaccine components can't get to your DNA to change it. Even if someone wanted to do that. Which they don't.

Whopper #4: "They cause blood clots." Another nope. No sign of blood clots from any vaccine currently authorized in the US. There has been a question raised about the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not authorized in the US, but is authorized in much of the world. I'm still not convinced there is a blood clot problem with this one—and neither are the folks who know things; but in any case, this vaccine isn't being given in the US. It is unlikely the company will request its emergency use authorization (EUA) from our FDA until much later this year after its phase 3 trials are finished here. We'll see what we know then and go from there. Meanwhile, nope. No vaccine-associated blood clots in the US.

Whopper #5: "Taking the vaccine will invalidate/void your life insurance." I have no idea where this one came from. Have to assume someone just made it up to scare people. The claim is that, since the vaccine is "experimental," your life insurance would not pay out in the event of your death from complications of the vaccine. Just so we're clear, these vaccines are not "experimental;" they are authorized by the FDA for administration to the general public. Also, we should be clear that, while between December 14 and March 8, there have been 1913 reports of deaths in the 190 million doses of vaccine that have been given so far (a rate of 0.01 percent), a review by the CDC and FDA "revealed no evidence that vaccination contributed to patient deaths," according to the FDA. Additionally, the American Council of Life Insurers' (ACLI) senior actuary, Jan Graeber, told WUSA9, "It's really an incorrect and unfortunate rumor that's going around. Insurance companies pay death benefits on policies when the insured dies, regardless of the cause of death, except in very narrow and limited circumstances." ACLI itself issued a statement last week to respond to these misstatements: "Life insurance policy contracts are very clear on how policies work, and what cause, if any, might lead to the denial of a benefit. A vaccine for COVID-19 is not one of them."

Whopper #6: "Uh-uhhh! Marvin Hagler died from the vaccine! I saw it on Facebook!" Wrong. This one appeared to have started when another boxer posted something on social media asking people to pray for his friend who is "in ICU fighting the source of the after effects of the vaccine." That post was later deleted, but the false story had gained legs by then. One said, "Marvin Hagler passed away at age of 66 after receiving the Covid vaccine. When will people wake up. Thousands are dying and tens of thousands are being injured by the vaccine." The truth is, we're not even sure Hagler was ever vaccinated; his wife wrote, "I was the only person close to him until the last minute, and I am the only person that know how things went . . . and I do NOT accept to read some stupid comment without knowing really what happen. For sure wasn't the vaccine that caused his death. . . and now is not the time to talk nonsense," on his fan club page. One of his sons said his dad had died "of natural causes near his home in New Hampshire." And once again, deaths following vaccination get investigated, and none of these has turned up the least

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link to the vaccine. So no. It's sad about Mr. Hagler, but a vaccine did not kill him.

Whopper #7: "Well, fine! But it killed Hank Aaron." No. No, it did not. This one is courtesy of a former MLB player who's outed himself as pretty antivax, posted on Instagram, "Hammering Hank Aaron . . . now Marvelous Marvin Hagler two legends dead after taking the # covid19 vaccine." We've dealt with Hagler's death, how about Aaron? We do know he was vaccinated; Aaron, 86, received his vaccination in public to encourage other Black people to be vaccinated. The Fulton County Medical Examiner's office announced his death was natural and not linked to the vaccine. It has been my observation that Medical Examiners don't often joke around or make things up about causes of death; I think we can take it as given they're telling the truth. I, for one, need more evidence than an Instagram post and a more qualified medical authority than a baseball player before I believe this claim. Also, see my note above on investigation of deaths that follow vaccinations.

And finally, Whopper #8: "We don't know anything about the side effects." Actually, yes. We do know a lot about the side effects. More than 100 million doses have been given in the US: a handful of anaphylactic reactions, no deaths. A fair number of milder side effects ranging from a sore arm to feeling pretty terrible, lasting a couple of days at most, no deaths. Mainly, no deaths. So we know plenty about the side effects—still collecting information, even as I type this. We also know quite a lot about the side effects of not being vaccinated. How's this? Worldwide, more than 100 million cases of Covid-19. Deaths: 2.69 million. I think I'll take my chances with the vaccine, thanks.

Brandon Jones lives in Baltimore; his mother-in-law lives in Vermont. She would come to visit his wife and her sister and, whenever she was in town, she always wanted to visit a particular Asian fusion restaurant, Ekiben, because she loved their tempura broccoli. Her daughter, Rina Jones, told the Washington Post that was the first stop every time Mom got off the train or the plane. According to Brandon's Facebook post, "She always joked that when she's on her death bed that If there's anything in the world, she wants tempura broccoli from Ekiben." Sadly, that time appears to have come; Mom has late-stage lung cancer and is not doing well. The family made arrangements to undertake the six-hour drive to Vermont, according to the Facebook post, "potentially to say our good-byes and enjoy some time with her."

Rina told the Post, "In fact, when I was packing on Friday to drive up to Vermont, I called my mom to see if she wanted something special and she jokingly said, 'tempura broccoli.'" So her loving son-in-law tried to figure out a way to make that happen. He figured take-out would be awful after the long drive, so he got in touch with the restaurant to ask whether they'd consider giving him the recipe and some cooking tips so he could make it for her when they arrived, adding that he's not a great cook so the tips would be really appreciated.

Co-owner Steve Chu told the Baltimore Sun that he read this and thought to himself, "Well . . . you're not cooking this." His reply said, "Thanks for reaching out. Ephrem and I are more than willing to meet you guys in Vermont, and make the food fresh so it will be just like what she remembered."

Jones: "You do know that this is Vermont we're talking about, right? It's a six-hour drive."

His wife told the Sun she wondered, "Do they know it's Vermont state? This doesn't make any sense."

Brandon said he wondered if there had been some sort of misunderstanding. "Do they not know this is in two days we're leaving?"

They knew. They knew where, and they knew when. They're all cool—yep, they'll be there. And they were—Chu, business partner Ephrem Abebe, and coworker Joe Anonuevo. Last Friday after work, they loaded up a truck with supplies and made the drive, spent the night. Saturday, they set up on the tailgate outside Mom's place and cooked—trying to get their fryer and their hot plate, plugged into the truck's power port, up to temperature in the cold; it took several hours. They made the tempura broccoli topped with fresh herbs, red onion, and rice vinegar, and they threw in an order of tofu brah made with spicy peanut sauce and fresh herbs over steamed rice. When it was finished, Chu said, "It was the most perfect tempura broccoli we ever made." The Sun added, "Made with love." Indeed.

I'm just going to add here that I had a look at the photos of these dishes and immediately checked out this place's menu online. Made me wish I lived in Baltimore; no wonder the lady was dreaming of this.

When it was finished, they knocked on the door and delivered. Just like that. Mom had no idea any of

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this was happening, so when the knock came on the door, Rina told her mother to answer, and "As soon as she opened the door, she recognized the aroma immediately. It smelled amazing." Mom also recognized the folks with the delivery: "This is from Baltimore!" They recognized her too—good customer like that.

Rina told the Sun that her mom has struggled to eat because of the cancer, but she ate this. There was so much she had leftovers the next day. And she ate it all. First the food: She cried later.

As for payment, nope. Home delivery, no charge. They wouldn't even accept money for gas. Chu told the Post they didn't do it for publicity or for praise; the request was so easy to grant they couldn't imagine saying no. "She's a lovely lady, who has showered us with love at our restaurant for years. It was a powerful experience, and I'm happy that we could make it happen." To the Sun, he added, "That's what hospitality is all about."

Brandon said in his Facebook post, "There's still hope for humanity." I guess there is. Be well. We'll talk again.

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Groton Daily Independent

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	455	434	886	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2840	2731	6041	39	Substantial	14.9%
Bennett	385	371	1191	9	Minimal	3.1%
Bon Homme	1511	1481	2127	26	Minimal	1.5%
Brookings	3701	3574	12314	37	Substantial	3.7%
Brown	5238	5079	13008	90	Moderate	6.2%
Brule	700	684	1904	9	Minimal	3.2%
Buffalo	422	407	903	13	Minimal	8.3%
Butte	1006	977	3273	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	262	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1328	1261	4020	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	391	370	964	5	Minimal	16.7%
Clay	1839	1795	5532	15	Substantial	6.2%
Codington	4133	3941	9852	79	Substantial	21.6%
Corson	474	460	1011	12	Minimal	9.1%
Custer	775	750	2771	12	Moderate	3.5%
Davison	3029	2911	6702	66	Substantial	13.4%
Day	681	643	1822	29	Moderate	3.6%
Deuel	487	465	1157	8	Minimal	5.0%
Dewey	1435	1406	3897	26	Substantial	6.9%
Douglas	437	425	932	9	Minimal	6.5%
Edmunds	488	470	1083	13	Minimal	14.8%
Fall River	558	536	2688	15	Substantial	4.5%
Faulk	363	348	707	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	993	935	2297	40	Moderate	5.0%
Gregory	566	516	1316	30	Moderate	4.0%
Haakon	260	246	546	10	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	737	683	1835	38	Moderate	4.3%
Hand	356	336	841	6	Moderate	9.1%
Hanson	374	364	744	4	Moderate	13.6%
Harding	92	91	187	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2345	2283	6719	36	Moderate	2.2%
Hutchinson	800	760	2432	26	Moderate	0.0%

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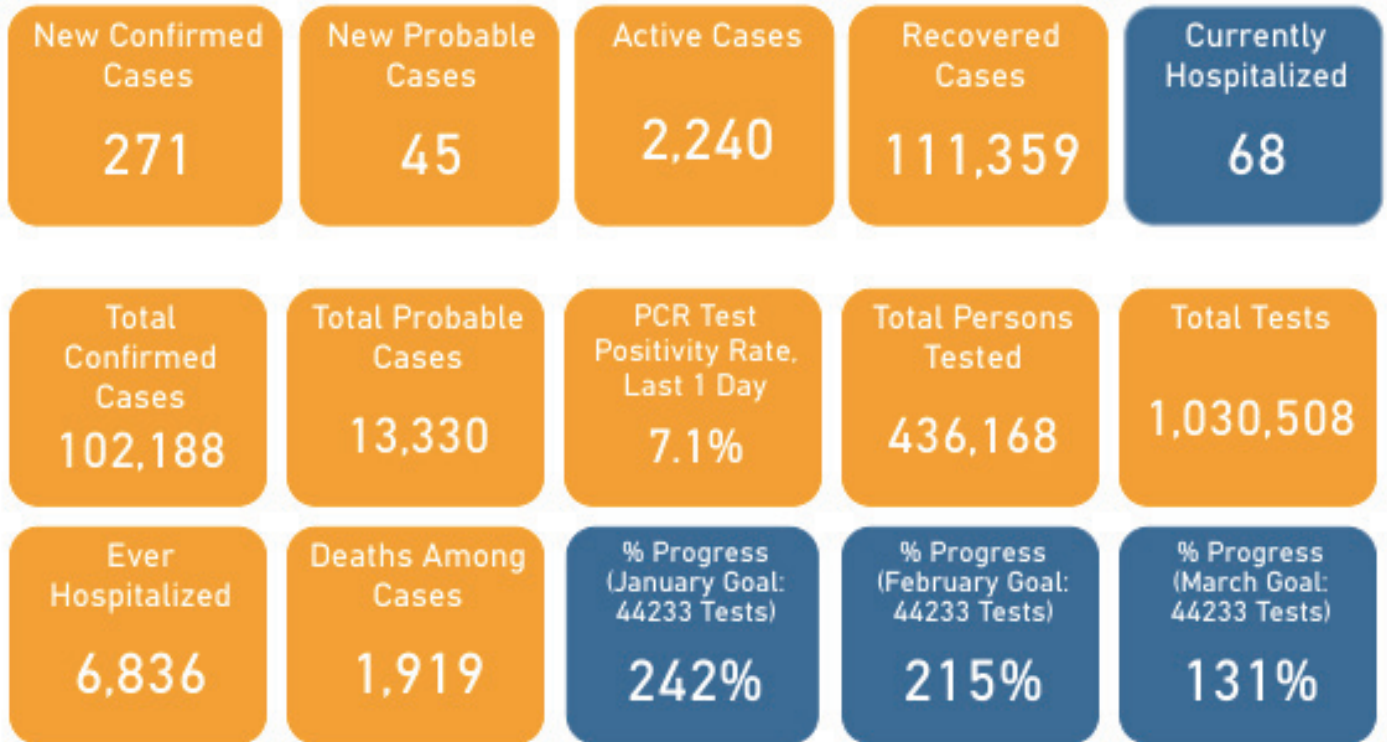
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Hyde	139	138	420	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	284	266	920	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	275	253	568	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	88	87	230	0	None	0.0%
Kingsbury	668	634	1705	14	Moderate	2.4%
Lake	1257	1185	3454	18	Substantial	12.7%
Lawrence	2879	2815	8635	45	Moderate	2.0%
Lincoln	8040	7773	20768	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	610	592	1896	10	Moderate	6.5%
Marshall	359	325	1238	6	Substantial	10.0%
McCook	770	725	1681	24	Substantial	19.4%
McPherson	240	234	565	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2673	2600	7860	31	Moderate	7.4%
Mellette	255	248	747	2	Moderate	0.0%
Miner	282	261	591	9	Minimal	10.0%
Minnehaha	28983	27994	80148	340	Substantial	9.4%
Moody	622	602	1789	17	Minimal	0.0%
Oglala Lakota	2080	2008	6696	49	Moderate	9.2%
Pennington	13162	12810	40163	191	Moderate	6.2%
Perkins	349	333	831	14	Minimal	0.0%
Potter	384	375	854	4	Moderate	13.8%
Roberts	1284	1195	4240	36	Substantial	18.7%
Sanborn	335	328	703	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	818	777	2173	26	Moderate	9.4%
Stanley	339	337	958	2	Minimal	4.3%
Sully	137	134	325	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1221	1189	4176	29	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	727	694	1510	16	Substantial	11.9%
Turner	1113	1023	2785	53	Substantial	20.8%
Union	2075	1959	6439	40	Substantial	11.3%
Walworth	740	708	1847	15	Moderate	12.8%
Yankton	2868	2779	9538	28	Moderate	9.0%
Ziebach	337	327	878	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1923	0		

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South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	86554	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13653	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5569	5%
Hispanic	4200	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2567	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1690	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1490	1%

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	60216	905
Male	55507	1017

COVID-19 Variant	# of Cases
B.1.1.7	3
B.1.351	0
B.1.427	0
B.1.429	0
P.1	0

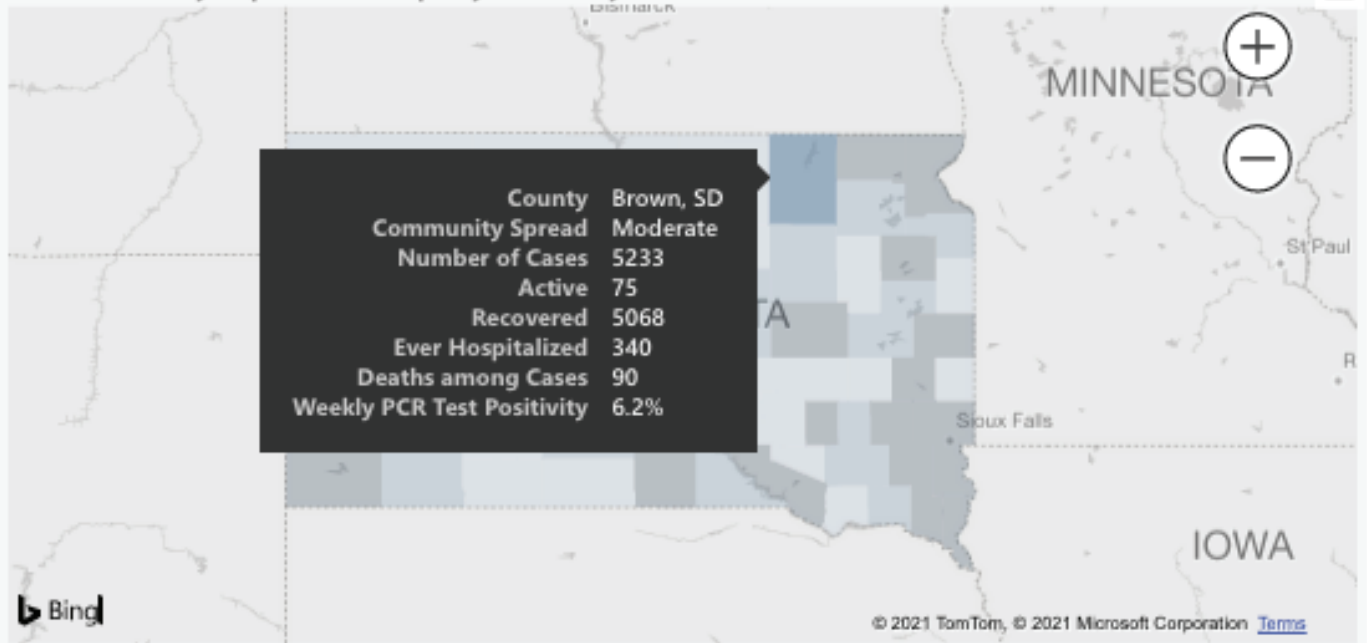
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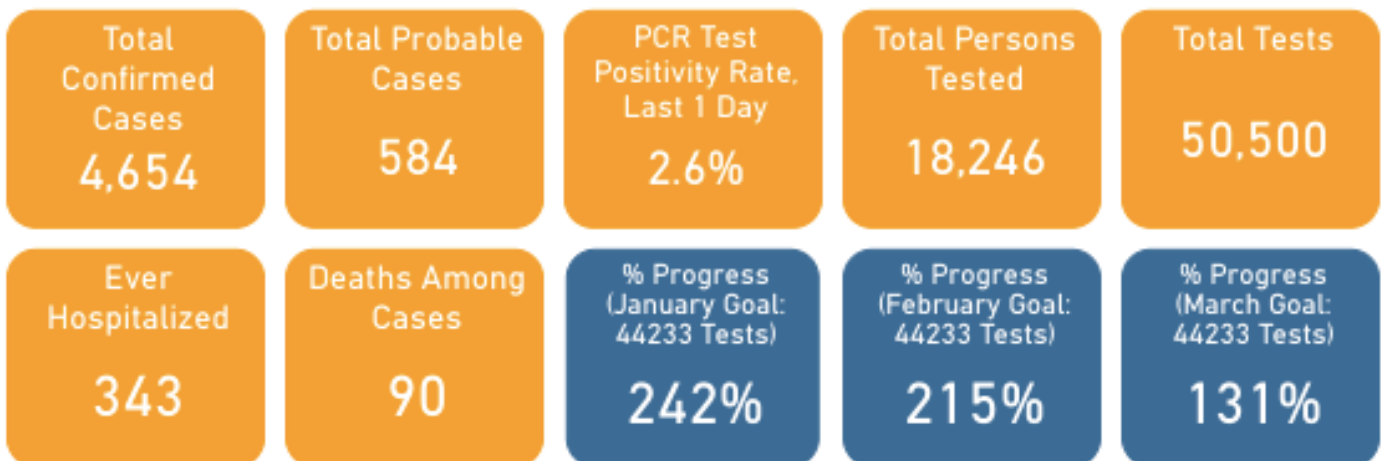
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



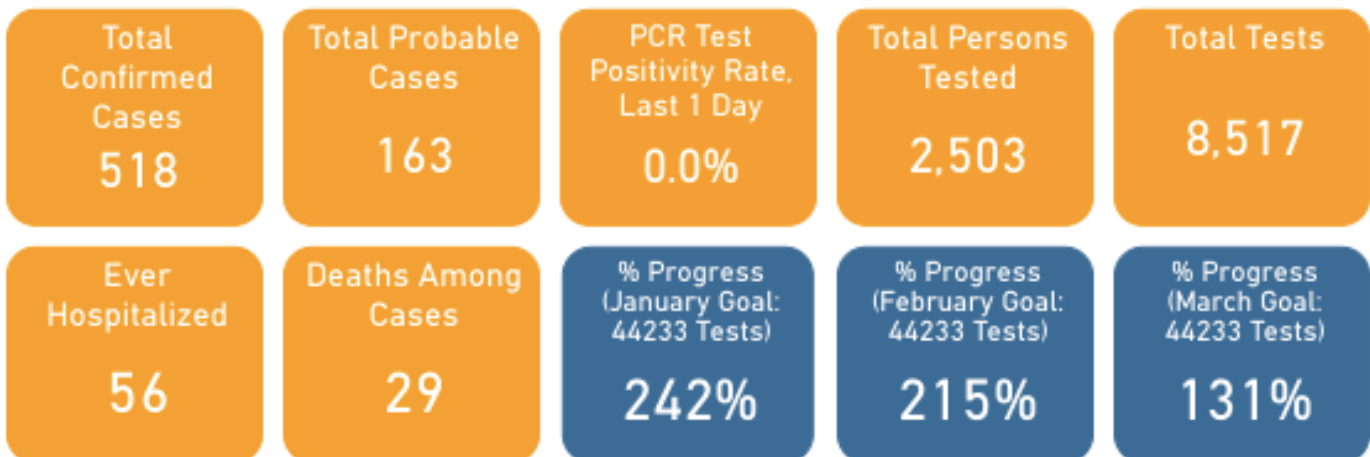
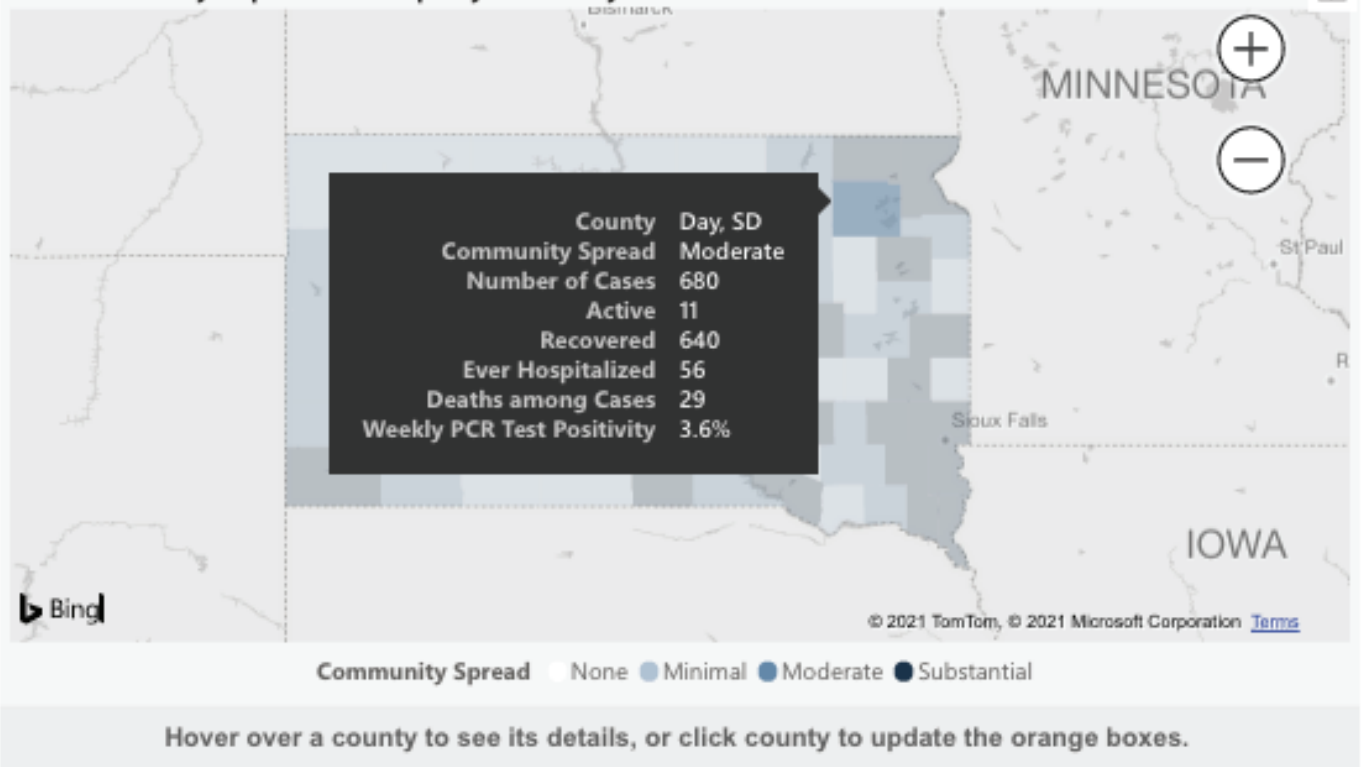
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

333,676

State Allocation

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

210,032

State Allocation

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

36%

State & Federal Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	4,279
Moderna	162,772
Pfizer	166,625

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	4,279
Moderna - 1 dose	43,160
Moderna - Series Complete	59,806
Pfizer - 1 dose	38,971
Pfizer - Series Complete	63,827

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	35.99%
Series Complete	22.09%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 15+ years includes

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	925	333	296	629
Beadle	6,998	1,999	2,499	4,498
Bennett*	484	130	177	307
Bon Homme*	3,839	887	1,476	2,363
Brookings	10,393	4,245	3,074	7,319
Brown	15,568	3,920	5,824	9,744
Brule*	1,965	481	742	1,223
Buffalo*	135	79	28	107
Butte	2,305	895	705	1,600
Campbell	1,119	179	470	649
Charles Mix*	3,462	1,152	1,155	2,307
Clark	1,374	452	461	913
Clay	5,308	1,808	1,750	3,558
Codington*	10,397	3,055	3,671	6,726
Corson*	312	72	120	192
Custer*	2,987	823	1,082	1,905
Davison	7,709	2,221	2,744	4,965
Day*	2,627	881	873	1,754
Deuel	1,641	485	578	1,063
Dewey*	384	60	162	222
Douglas*	1,323	351	486	837
Edmunds	1,471	421	525	946
Fall River*	2,736	650	1,043	1,693
Faulk	1,155	327	414	741
Grant*	2,861	1,081	890	1,971
Gregory*	1,898	582	658	1,240
Haakon*	562	152	205	357

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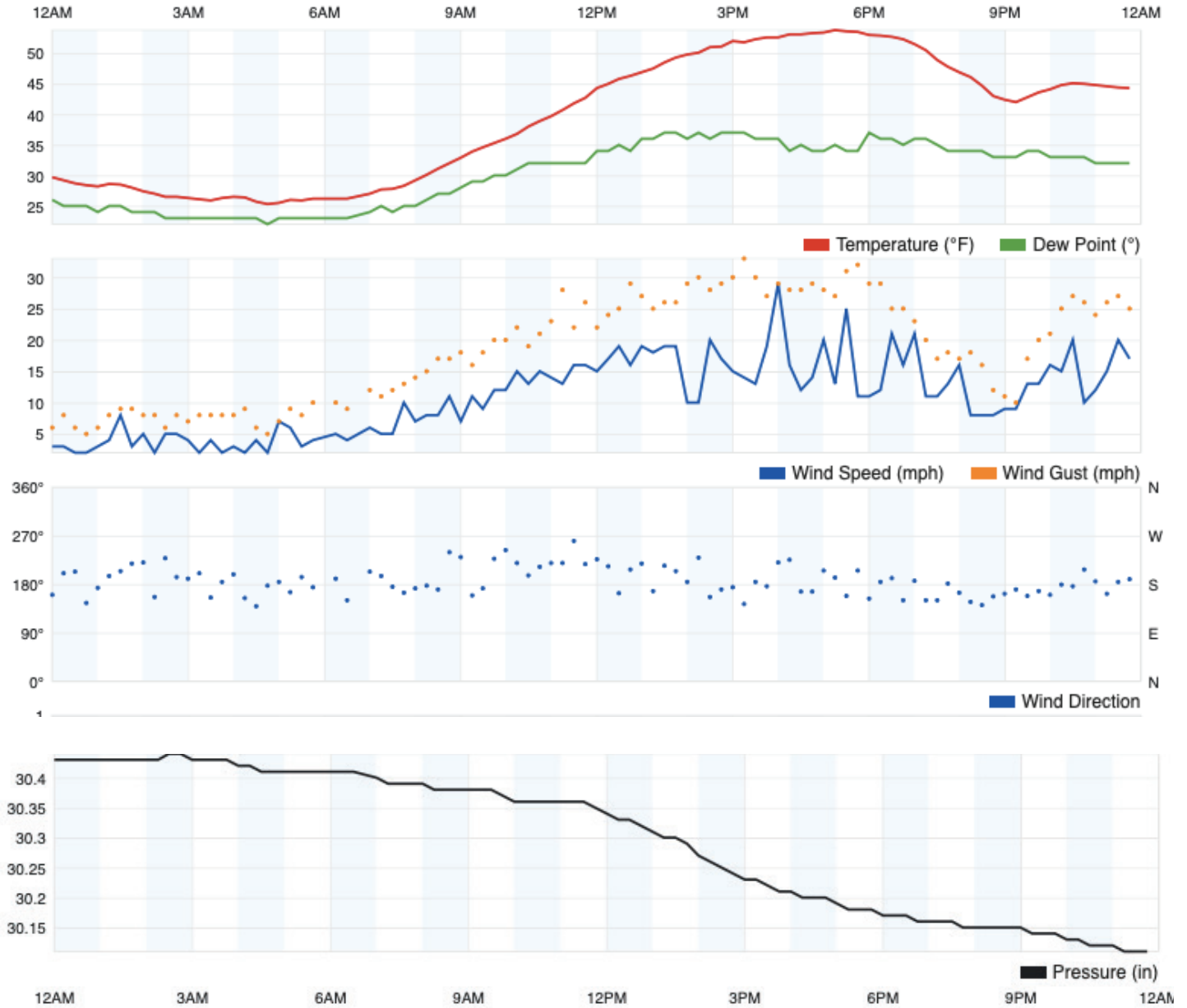
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Hamlin	1,894	586	654	1,240
Hand	1,584	502	541	1,043
Hanson	501	174	163	337
Harding	113	49	32	81
Hughes [*]	8,296	1,676	3,310	4,986
Hutchinson [*]	3,805	962	1,421	2,383
Hyde [*]	580	158	211	369
Jackson [*]	426	120	153	273
Jerauld	987	303	342	645
Jones [*]	653	141	256	397
Kingsbury	2,633	929	852	1,781
Lake	4,437	1,567	1,435	3,002
Lawrence	8,783	3,091	2,846	5,937
Lincoln	27,302	5,623	10,838	16,461
Lyman [*]	874	258	308	566
Marshall [*]	1,773	567	603	1,170
McCook	2,293	605	844	1,449
McPherson	266	70	98	168
Meade [*]	6,688	1,862	2,413	4,275
Mellette [*]	50	14	18	32
Miner	931	257	337	594
Minnehaha [*]	85,266	18,939	33,161	52,100
Moody [*]	1,903	649	627	1,276
Oglala Lakota [*]	185	57	64	121
Pennington [*]	39,171	8,817	15,177	23,994
Perkins [*]	741	253	244	497
Potter	998	328	335	663
Roberts [*]	4,585	1,231	1,677	2,908
Sanborn	1,054	340	357	697
Spink	3,268	804	1,232	2,036
Stanley [*]	1,270	226	522	748
Sully	394	74	160	234
Todd [*]	171	41	65	106
Tripp [*]	2,203	471	866	1,337
Turner	3,779	979	1,400	2,379
Union	3,503	1,331	1,086	2,417
Walworth [*]	2,014	366	824	1,190
Yankton	10,096	2,550	3,773	6,323
Ziebach [*]	59	13	23	36
Other	6,209	1,695	2,257	3,952

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny
and Windy

High: 62 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy
and Breezy

Low: 41 °F

Sunday



Chance Rain
40%

High: 56 °F

Sunday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 27 °F

Monday



Sunny

High: 51 °F



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

www.weather.gov/abr

Created:
3/20/2021 4:24 AM

Today
Highs: 58-70



Windy
Breezy South winds gusting
35-45 mph

Sunday
Highs: 53-58



Light rain expected
through the day

Tonight

Light Rain moves into the region late

Lows: 36-46

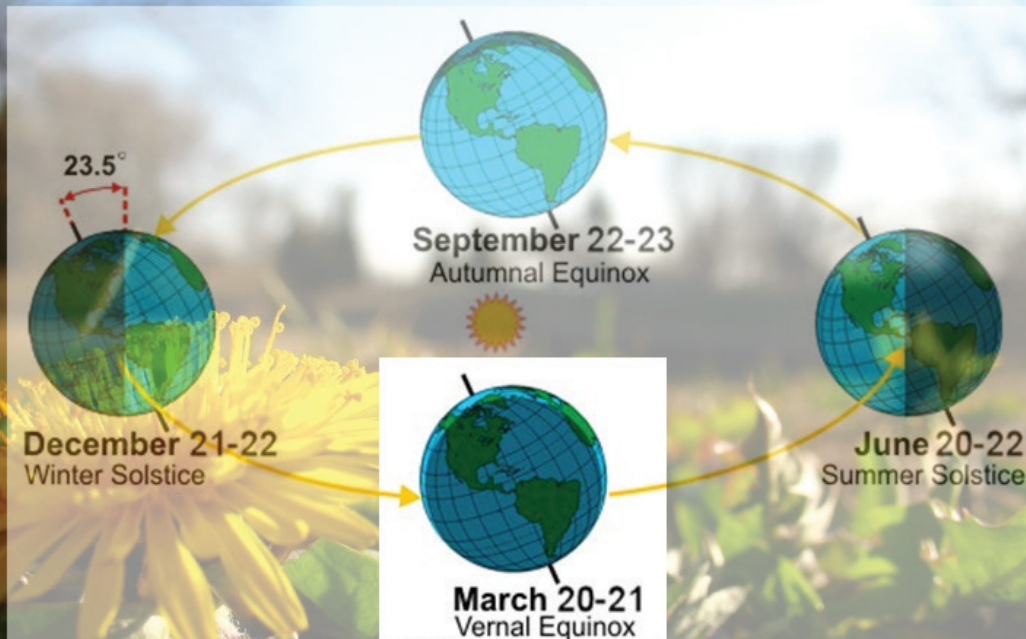
Winds out of the south will pick up later this morning ahead of a frontal boundary. Gusts up to 45mph will be possible this afternoon. Late tonight into Sunday, light rain moves into the region associated with the cold front.

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First Day of Spring: Saturday, March 20st at 4:37 AM



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD



Updated: 3/20/2021 3:14 AM Central

While it may feel like it already with the above normal temperatures we've been having, astronomical spring begins today!

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Today in Weather History

March 20, 1982: A winter storm dropped 10-20 inches of heavy wet snow across the northern two-thirds of South Dakota. Five persons were killed and eight others injured in indirect accidents. Downed power lines caused isolated power outages. A half dozen newborn calves died of exposure near Lemmon in Perkins County. Also, 5% of the pheasant population in Brown, Edmunds, and Faulk Counties were killed. The weight of the snow collapsed a canopy of a grocery store in McLaughlin, Corson County, tearing out part of the brick front and breaking windows in the store.

March 20, 2008: An upper-level disturbance coupled with an area of low pressure moving across the Central Plains brought widespread heavy snow from the late afternoon through the early morning hours to north-central and northeast South Dakota. Heavy snow of 6 to as much as 18 inches fell in this area resulting in school delays and cancelations along with treacherous travel conditions. Some snowfall amounts included: 6 inches at Bowdle, South Shore, and Bradley; 7 inches at Eureka, Chelsea, Bristol, and Pollock; 8 inches near Hosmer, Osaka, and Roscoe; 9 inches at Victor; 10 inches at Westport and Ipswich. Locations with a foot or more of snowfall included: 12 inches at Columbia, Milbank, and Waubay; 13 inches at Sisseton and Webster; 14 inches at Big Stone City; 15 inches at Summit; 16 inches at Roy Lake; 18 inches at Wilmot and Pickerel Lake State Park.

1948: The city of Juneau received 31 inches of snow in 24 hours, a record for the Alaska Capitol. (20th - 21st)

Also, on this day, an F3 tornado tracked through Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City, OK just before 10 pm destroying 54 aircraft, including 17 transport planes valued at \$500,000 apiece. The total damage amounted to more than \$10 million, a record for the state that stood until the massive tornado outbreak of 5/3/1999. Major Ernest W. Fawbush and Captain Robert C. Miller were ordered to see if operationally forecasting tornadoes were possible. The tornado prompted the first attempt at tornado forecasting. Forecasters at Tinker believed conditions were again favorable for tornadoes and issued the first recorded tornado forecast. Five days later, on 3/25 at 6 pm, a forecasted tornado occurred, crossing the prepared base, and the damage was minimized. The successful, albeit somewhat lucky forecast, paved the way for tornado forecasts to be issued by the U.S. Weather Bureau after a lengthy ban.

1986: Great Britain recorded its highest wind gust ever as the summit of Scotland's Cairngorm Mountains, at 4,085 feet, had a gust of 172 mph.

1998: A deadly tornado outbreak occurred over portions of the southeastern United States on this day. Particularly hard hit were rural areas outside of Gainesville, Georgia, where at least 12 people were killed during the early morning hours. The entire outbreak killed 14 people and produced 12 tornadoes across three states. The town of Stoneville, North Carolina, hard hit by the storms.

1924 - A late winter storm in Oklahoma produced nearly a foot of snow at Oklahoma City and at Tulsa. (David Ludlum)

1984 - A severe three day winter storm came to an end over the Central Plains. The storm produced up to twenty inches of snow in Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas, and left a thick coat of ice from eastern Kansas across northwestern Missouri into Iowa. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm produced blizzard conditions in Wyoming and eastern Nebraska, and severe thunderstorms in central Nebraska. Snowfall totals ranged up to 12 inches at Glenrock WY and Chadron NE. Thunderstorms in central Nebraska produced wind gusts to 69 mph at Valentine, and wind gusts to 76 mph at Bartley. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls in the Great Lakes Region left up to eight inches of new snow on the ground in time for the official start of spring. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the western U.S. Seven cities reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Tucson AZ with a reading of 89 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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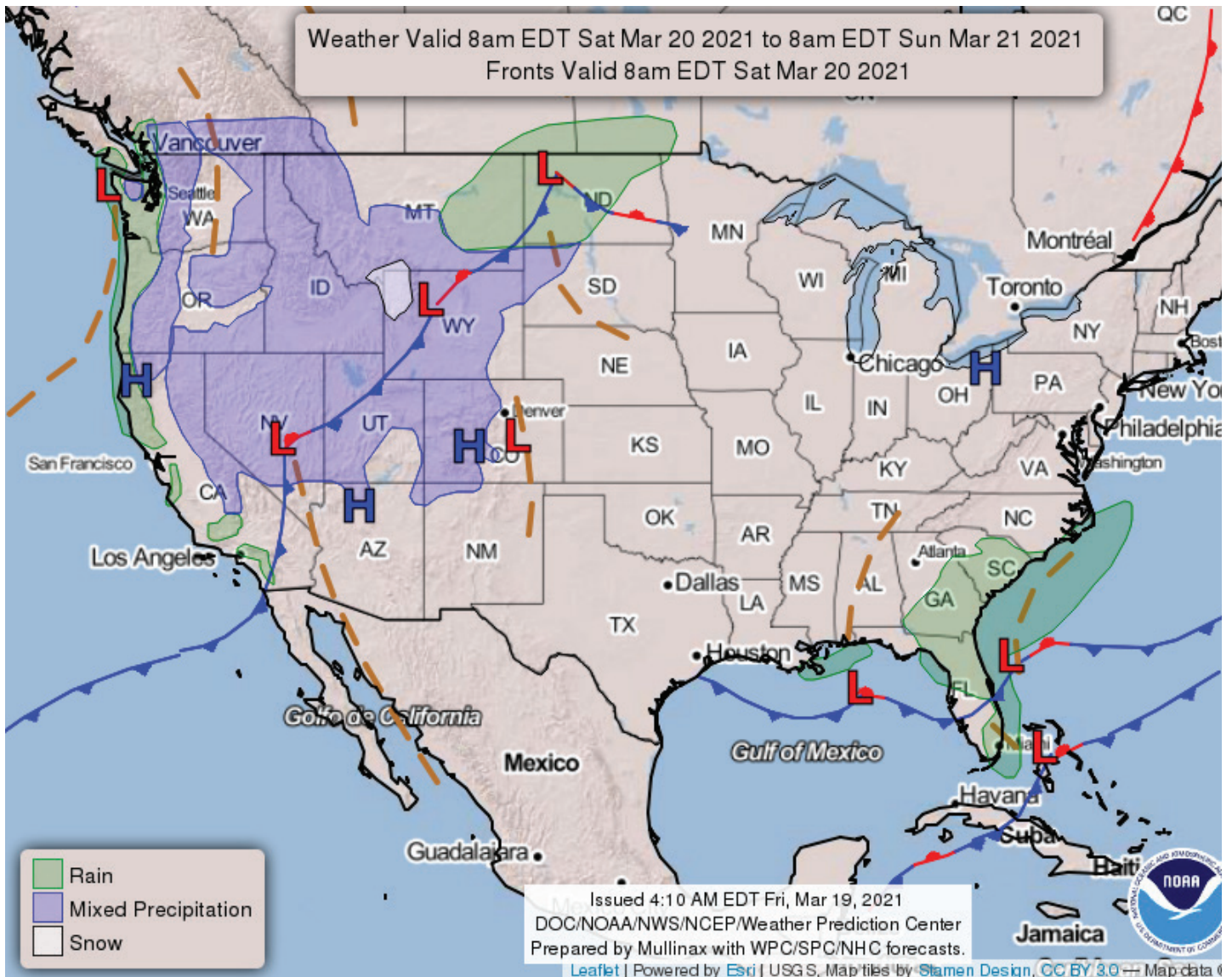
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 54 °F at 5:17 PM
Low Temp: 25 °F at 4:51 AM
Wind: 33 mph at 3:07 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 75° in 1910
Record Low: -6° in 1893, 1965
Average High: 42°F
Average Low: 22°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.63
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.65
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:47 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:34 a.m.



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LOOK AT ME, GOD!

"How bad do you want to be good?" he asked.

Confused, I asked, "What do you mean? Being bad to be good doesn't make sense."

"This has to do with motivation," came the reply. "Do you really want to be 'outstanding' or be just like so many others who do things half-heartedly or just get by in life?" To be outstanding takes determination, and David was a man of determination.

He was determined to be the man God wanted him to be. He was not content to go about his daily activities without making sure that he was a "man after God's own heart." So he asked God to "Test my motives and search my heart."

That must have taken a great amount of courage – especially after he demanded, "Declare me innocent, O Lord!" Imagine his boldness: "I have acted with integrity...I have trusted You without wavering...put me on trial and cross-examine me."

Rarely do we hear of God's judgment anymore. It is no longer a popular topic. Perhaps we have become so accustomed to God's blessings that we have forgotten that there will be a day when we will stand before our Savior and give an account to Him of every deed – good or bad – that we have ever done. Let us never forget that.

While this took courage for David to ask God to examine him, he had no fear or apprehension. Why? Because he was "aware of God's unfailing love" that far exceeds His judgment and certain punishment.

What a great example for each of us!

Prayer: Lord, search our hearts thoroughly. If there is any sin in our hearts, reveal it so we can ask for Your forgiveness so You can cleanse us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Put me on trial, Lord, and cross-examine me. Test my motives and my heart. Psalm 26:1-2

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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

Federal judge says his successor should know Lakota culture

By ARIELLE ZIONTS Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The next federal judge serving western South Dakota should be culturally competent in Lakota culture and history, said retiring Judge Jeffery Viken.

"The history of Native people is critically important — in terms of what happened and the trauma and the beauty of the culture and all of these acts of Congress that diminished Native lands in South Dakota down to these nine reservations," Viken said from his chambers in the federal courthouse in downtown Rapid City.

"The history of that is critically important to understand how people function now and why the level of poverty is what it is, substandard education, substandard health care, problems with chemical dependency," he said. "There are reasons and roots for those issues that bring people to this court every day."

The South Dakota Democratic Party has submitted recommendations to President Joe Biden for Viken's replacement as well as for the U.S. Attorney and Marshal in South Dakota, Chair Randy Seiler.

We received an "overwhelming response" of South Dakotans interested in these positions, said Seiler, a former U.S. Attorney who ran against Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg in 2018.

U.S. Attorneys and Marshals are replaced when there's a new president. Federal judges have lifetime appointments but the western division of South Dakota needs a new one since Viken decided to retire on Oct. 1, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Candidates for these positions are usually selected by a U.S. senator or representative of the president's same party but all three members of South Dakota's delegation are Republicans, Seiler explained.

The next option is for the recommendations to be handled by a statewide election official of the same party — something else South Dakota doesn't have. That's how the responsibility fell to the state's Democratic Party, a situation seen in other states such as North Dakota.

Seiler said he and the party discussed potential recommendations with former South Dakota members of Congress, current state Democratic leaders and federal judges.

"The political aspects of this matter" in addition to how qualified and experienced they are for the job, Seiler said. He said he considered how engaged candidates have been with the Democratic Party and if they've ran for office.

All of the five full- and part-time federal judges in South Dakota — all nominated by Democratic presidents — were involved in the party in some way, Seiler said. Once people become federal judges, they can't be involved in any politics, Viken said.

The recommendations to the Biden team included multiple candidates for at least one of the three positions, Seiler said. He declined to name them.

There is no deadline for when Biden must announce his nominations, Seiler said. He noted that former U.S. Attorney Brendan Johnson wasn't sworn in until nine months into Barack Obama's presidency.

Biden's nominations for federal judge and U.S. Attorney must be approved by the U.S. Senate.

"A Native person would be an extraordinary candidate for this job," Viken said.

The 68-year-old noted that there are few Indigenous federal judges, and there's never been one in South Dakota.

The state has had at least one Indigenous U.S. Marshal, Bob Ecoffey, the current police chief of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. It's also had at least two Indigenous U.S. Attorneys, Philip Hogen and Terry Pechota, who both maintain private practices in the Black Hills.

Biden released a memo making it clear that he wants to see judges with diverse identities and legal backgrounds, Viken said. The president is looking for people who've served as defense and civil rights lawyers, not just those who've worked as prosecutors and in corporate law firms.

Whether the new judge is Indigenous or not, Viken said, it's important for them to have "cultural com-

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petency" with Lakota history and culture since 50 to 60% of cases stem from the Pine Ridge Reservation. "It's a very unique criminal docket ... because of the level of work we have under the Major Crimes Act in Indian Country," he said in reference to the law that says serious crimes on reservations are handled in federal instead of state court. "There are only two or three other jurisdictions in the country that have anything close to what we do."

A judge needs to "understand the historical trauma and dysfunction that results in the criminal case load that we have here," Viken said. "To embrace that and understand that is not to say that 'oh, we're here, we're so sympathetic, these crimes are just not serious.' That's not it at all. There are real victims in some of these cases. But I think somebody has to have the intellectual and the emotional capacity to take that in.

"If you just read the paper and follow the news, it seems like everybody coming off Pine Ridge is a criminal. Not true," said Viken, who was adopted decades ago into a Lakota family through a hunka ceremony. "Pine Ridge is a glorious culture and it's been misrepresented every which way by national publications and films, as well as locally."

After every trial involving a defendant from the reservation, Viken said, he tells the jury that "they're seeing the most difficult part of life, Pine Ridge is filled with wonderful people and families."

Viken said the new judge must know about treaty history, especially the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, a topic that often comes up in court.

The judge must also be familiar with civil law. Viken said unique civil issues to the division involve lawsuits related to the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, Indian Health Service and public lands in the Black Hills.

Viken worked as a federal prosecutor, federal public defender and in private practice before President Barack Obama nominated him to be a federal judge in 2009.

"I may have, I don't know," Viken said about whether he would delayed retirement if Donald Trump had won the election. "I would have looked at it. I had some concerns about people who were being put forward for the district courts and the manner of their selection."

"I can't tell you the change in administration is the only reason I'm taking senior status, that's simply not true," he said. Viken said the "driving factor" is the fact that he's becoming eligible for retirement in August.

Viken, who's worked in law for 44 years, said he'd like to spend more time with his wife of 41 years, attorney Linda Lea. He said they look forward to having more time for their hobbies — hiking in the Black Hills, international travel, collecting Native American artwork, cooking for and attending group dinner parties, spending time with their hunka family on the reservation, and supporting nonprofits related to the arts, education, women and children.

However, Viken is still interested in public service so he's retiring to senior status — where he will work at least a 25% caseload — instead of taking a full retirement.

He said he will be able to help the next judge adjust to their new role while helping to process a large case load. The Rapid City judge handles 100 cases more than the federal judges based in Pierre and Sioux Falls do each year.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

09-14-40-58-69, Mega Ball: 8, Megaplier: 3

(nine, fourteen, forty, fifty-eight, sixty-nine; Mega Ball: eight; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$105 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$200 million

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Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

State Consolation Semifinal=

Class AA=

Aberdeen Central 53, Harrisburg 51

Brandon Valley 76, Mitchell 65

Class A=

Chamberlain 68, Winner 43

St. Thomas More 35, Vermillion 32

Class B=

Lower Brule 51, Lyman 36

White River 74, Canistota 69

State Semifinal=

Class AA=

O Gorman 51, Sioux Falls Washington 48

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 69, Yankton 43

Class A=

Sioux Falls Christian 64, Dell Rapids 52

Sioux Valley 62, Dakota Valley 57

Class B=

Aberdeen Christian 60, Dell Rapids St. Mary 53

DeSmet 56, Viborg-Hurley 44

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

South Dakota gov pushes changes to transgender sports ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem on Friday suggested language changes in a bill to ban transgender girls and women from participating in girls' or women's sports leagues to limit the ban to high school and elementary schools, excluding college sports from the proposal.

The Republican governor had initially tweeted she was "excited to sign" the bill after it passed the Legislature but sent the bill back to lawmakers with suggestions to change its language. The governor's move, known as a style and form veto, amounted to a setback for the bill, but still kept it alive. A majority of both chambers of the Legislature can approve it on March 29.

Noem's proposal would limit the ban to high school and elementary sports and exclude collegiate athletics. Opponents to the bill had warned that it would cause the state to lose out on millions of dollars from the NCAA if it pulls out of sports tournaments, though it was not clear if Noem's proposed changes would ultimately deter that.

"I am also concerned that the approach House Bill 1217 takes is unrealistic in the context of collegiate athletics," Noem said in a letter sent to lawmakers.

Legislatures in more than 20 states have proposed restrictions on athletics or gender transition surgeries for transgender minors this year. But Noem's reversal showed that even in conservative states with an appetite for enacting laws that discriminate against transgender people, Republican lawmakers are weighing the financial fallout. The Republican governor of only one state — Mississippi's Tate Reeves — has signed such a ban into law.

Noem is a rising force among conservatives and has been considered a potential Republican pick for president in 2024, aligning herself closely with former President Donald Trump.

Advocates for transgender children have said the law could have devastating effects, leading to bullying

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and depriving them of the benefits of participating in sports.

"We're really calling on Gov. Noem and legislators to recognize the serious physical, emotional and psychological harm that this would cause trans kids across South Dakota," said Susan Williams, who heads the Transformation Project. "In short, it threatens their lives."

Advocates are lobbying the governor to veto the bill entirely and have held protests against it. But Williams said they have been unsuccessful in setting up a meeting with the governor to discuss the bill.

Sioux Falls Sports Authority, the business organization that hosts NCAA tournaments in the city, warned lawmakers that the ban would jeopardize the city's chances of hosting future competitions. When the organization bids to host NCAA tournaments, it must complete a questionnaire asking whether any state or local laws are discriminatory. If the proposed bill becomes law, the organization says it would need to disclose that the state has discriminatory laws.

David Zimbeck, a lobbyist for the Sioux Falls Sports Authority, told lawmakers that an annual NCAA basketball tournament brought in \$5 million, while other tournaments for sports including volleyball and hockey bring in \$2.5 million. Up to 100 full- and part-time jobs were at risk, he said.

The governor continued to defend the bill, saying, "I believe that boys should play boys' sports, and girls should play girls' sports."

Noem said she agreed with arguments that proponents made— that transgender girls, because they were born male, are naturally stronger, faster and bigger than those born female. But opponents say such proposals violate not only Title IX of federal education law prohibiting sex discrimination but also rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court and 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

There are currently no transgender girls competing in girls' high school sports, according to the South Dakota High School Activities Association, which has a policy for evaluating applications from transgender athletes on a case-by-case basis. The association reported that only one transgender girl has ever competed in girls' sports in the state. She has since graduated and did not disrupt the competitive fairness of other girls, according to the association.

The bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Rhonda Milstead, said Noem was overstepping her powers in using the style and form veto to make broad changes to the bill. Such vetoes are usually used to clean up technical language, but Noem's proposal strikes two sections entirely and changes the reach of the bill.

"She has literally gutted the bill and rewritten the bill," Milstead said.

While the ban — known as House Bill 1217 — sailed through the House, Republicans in a Senate committee initially rejected it, reasoning that its passage would bring up a broad range of problems for the state — from potentially causing the NCAA to shy away, to dragging the state into costly litigation and saddling schools with the administrative burden of requiring proof of every athlete's sex at birth. It was later revived in a legislative maneuver on the Senate floor and passed on March 8.

Noem also tried to clean up some of those issues in the bill, striking sections that would allow students to sue schools for violations of the law and require schools to annually collect proof of athletes' sex at birth.

If Noem's changes are not approved by majorities in the Legislator, it would die. However, lawmakers could also enact the bill as originally-passed with a two-thirds vote in both chambers.

Noem signs Deadwood sports gambling legislation

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem has signed legislation bringing sports gambling to Deadwood.

The South Dakota Commission on Gaming met in Deadwood this week to begin framing the rules for the sports wagering. Voters approved a constitutional amendment in November that legalized sports gambling at the town's casinos.

Deadwood Gaming Association Executive Director Mike Rodman said he's pleased the governor signed the bill Thursday.

"It's a big day for Deadwood and our next step now is to work with the South Dakota Commission on Gaming to promulgate the rules," Rodman said. "We'll be working through the process with the hope that we will be able to offer sports wagering by Sept. 1."

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Rodman said he expects the gaming commission to have the preliminary set of rules ready by their June 16 meeting, where it will then go to a legislative committee for approval.

Sports wagering will be allowed on the premises of Deadwood casinos through sports betting windows, kiosks or a mobile app, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The association estimates sports wagering will provide more than \$22 million in additional gaming revenue, \$2.2 million in additional gaming taxes and approximately 150 direct gaming jobs.

Sports wagering is legal in 25 states and the District of Columbia, and live sports wagering is happening in 20 of those states, according to the American Gaming Association.

State hire will handle missing, murdered Indigenous cases

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Attorney General's Office plans to hire a full-time employee dedicated to missing and murdered Indigenous person cases.

Rep. Peri Pourier, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, says Gov. Kristi Noem's office informed her this week that the Noem will sign the legislation creating the position.

"On behalf of those who helped lobby this effort, and, most importantly, the countless missing and murdered Indigenous people throughout our state, we say Pilamayaye. Thank You!" Pourier wrote in a news release.

"This will help identify the areas where existing coordination could improve, opens the door for further investment from federal and foundational opportunities, and ultimately bring our missing relatives home," said Sen. Red Dawn Foster, who like Pourier is a Democrat from Pine Ridge, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"This is a step in the right direction for state and tribal leaders," said Kevin Killer, president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. "This is a non-political issue that we should be able to work together towards addressing and solving."

The MMIP office will be funded through grants from foundations and the federal government, according to the news release.

There are currently 102 missing South Dakotans. About 68%, are Indigenous even though Native Americans make up only about 9% of the state's population.

Prosecutor: Man charged with 1 murder says he killed 16

WOODBURY, N.J. (AP) — A man who is accused of killing a New Jersey man he says sexually abused him in childhood, and who is a person of interest in the deaths of his ex-wife and three others in New Mexico, has said he is responsible for a total of 16 slayings, prosecutors say — though authorities have yet to corroborate his claim.

Sean Lannon, 47, said he was responsible for the killings in New Jersey and New Mexico — that he had killed his wife and others, including "11 other individuals," NJ.com quoted Alec Gutierrez, an assistant prosecutor in suburban Philadelphia's Gloucester County, New Jersey, as saying during a detention hearing Friday.

"He admitted to killing a total of 16 people ... 15 being in New Mexico and one in the state of New Jersey," Gutierrez said.

Authorities allege in court documents that the admission came in a phone call to a family member who told Gloucester County investigators that Lannon expressed remorse.

Lannon was arrested in St. Louis on Wednesday morning after a search that stretched from New Jersey to Missouri. He was driving a car stolen from Michael Dabkowski, the New Jersey victim. He is behind bars in New Jersey.

He is accused of breaking into the 66-year-old Dabkowski's home and beating him with a hammer Monday, according to an affidavit.

Lannon is also a person of interest in the death of his wife and three others in New Mexico. Authorities say a vehicle was discovered last week in a garage at Albuquerque International Sunport, New Mexico's

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largest airport, containing four bodies.

The bodies were later identified as Jennifer Lannon, 39; Matthew Miller, 21; Jesten Mata, 40; and Randal Apostalon, 60. Sean Lannon lived 80 miles (130 kilometers) away in Grants, New Mexico.

Gutierrez alleged Friday that Lannon admitted to luring several victims to a home in New Mexico and dismembering some of them.

Grants Police Lt. David Chavez told the Albuquerque Journal that authorities have no indication that Lannon's claims are true and that they aren't aware of any missing-person or homicide reports that would fit his narrative.

"Is it possible? Sure it's possible. Is it probable? No, probably not," Chavez told the newspaper, saying authorities would investigate.

Grants police had been looking for Miller, Mata and Jennifer Lannon since last month and, on Feb. 26, said Lemos – a relative of Miller's who knew all three – was wanted for questioning.

Apart from the five deaths already described by investigators, authorities hadn't earlier spoken of any other killings in which Lannon was a suspect. He has been charged only in the New Jersey killing and has not been charged in any cases in New Mexico.

Public defender Frank Unger challenged probable cause for the New Jersey murder charge, arguing that Lannon entered Dabkowski's home in East Greenwich Township with permission and that the acts that followed amounted, at worst, to passion provocation manslaughter, NJ.com reported.

Unger alleged that Lannon had been abused and went to the home to retrieve photos because he didn't want anyone "to have control over me any longer."

Dabkowski mentored Lannon and his twin brother through a Big Brothers program in the 1980s, NJ.com reported. Lannon told investigators that Dabkowski had sexually abused him as a child and that he went to the man's home to retrieve sexually explicit photos of the two of them together.

Unger said that Dabkowski had "documented those sexual assaults, those rapes, by taking pictures of himself with Mr. Lannon in sexually compromised positions."

Unger said Lannon retrieved two hammers from Dabkowski's garage and gave them to the victim, saying, "You're going to need these. I don't want to hurt you."

"I would suggest that this fact alone illustrates this was not purposeful murder. He did not even bring a weapon to the home," he said, further alleging that Dabkowski attacked his client and was then killed.

Unger also challenged prosecutors' comments on the New Mexico murders, saying Lannon hadn't been charged in those cases.

New Jersey Superior Court Judge Mary Beth Kramer told prosecutors to confine their presentation to information relevant to the New Jersey case but allowed limited references to the New Mexico cases.

Gutierrez said that the New Mexico victims had been lured to a home and argued that the idea of Lannon having been invited into Dabkowski's home "should be looked at through the lens of at least three prior incidents in New Mexico."

"Those individuals, self-admittedly, were lured into the residence and subsequently murdered," he said.

Unger argued for pretrial release, saying his client has no prior convictions and is an Army veteran with an honorable discharge.

Although born in Massachusetts, Lannon spent most of his early years in Gloucester County before he was deployed to Germany, and he has family in southern New Jersey, including his mother and sister, and could stay locally on electronic monitoring if released, Unger said.

Gutierrez said Lannon adopted an assumed name to avoid detection when he returned to the East Coast and was arrested in New Mexico several weeks ago for failure to appear and spent a week in jail.

Gutierrez alleged that Lannon had admitted to dismemberment of victims and efforts to conceal evidence and "is a significant danger to the community, based on those statements."

The judge agreed and ordered Lannon to remain behind bars.

This story has been updated to correct attribution in the first paragraph.

Asian women say shootings point to relentless, racist tropes

By TERRY TANG and CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

For Christine Liwag Dixon and others, the bloodshed in Georgia — six Asian women among the dead, allegedly killed by a man who blamed his “sexual addiction” — was a new and horrible chapter in the shameful history of Asian women being reduced to sex objects.

“I’ve had people either assume that I’m a sex worker or assume that, as a Filipino woman, I will do anything for money because they assume that I’m poor,” said Dixon, a freelance writer and musician in New York City. “I had an old boss who offered me money for sex once.”

Tuesday’s rampage at three Atlanta-area massage businesses prompted Asian American women to share stories of being sexually harassed or demeaned. They say they’ve often had to tolerate racist and misogynistic men who cling to a narrative that Asian women are exotic and submissive.

Elaine Kim, who is Korean American and a professor emeritus in Asian American studies at the University of California, Berkeley, recalled being crassly harassed by white young men while she was in high school. Later in life, one of her white students made sexualizing comments about the Asian women in her class and lurked outside their apartments.

Kim was reminded of these moments when she heard that the man accused in the Atlanta-area shootings had said he had acted because his targets tempted him.

“I think it’s likely that the killer not only had a sex addiction but also an addiction to fantasies about Asian women as sex objects,” she said.

Two of the Georgia massage businesses had been repeatedly targeted in prostitution investigations in the past 10 years, according to police records. The documents show that 10 people had been arrested on prostitution charges, but none since 2013.

The suspect in the shootings, a 21-year-old white man, considered the women inside the spas “sources of temptation,” police said.

Grace Pai, a director of organizing at Chicago’s Asian Americans Advancing Justice branch, called that characterization of the attacks “a real slap in the face to anyone who identifies as an Asian American woman.”

“We know exactly what this racialized misogyny looks like,” Pai said. “And to think that someone targeted three Asian-owned businesses that were staffed by Asian American women ... and didn’t have race or gender in mind is just absurd.”

Framing the women who were killed as “sources of temptation” places blame on the women as the ones “who were there to tempt the shooter, who is merely the victim of temptation,” said Catherine Ceniza Choy, a University of California, Berkeley, professor of ethnic studies and a Filipino American woman. She said this scenario echoes a long-running stereotype that Asian women are immoral and hypersexual.

“That may be the way the alleged shooter and killer thinks of it, that you can compartmentalize race in this box and sex addiction in a separate box. But it doesn’t work that way,” Choy said. “These things are intertwined, and race is central to this conversation.”

Stereotypes of Asian women as “dragon ladies” or sexually available partners have been around for centuries. From the moment Asian women began to migrate to the U.S., they were the targets of hypersexualization, said Ellen Wu, a history professor at Indiana University.

The Page Act of 1875 prohibited women coming to the U.S. from anywhere for “immoral purposes,” but the law was largely enforced against Chinese women.

“As early as the 1870s, white Americans were already making this association, this assumption of Asian women being walking sex objects,” Wu said.

Asian lives are seen as “interchangeable and disposable,” she said. “They are objectified, seen as less than human. That helps us understand violence toward Asian women like we saw this week.”

U.S. military deployments in Asia also played a role, according to Kim. She said the military has long fueled sex trafficking there, starting after the Spanish-American War, when traffickers and brothel owners in the Philippines bought and sold women and girls to meet the demands of U.S. soldiers.

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During the Vietnam War, women from Thailand and many other Asian countries were used for sex by U.S. soldiers at various "rest and recreation" spots. The bodies and perceived submissiveness of Asian women were eroticized and hypersexualized, Kim said, and eventually these racist stereotypes were brought back to the United States.

In American culture, Asian women have been fetishized as submissive, hypersexual and exotic, said Christine Bacareza Balance, an Asian American studies professor at Cornell University and a Filipina woman.

A prime example is the wildly popular 1887 novel, "Madame Chrysanthème," a French narrative, translated into English, in which Japanese women are referred to as "playthings" and "China ornaments." More recently, an Asian woman has generally been portrayed in films as either "a manipulative, dragon lady temptress or the submissive, innocent 'lotus blossom' meant to please a man," Balance said.

Choy, the ethnic studies professor at Berkeley, said Tuesday's shootings and subsequent efforts to remove race from the conversation is yet another example of the denial of the racism and sexism Asian and Asian American women face.

"In American society, Asian Americans are not seen and listened to," she said. "We are seen in specific ways at times, as model minorities, as projections of white, male fantasy, but we are not seen as full-fledged Americans. We are not seen as full human beings. It's a kind of erasure and dehumanization."

Associated Press writer Noreen Nasir in Chicago contributed. Tang, Fernando and Nasir are members of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Tang reported from Phoenix and Fernando from Chicago.

Half of UK adults have gotten one dose of COVID-19 vaccine

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The U.K. says half of the country's adults have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, a milestone in the government's drive to reach everyone over age 18 by the end of July.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Saturday that more people received injections on Friday than any day since the country's vaccination program began in early December.

"It's a huge success," Hancock said in a video posted on Twitter. "And I want to say many, many thanks to all those involved, including the half of all adults who have come forward. It's so important because this vaccine is our way out of this pandemic."

But the celebration comes amid growing concerns about the failure of wealthy countries to share scarce vaccine supplies with developing nations.

While Britain should be proud of the success of its vaccination drive, it is time to start thinking about the rest of the world, said Dr. Jeremy Farrar, director of Wellcome, a London-based health policy think tank.

Britain has the rights to enough doses to vaccinate its entire population twice, and it is time to begin sharing that surplus with countries that are most in need, Farrar said in a statement released after Hancock's announcement. Ensuring the world is vaccinated is a scientific and economic imperative, he said.

"If left to spread unchecked in large parts of the world, the virus risks mutating to an extent where our vaccines and treatments no longer work — leaving us all exposed," Farrar said. "Science has given us the exit strategy, but it will only work if its benefits can reach the maximum number of people around the world."

Wellcome is a co-founder of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, which is part of the effort to ensure equitable access to coronavirus vaccines around the world.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at:

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

<https://apnews.com/hub/understanding-the-outbreak>

Strong quake shakes Japan; minor injuries, no major damage

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A strong earthquake struck Saturday off northern Japan, shaking buildings even in Tokyo and triggering a tsunami advisory for a part of the northern coast. No major damage was reported, but several people had minor injuries.

The U.S. Geological Survey put the strength of the quake at magnitude 7.0 and depth at 54 kilometers (33.5 miles). The shaking started just before 6:10 p.m.

The quake was centered off the coast of Miyagi prefecture, in the country's rugged northeast, which was heavily damaged during the huge earthquake and tsunami of 2011 that left more than 18,000 people dead.

Japan's Meteorological Agency issued an advisory for a tsunami up to 1 meter (yard) in height for Miyagi prefecture immediately after the quake, but lifted it about 90 minutes later.

Officials there said there were no immediate reports of damage.

The Fire and Disaster Management Agency said seven people were injured in Miyagi prefecture, including two elderly women — one who was banged in the head by a door and the other who was hit in the shoulder by furniture. In neighboring Iwate prefecture, a woman in her 50s fell and cut her mouth.

The strong temblor caused a temporary blackout in some areas and suspended bullet train services in the area, according to the East Japan Railway Co.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority said no abnormalities have been detected at nuclear power plants in the region, including the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, which suffered meltdowns in the 2011 quake and tsunami.

Akira Wakimoto, a crisis management official in Tome town in Miyagi prefecture, said he was in his apartment when the quake struck, and felt his room shake for a long time.

In a coastal city of Ofunato, Shotaro Suzuki, a hotel employee, said there was a temporary blackout and elevators stopped briefly, but power has been restored and there were no other problems.

"Our guests seemed worried at first, but they have all returned to their rooms, and our facility seems fine," Suzuki told NHK.

In mid-February, another powerful quake in the region killed one person and left more than 180 injured, though most injuries were minor. The quake damaged roads, train lines and thousands of houses. It also caused minor damage to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

A Japan Meteorological Agency spokesperson, Noriko Kamaya, said in a news conference that Saturday's quake is considered an aftershock of the 9.0 magnitude quake in 2011. Kamaya urged people to use caution and stay away from the coastline due to possible high waves.

Associated Press writer Foster Klug contributed to this report.

Turkey withdraws from European treaty protecting women

By ZEYNEP BILGINSOY Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Turkey withdrew early Saturday from a landmark European treaty protecting women from violence that it was the first country to sign 10 years ago and that bears the name of its largest city.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's overnight decree annulling Turkey's ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a blow to women's rights advocates, who say the agreement is crucial to combating domestic violence. Hundreds of women gathered in Istanbul to protests against the move on Saturday.

The Council of Europe's Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, called the decision "devastating."

"This move is a huge setback to these efforts and all the more deplorable because it compromises the protection of women in Turkey, across Europe and beyond," she said.

The Istanbul Convention states that men and women have equal rights and obliges state authorities to take steps to prevent gender-based violence against women, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators.

Some officials from Erdogan's Islam-oriented party had advocated for a review of the agreement, arguing

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it is inconsistent with Turkey's conservative values by encouraging divorce and undermining the traditional family unit.

Critics also claim the treaty promotes homosexuality through the use of categories like gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. They see that as a threat to Turkish families. Hate speech has been on the rise in Turkey, including the interior minister who described LGBT people as "perverts" in a tweet. Erdogan has rejected their existence altogether.

Women's groups and their allies who have been protesting to keep the convention intact immediately called for demonstrations across the country Saturday under the slogan "Withdraw the decision, implement the treaty." They said their years-long struggle would not be erased in one night.

Rights groups say violence against and killing of women is on the rise in Turkey but the interior minister called that a "complete lie" on Saturday.

A total of 77 women have been killed since the start of the year, according to the We Will Stop Femicide Platform. Some 409 women were killed in 2020, with dozens found dead under suspicious circumstances, according to the group.

Numerous women's rights groups slammed the decision. Advocacy group Women's Coalition Turkey said the withdrawal from a human rights agreement was a first in Turkey. "It is clear that this decision will further encourage the murderers of women, harassers, rapists," their statement said.

Turkey's justice minister said the government was committed to combating violence against women.

"We continue to protect our people's honor, the family and our social fabric with determination," Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul tweeted.

Erdogan has repeatedly stressed the "holiness" of the family and called on women to have three children. His communications director, Fahrettin Altun, said the government's motto was 'Powerful Families, Powerful Society.'

Many women suffer physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands or partners, but up-to-date official statistics are unavailable. The Istanbul Convention requires states to collect data.

Hundreds of women and allies gathered in Istanbul, wearing masks and holding banners. Their demonstration has so far been allowed but the area was surrounded by police and a coronavirus curfew is begins in the evening.

They shouted pro-LGBT slogans and called for Erdogan's resignation. They cheered as a woman speaking through a megaphone said, "You cannot close up millions of women in their homes. You cannot erase them from the streets and the squares."

Turkey was the first country to sign the Council of Europe's "Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence" at a committee of ministers meeting in Istanbul in 2011. The law came into force in 2014 and Turkey's constitution says international agreements have the force of law.

Some lawyers claimed Saturday that the treaty is still active, arguing the president cannot withdraw from it without the approval of parliament, which ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2012.

But Erdogan gained sweeping powers with his re-election in 2018, setting in motion Turkey changing from a parliamentary system of government to an executive presidency.

The justice minister wrote on Twitter that while parliament approves treaties which the executive branch puts into effect, the executive also has the authority to withdraw from them.

Women lawmakers from Turkey's main opposition party said they will not recognize the decree and called it another "coup" on parliament, which had unanimously accepted the treaty, and a usurpation of the rights of 42 million women.

Eruption of Iceland volcano easing, not affecting flights

By EGILL BJARNASON Associated Press

REYKJAVIK, Iceland (AP) — The eruption of a long-dormant volcano that sent streams of lava flowing across a small valley in southwestern Iceland is easing and shouldn't interfere with air travel, the Icelandic

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Meteorological Office said Saturday.

The fissure eruption began at around 8:45 p.m. Friday in the Geldinga Valley, about 32 kilometers (20 miles) southwest of the capital, Reykjavik, the Met Office said. The eruption is "minor" and there were no signs of ash or dust that could disrupt aviation, the agency said.

"The more we see, the smaller this eruption gets," geophysicist Pall Einarsson told The Associated Press on Saturday after monitoring the volcano throughout the night.

This southwestern corner of Iceland is the most heavily populated part of the country. The Department of Emergency Management said it doesn't anticipate evacuations, unless levels of volcanic gases rise significantly.

Keflavik Airport, Iceland's international air traffic hub, said flights have remained on schedule since the eruption began.

"There is no indication of production of ash and tephra, and there is no imminent hazard for aviation," the Met Office said on its website.

In 2010, an eruption of the Eyjafjallajokull volcano in Iceland sent clouds of ash and dust into the atmosphere, interrupting air travel between Europe and North America because of concerns the material could damage jet engines. More than 100,000 flights were grounded, stranding millions of passengers.

The Geldinga Valley eruption is the first on the Reykjanes Peninsula in almost 800 years.

The area began rumbling with increased seismic activity 15 months ago, and the tremors increased dramatically last month.

Over the past three weeks, the area has been rattled by about 50,000 small earthquakes, dozens of them magnitude 4 or stronger, the Met Office said.

Iceland, located above a volcanic hotspot in the North Atlantic, averages one eruption every four to five years. The last one was at Holuhraun in 2014, when a fissure eruption spread lava the size of Manhattan over the interior highland region.

Scientists flew over the Geldinga Valley eruption on Saturday morning and estimated the eruptive fissure was about 500 meters long (1,640 feet.) The two streams of lava were about 2.5 kilometers from the nearest road.

Solny Palsdottir's house is the closest to the site of the eruption, just four kilometers (2.5 miles) away in the coastal town of Grindavik. She and her husband were watching TV on Friday night when her teenage son pointed out a red glow in the distance.

"Today, I see a white-blue cloud of steam coming from the mountains," Palsdottir, 50, told The Associated Press. "Not something I expected to have in my backyard."

"I am just relieved the earthquakes are over," she added.

'Speak out:' Biden, Harris decry racism during Atlanta visit

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, JEFF AMY and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris offered solace to Asian Americans and denounced the scourge of racism at times hidden "in plain sight" as they visited Atlanta, just days after a white gunman killed eight people, most of them Asian American women.

Addressing the nation after a roughly 80-minute meeting with Asian American state legislators and other leaders Friday, Biden said it was "heart-wrenching" to listen to their stories of the fear among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders amid what he called a "skyrocketing spike" of harassment and violence against them.

"We have to change our hearts," he said. "Hate can have no safe harbor in America."

Biden called on all Americans to stand up to bigotry when they see it, adding: "Our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit."

"They've been attacked, blamed, scapegoated and harassed; they've been verbally assaulted, physically assaulted, killed," Biden said of Asian Americans during the coronavirus pandemic.

The president also called the shootings an example of a "public health crisis of gun violence in this coun-

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try," as his administration has come under scrutiny from some in his own party for not moving as swiftly as promised on reforming the nation's gun laws.

Harris, the first person of South Asian descent to hold national office, said that while the motive of the shooter remains under investigation, these facts are clear: Six of the eight killed were of Asian descent and seven of them were women.

"Racism is real in America. And it has always been. Xenophobia is real in America, and always has been. Sexism, too," she said. "The president and I will not be silent. We will not stand by. We will always speak out against violence, hate crimes and discrimination, wherever and whenever it occurs."

She added that everyone has "the right to be recognized as an American. Not as the other, not as them. But as us."

Before leaving Washington, Biden declared his support for the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, a bill that would strengthen the government's reporting and response to hate crimes and provide resources to Asian American communities.

Georgia state Rep. Marvin Lim, who was among a group of Asian American leaders who met with Biden and Harris in Atlanta, said the group "didn't really talk about hate crime sentencing and all of these things there's been a lot of discussion around.

"We really talked about the grief people are feeling, the fear people are feeling, the possible responses to that," Lim said. "The discussion felt very affirming."

State Sen. Michelle Au, a Chinese American Democrat who represents parts of Atlanta's northern suburbs, was moved by the presence of Harris, saying: "Not only that she was there listening to us, but that she also understood these issues in a very intimate way, that in some ways you can't teach, that you can't teach that sort of lived experience. So we felt that she was going to be an incredible advocate on our behalf in the White House."

Their trip was planned before the shooting, as part of a victory lap aimed at selling the benefits of pandemic relief legislation. But Biden and Harris instead spent much of their visit consoling a community whose growing voting power helped secure their victory in Georgia and beyond.

Activists have seen a rise of racist attacks. 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.

Biden and Harris both implicitly criticized former President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus."

"For the last year we've had people in positions of incredible power scapegoating Asian Americans," said Harris, "people with the biggest pulpits, spreading this kind of hate."

"We've always known words have consequences," Biden said. "It is the 'coronavirus.' Full stop."

In his first primetime address to the nation as president last Thursday — five days before the Atlanta killings at three metro-area massage businesses — Biden called attacks on Asian Americans "un-American."

Biden also used the visit to tour the headquarters of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he received a briefing on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic and delivered a pep talk to the agency's scientists.

"We owe you a gigantic debt of gratitude and we will for a long, long, long time," Biden said, adding that under his administration "science is back" driving policy to combat the virus.

Though the originally planned political event to tout the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill has been delayed, Biden still met with Georgia voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams, Democrats' likely 2022 candidate for governor, as Republicans in the state legislature push several proposals to make it harder to vote in the state.

"The battle for the right to vote is never, ever over," Biden said. "It's not over here in this state of Georgia. So we're gonna fight again."

He also met with newly minted Democratic Sens. Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock and Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms.

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As the fastest-growing racial demographic in the U.S. electorate, Asian Americans are gaining political influence across the country. In California, two Korean American Republican women made history with their congressional victories. The Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, typically dominated by Democrats, has its largest roster ever, including Asian American and Pacific Islander members and others who represent significant numbers of Asian Americans.

"We're becoming increasingly more visible and active in the political ecosystem," said Au, a Democrat who represents part of the growing, diversifying suburbs north of Atlanta. Yet, Au said, "What I've heard personally, and what I have felt, is that people sometimes don't tend to listen to us."

Au said a White House spotlight, especially amid tragedy, is welcomed by a community often overshadowed in national conversations about diversity. She noted Trump and other Republicans merely brushed off charges of racism when they dubbed the coronavirus the "China virus" because of its origins.

"To have them talk about it in this way, so publicly, and to say AAPI, or to note that our communities are going through difficult times, is huge," Au said.

As he boarded Air Force One on Friday morning, Biden, who was wearing a mask, stumbled several times up the stairs to the aircraft, before saluting the military officer who greeted him on the tarmac. White House principal deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden was "doing 100% fine."

Miller reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Ben Nadler and Bill Barrow contributed to this report.

As vaccinations lag, Italy's elderly again pay a price

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

BERGAMO, Italy (AP) — One year ago, Bergamo's state-of-the-art Pope John XXIII Hospital verged on collapse as doctors struggled to treat 600 patients, with 100 of them in intensive care. Army trucks ferried the dead from the city's overtaxed crematorium in images now seared into the collective pandemic memory.

The picture is much improved now: The hospital is treating fewer than 200 virus patients, just one quarter of whom require intensive care.

But still unchanged as Italy's death rate pushes upward once again is that the victims remain predominantly elderly, with inoculation drives stumbling in the country and elsewhere in Europe.

"No, this thing, alas, I was not able to protect the elderly, to make clear how important it would be to protect the elderly," said Dr. Luca Lorini, head of intensive care at the hospital named for the mid-20th century pope born in Bergamo. "If I have 10 elderly people over 80 and they get COVID, in their age group, eight out of 10 die."

That was true in the first horrifying wave and remained "absolutely the same" in subsequent spikes, he said.

Promises to vaccinate all Italians over 80 by the end of March have fallen woefully short, amid well-documented interruptions of vaccine supplies and organizational shortfalls. Just a third of Italy's 7.3 million doses administered so far have gone to people in that age group, with more than half of those who carry memories of World War II still awaiting their first jab.

"We should have already finished with this," Lorini told The Associated Press.

Italy's new premier, Mario Draghi, pledged during a visit to Bergamo on Thursday that the vaccine campaign would be accelerated. His remarks came as he inaugurated a park to honor the country's more than 104,000 dead from the pandemic. As of early March, two-thirds of Italy's virus-related deaths were among those over 80; the median age of Italy's pandemic dead currently hovers over 80 after spiking to 85 last summer.

"We are here to promise our elderly that it will never happen again that fragile people are not adequately helped and protected. Only like this will we respect those who have left us," Draghi said on the anniversary of the first army convoy carrying the virus dead from Bergamo.

Italy can hope to see its future by looking to Britain, the first country in Europe to authorize widespread

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vaccinations. More than 38% of the U.K. population has been inoculated since early December, starting with those over 70, health care workers and staff of care homes.

Britain, which leads Europe in virus deaths, has seen the percentage of fatalities among those over 75 diminish from 75% of the total before the vaccination campaign to 64% in the week ending March 5. Deaths across Britain have dropped from an average of 128 a day in the most recent seven-day period, from a high of 1,248 in the week ended Jan. 20 -- also thanks to lockdown measures.

Along with health care workers, Spain, France and Italy prioritized vaccinating residents of nursing homes, by far the single hardest-hit population in the spring surge. They account for nearly a third of the dead in Italy's first wave, and a third of France's pandemic death toll of nearly 91,100.

In France, COVID-19 infections and deaths in care homes have been steadily trending downward as the numbers of vaccinated has climbed, with 85% having received at least one shot. Early signs are that the proportion of ICU patients aged 75 and older has also started to decline since February, with nearly half in this age group at least partially vaccinated. The improved picture for residents of care homes comes despite a renewed worsening of France's outbreak.

Spain has seen a huge drop in infections and deaths in nursing homes, following the first phase of its vaccination program, with a significant decline in deaths.

In Italy, where vaccinations of nursing home residents got under way in January, compared with mid-February for other elderly, lower infection rates in nursing homes have been declared "an early success."

"We cannot count it as a victory, absolutely not, of the vaccine strategy," Dr. Giovanni Rezza, director of infectious diseases at the Health Ministry, acknowledged recently.

On Friday, Draghi said Italy aimed to administer 500,000 shots a day by next month, from a current daily level of around 165,000.

With Italy's infection rate up for the seventh straight week propelled by the fast-moving U.K. variant, more than 2.5 million Italians over 80 are awaiting their shots. What's worse, many still have no indication when they might get them.

Luca Fusco founded a group to remember the dead and advocate for justice in their memory after his father died of COVID-19 on March 11, 2020.

His mother, who celebrated her 83rd birthday on the anniversary of her husband's death, still hasn't received an appointment to be vaccinated more than a month after submitting a request. Fusco said that was true for most of the several hundred elderly in their small town near Bergamo, adding they were being required to travel 30 miles (20 kilometers) to get each shot, a burden for many.

Italy's aim is to vaccinate 80% of the population by September, and Draghi has appointed an army general to relaunch the campaign. Fusco said his group, "Noi Denunceremo," ("We Will Denounce") will act as a watchdog on the issue.

"Draghi said that by September, we will all be vaccinated. Perfect," Fusco said. "We have taken note of it. If this is not true, we will make our voices heard ... and we will ask Draghi for explanations."

Associated Press writers Danica Kirka in London, John Leicester and Sylvie Corbet in Paris, Joseph Wilson in Barcelona, Frank Jordans in Berlin and Samuel Petrequin in Brussels contributed.

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Spectators from abroad to be barred from Tokyo Olympics

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — At last it's official after countless unsourced news reports and rumors: spectators from abroad will be barred from the postponed Tokyo Olympics when they open in four months.

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The decision was announced Saturday after an online meeting of the International Olympic Committee, the Japanese government, the Tokyo government, the International Paralympic Committee, and local organizers.

Officials said the risk was too great to admit ticket holders from overseas during a pandemic. The Japanese public has also opposed fans from abroad. Several surveys have shown that up to 80% oppose holding the Olympics, and a similar percentage opposed fans from overseas attending.

Japan has attributed about 8,800 deaths to COVID-19 and has controlled the virus better than most countries.

"In order to give clarity to ticket holders living overseas and to enable them to adjust their travel plans at this stage, the parties on the Japanese side have come to the conclusion that they will not be able to enter into Japan at the time of the Olympic and Paralympic Games," the Tokyo organizing committee said in a statement.

Organizers said 600,000 tickets were sold to fans from outside Japan. They have promised refunds, but this will be determined by so-called Authorized Ticket Resellers that handle sales outside Japan. These dealers charge fees of up to 20% above the ticket price. It is not clear if the fees will be refunded.

Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the organizing committee, said organizers were not responsible for money lost on flights or hotel reservations. He said these did not involve any "contract arrangement with Tokyo."

Organizing committee President Seiko Hashimoto, who appeared in seven Olympics as an athlete — she won bronze in speedskating in 1992 — said there was pressure to wait longer to make a decision. But she said fans could now plan. She also lamented the move.

"So the fact that spectators are not able to attend the games from abroad — that is very disappointing and it's regrettable," she said. "It was an unavoidable decision."

IOC President Thomas Bach called it a "difficult decision."

"We have to take decisions that may need sacrifice from everybody," he said.

Muto seemed to rule out fans entering who may have received tickets from deep-pocketed sponsors.

"If they are part of the operation of the games, if they are somewhat involved in the operation then there is still a possibility they may be able to enter into Japan," Muto said. "But solely as spectators for watching games — no, they will not be allowed to make an entry."

The financial burden of lost ticket sales falls on Japan. The local organizing committee budget called for \$800 million income from ticket sales, the third largest income source in the privately financed budget. Any shortfall in the budget will have to be made up by Japanese government entities.

"The ticketing revenue will be in the decline," Muto said. "That is very clear at this point."

Muto also hinted at more cuts for people on the periphery of the Olympics. He also said volunteers from overseas would "be dealt with in the same manner" but said details would be forthcoming later.

"But as far as other people related to the games or whether we should maintain the same number — perhaps we will have to reduce the number. That is the consensus. That is the premise," he said.

Overall, Japan is officially spending \$15.4 billion to organize the Olympics. Several government audits say the actual cost may be twice that much. All but \$6.7 billion is public money, and a University of Oxford study says these are the most expensive Olympics on record.

About 4.45 million tickets were sold to Japan residents. Organizers are expected next month to announce the capacity at venues, which now will be populated by only local residents.

The ban on fans from abroad comes just days before the Olympic torch relay starts Thursday from Fukushima prefecture in northeastern Japan. It will last for 121 days, crisscross Japan with 10,000 runners, and is to end on July 23 at the opening ceremony at the National Stadium in Tokyo.

The relay will be a test for the Olympics and Paralympics, which will involve 15,400 athletes entering Japan. They will be tested before leaving home, tested upon arrival in Japan, and tested frequently while they reside in a secure "bubble" in the Athletes Village alongside Tokyo Bay, or at venues or training facilities.

Athletes will not be required to be vaccinated to enter Japan, but many will be.

In the midst of Saturday's meeting, Bach and others were given a reminder about earthquake-prone

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northeastern Japan — and Japan in general.

A strong earthquake shook Tokyo and triggered a tsunami warning as Bach and others made introductory remarks before the virtual meeting. The strength was put at 7.0 by the U.S. Geological Survey and the location was in northeastern Japan, an area hit by a huge earthquake and tsunami in 2011. About 18,000 were killed in that tragedy 10 years ago.

"I think the screen is shaking. Have you noticed the screen is shaking," Tamayo Marukawa, Japan's Olympic minister, said as she made her presentation from Tokyo talking remotely to Bach visible on a screen in Switzerland. "We're actually in the midst of an earthquake right now."

Officials there said there were no immediate reports of damage.

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

Biden is on his heels amid a migrant surge at Mexico border

By AAMER MADHANI and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Somehow, they didn't see it coming.

Within weeks of Inauguration Day on Jan. 20, the Biden administration had reversed many of the most maligned Trump-era immigration policies, including deporting children seeking asylum who arrived alone at the U.S.-Mexico border and forcing migrants to wait in Mexico as they made their case to stay in the United States.

While the administration was working on immigration legislation to address long-term problems, it didn't have an on-the-ground plan to manage a surge of migrants. Career immigration officials had warned there could be a surge after the presidential election and the news that the Trump policies, widely viewed as cruel, were being reversed.

Now officials are scrambling to build up capacity to care for some 14,000 migrants now in federal custody — and more likely on the way — and the administration finds itself on its heels in the face of criticism that it should have been better prepared to deal with a predictable predicament.

"They should have forecasted for space (for young migrants) more quickly," said Ronald Vitiello, a former acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and chief of Border Patrol who has served in Republican and Democratic administrations. "And I think in hindsight, maybe they should have waited until they had additional shelter space before they changed the policies."

The situation at the southern border is complex.

Since Biden's inauguration, the U.S. has seen a dramatic spike in the number of people encountered by border officials. There were 18,945 family members and 9,297 unaccompanied children encountered in February — an increase of 168% and 63%, respectively, from the month before, according to the Pew Research Center. That creates an enormous logistical challenge because children, in particular, require higher standards of care and coordination across agencies.

Still, the encounters of both unaccompanied minors and families are lower than they were 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 about 84,500 migrants traveling in family units.

Career immigration officials, overwhelmed by the earlier surges, have long warned the flow of migrants to the border could ramp up again.

Migrant children are sent from border holding cells to other government facilities until they are released to a sponsor. That process was slowed considerably by a Trump administration policy of "enhanced vetting," in which details were sent to immigration officials and some sponsors wound up getting arrested, prompting some to fear picking up children over worries of being deported. Biden has reversed that policy, so immigration officials hope the process will speed up now.

Biden administration officials have repeatedly laid blame for the current situation on the previous administration, arguing that Biden inherited a mess resulting from President Donald Trump's undermining and

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weakening of the immigration system.

The White House also points to Biden's decision to deploy the Federal Emergency Management Agency, known for helping communities in the aftermath of a natural disaster, to support efforts to process the growing number of unaccompanied migrant children arriving at the border.

Biden and others have pushed back on the notion that what's happening now is a "crisis."

"We will have, I believe, by next month enough of those beds to take care of these children who have no place to go," Biden said in a recent ABC News interview, when asked whether his administration should have anticipated the surge in young unaccompanied migrants as well as families and adults. He added, "Let's get something straight though. The vast majority of people crossing the border are being sent back ... immediately sent back."

Adam Isacson, an analyst at the human rights advocacy group Washington Office on Latin America, said Republicans' insistence that there is a "crisis" at the border is overwrought, but that the surge in migrants was predictable.

He called it a perfect storm of factors: hurricanes that hit Central America last fall; the economic fall-out caused by the coronavirus pandemic; typical seasonal migration patterns; the thousands of Central American migrants already stuck at the border for months; and the persistent scourge of gang violence afflicting Northern Triangle countries — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Isacson said the Biden administration may have been "two or three weeks" slow in preparing for the increase in unaccompanied young migrants and the subsequent housing crunch after announcing in early February it would stop deporting unaccompanied youths.

But Isacson added that the bottleneck was also affected by the lack of cooperation by the Trump administration with the Biden transition.

The Biden administration announced on Feb. 2 it would no longer uphold the Trump administration policy of automatically deporting unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. Two weeks later, the White House announced plans to admit 25,000 asylum-seekers to the U.S. who had been forced to remain in Mexico.

In subsequent weeks, the number of young migrants crossing without adults skyrocketed. Both Customs and Border Protection, and Health and Human Services officials have struggled to house the influx of children. Immigration officials say the number of adult migrants and families trying to enter the U.S. illegally also has surged.

Border patrol officials had encountered more than 29,000 unaccompanied minors since Oct. 1, nearly the same number of youths taken into custody for all of the previous budget year, administration officials say.

"Getting capacity up to deal with the unaccompanied minors is critical, but the numbers just don't bear out to pointing to a crisis," Isacson said.

That hasn't stopped Republicans -- including Trump and House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California -- from pillorying Biden.

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

Biden is also facing criticism from Republicans that his administration has sent mixed messages.

Critics have focused on public comments from Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who earlier this month said the administration's message to migrants was "don't come now" and a slip by Roberta Jacobson, the White House's lead adviser on the border, who said in Spanish during a recent briefing the "border is not closed," before correcting herself.

The president and other administration officials in recent days have stepped up efforts to urge migrants not to come. Embassies in Northern Triangle countries are airing public service announcements underscoring the dangers of making the trek north.

Eric Hershberg, director of the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University, said Biden's team faces a powerful counter-narrative as it attempts to persuade desperate Central Americans to stay put: chatter on social media from migrants who successfully made it across the border and smugglers who insist that now is the ideal time.

Hershberg cites a Honduran friend's reaction to U.S. warnings that migrants could face danger on the

journey: "You know, you don't need to go with such uncertainty. You can just stay here and know that you'll be raped or killed."

In poor districts, pandemic overwhelms school counselors

By MICHAEL MELIA Associated Press

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. (AP) — To help her students keep up with school this year, counselor Nadia Pearce has tried it all.

She reminds them of goals they had before the pandemic, for college or a career. She calls parents and goes over how their children are supposed to log in for distance learning. She begs. She pleads. She practices tough love.

"I really have to say, 'You're in this nest right now. This is high school and we are pampering you. But when you leave here, you're going to be an adult and you have to make your own decisions and there won't be a Ms. Pearce to come advocate for you,'" she said. "'So you have to get it together, now.'"

School counselors everywhere have played important roles in guiding students through the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, but the burden has been especially heavy in urban, high-needs districts like Bridgeport, Connecticut, where they have been consumed with issues related to attendance and engagement.

In a nation where poor districts typically have fewer counselors per student, those demands highlight one way the pandemic is likely to worsen inequities in the American education system as those with the most on their plates have the least amount of time to help students plan for the future.

Well before school buildings shut down last spring, addressing chronic absenteeism was a time-consuming chore for Pearce and her colleagues. Since the shift to distance and then hybrid learning, her students at Fairchild Wheeler Interdistrict Magnet school have taken on more responsibilities at home, working jobs or caring for siblings.

Counselors regularly run reports to identify students who are missing consecutive days of school or not logging in for class. From there, they analyze whether it's a case of illness, or perhaps flagging motivation, and discuss strategies that could work for each student.

"Attendance, attendance, attendance," Pearce said. "The data for attendance is like that emoji where there's an explosion."

There is one guidance counselor for every 350 students in high school in Bridgeport, Connecticut's largest city where three quarters of the students in the low-income district are Black or Hispanic. That compares with much smaller ratios in neighboring, largely white Fairfield County communities including 1 for every 220 in Greenwich, 206 in Darien and 162 in Weston, according to federal data.

Nevertheless, counselors in Bridgeport generally need to spend more time engaging families and connecting them with resources outside of school, said Michael Testani, Bridgeport's superintendent and a former school counselor.

"There's a lot of areas that a school counselor in Bridgeport needs to cover outside of just the academic guidance and support that you may see in the suburbs, where kids are getting all of their needs met at home and in the community," Testani said.

Nationally, high school counselors who serve predominantly students of color attend to 34 more students than others, according to a 2019 report by the American School Counselor Association, the Education Trust and Reach Higher. It also found that schools serving the most students from low-income families tend to have fewer counselors.

Still, Pearce has made time for students who lean on her for college planning.

Pola Indyk, a senior whose mother is from Poland and was unfamiliar with the college application process, said Pearce guided her through every step, even working after the school day on a last-minute request for a recommendation.

"It was very nerve-racking. I'm a pretty anxious person as it is. I just felt really overwhelmed," Pola said. "She checks up on me. She knows that I have a lot of plans and aspirations."

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In a crisis year, counselors and other school staff members in many areas have been occupied with making sure students have meals and support for emotional struggles, never mind declines in student performance and college application rates. A shift to emphasize student attendance and well-being — and not necessarily academic counseling — has taken place even in suburban districts, said Amanda Fitzgerald, an assistant deputy executive director at the school counselor association.

"I think the college and career readiness piece is, in some communities, still a number one priority. And I think in most communities, the social and emotional well-being of students is the number one priority," Fitzgerald said.

In Cheshire, Connecticut, a New Haven suburb where the vast majority of students go on to college, counselors have been called upon to provide extra support addressing student's social and emotional needs, which had been rising rapidly in many places even before the pandemic, district counseling director Michelle Catucci said.

The pandemic, she said, has brought further stress, including the uncertainty around planning for college and whether students will be comfortable going away for higher education.

"It's just increasing — the demands on our students as far as what success means and being successful and managing the social pieces, especially with social media," said Catucci, who is also executive director of the Connecticut School Counselor Association. "But since the pandemic, we're obviously still dealing with some of those issues, but also with supporting students through this unprecedented time and the emotions that come with it."

In Bridgeport, Pearce said she has adopted the role of an "auntie," checking in on students and their parents alike.

"I told a mother, 'Look, I know that you work. My sister's a single mom, too. So I get it. You're doing a lot of different things,'" she said. "But you know, we've got to help our little friend cross the finish line. Can you just check her assignments? Just to make sure she's doing what she needs to do?"

She also has success stories.

Masengo Nkuili, a junior, said distance learning has been disrupted by distractions at home and there have been days she didn't feel like getting out of bed. She said Pearce has helped to keep her motivated and guided her toward scholarship opportunities to help fulfill her dream of attending a historically Black college.

"If I am just not feeling something or I don't feel like going, it's, 'Masengo you have to go to class,'" she said. "She always gives me advice like that. Her energy is always amazing."

India, US to expand military engagement, defense ties

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Top defense officials from India and the United States pledged Saturday to expand their military engagement, underscoring the strengthening defense ties between two countries concerned over China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh met in New Delhi and agreed to deepen defense cooperation, intelligence sharing and logistics.

"India is an increasingly important partner in rapidly shifting international dynamics. I reaffirm our commitment to a comprehensive forward-looking defense partnership with India as a central pillar of our approach to the Indo-Pacific region," Austin said.

Austin is making the first visit to India by a top member of President Joe Biden's administration. His visit follows a meeting last week between leaders of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, which together make up the four Indo-Pacific nations known as the Quad.

The Quad is seen as a counterweight to China, who critics say is flexing its military muscle in the South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait and along its northern border with India.

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

Austin's Indian counterpart, Singh, said the talks were focused on "expanding military-to-military en-

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gagement.”

“We are determined to realize the full potential of comprehensive global strategic partnership,” Singh said. Austin arrived in New Delhi on Friday and met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

According to a statement from the Prime Minister’s Office, Modi “outlined his vision for the strategic partnership between the two countries and emphasized the important role of bilateral defense cooperation in India-U.S. ties.”

Before the talks on Saturday, Austin visited the National War Memorial and was accorded a ceremonial guard of honor.

The timing of Austin’s visit, which follows talks between high-ranking U.S. and Chinese officials in Alaska amid a bitter exchange of words, signals the importance Biden places on New Delhi as a security ally.

The U.S. and India have steadily ramped up their military relationship in recent years and signed a string of defense deals and deepened military cooperation. In 2019, the two sides concluded defense deals worth over \$3 billion. Bilateral defense trade increased from near zero in 2008 to \$15 billion in 2019.

The U.S.-India security partnership enjoys strong bipartisan support in Washington, and it has grown significantly since the early 2000s even though trade agreements have been a sticking point. But in recent years, relations between the countries have been driven by a convergence of interests to counter China.

More recently, India drew closer to the U.S. following its months-long military standoff with China along their disputed border in eastern Ladakh, where deadly clashes erupted last year. Tensions between the nuclear-armed Asian giants have eased after the two countries pulled back troops from one area of contention.

The military tensions between the two neighbors at that time had stoked fears of a larger confrontation.

Austin in a separate press briefing said the U.S. “never considered that India and China were on the threshold of war.”

In French woods, rivals take aim at senator’s WWI research

By MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The World War I exploits of Sgt. Alvin C. York netted Gary Cooper a best actor Academy Award and Pennsylvania state Sen. Doug Mastriano a degree, a book deal — and academic backlash.

Mastriano had a deep interest in York long before he led anti-mask protests last year, fought tirelessly to overturn then-President Donald Trump’s reelection loss and showed up outside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 riot.

Mastriano’s research into York helped earn him a doctorate in history from the University of New Brunswick and a publishing deal with the University Press of Kentucky, but critics argue his work does not hold up to scrutiny.

A crack shot, York led a small group of U.S. soldiers behind German lines to disrupt machine gunfire while badly outnumbered outside the village of Chatel-Chéhery, France, in the waning weeks of the war. More than 20 German soldiers were killed and 132 captured, winning the Tennessee native widespread fame and the Medal of Honor.

More than a century later, a battle continues to rage over where exactly it all took place.

For more than a decade, other researchers have questioned Mastriano’s claim to have conclusively proved exactly where York was when his lethal marksmanship played out in October 1918. They argue his research is plagued with errors and that a walking trail to the battle location he helped build actually takes visitors to the wrong spot.

In the past two months, University of Oklahoma history graduate student James Gregory has filed complaints with Mastriano’s publisher and with the Canadian university.

“Many of his citations are completely false and do not support his claims whatsoever,” Gregory said in a Jan. 25 email to the University Press of Kentucky, identifying footnotes with no apparent relation to their

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corresponding book passages.

"Any work done using Mastriano is built upon poor, false research," Gregory wrote.

Both institutions have told Gregory they have opened preliminary reviews.

Mastriano has not responded to repeated requests for comment, including written questions, from The Associated Press.

The 57-year-old Franklin County Republican, first elected two years ago and currently pondering a 2022 run for governor, seemed to emerge out of nowhere last year to become a one-man force in Pennsylvania politics.

He has boasted of speaking with Trump at least 15 times and organized an election hearing in Gettysburg that featured Rudy Giuliani and a phone call appearance by Trump.

He was even scheduled to speak on the U.S. Capitol steps during the early afternoon on Jan. 6 and had organized charter buses to Trump's speech. Despite calls from some Democratic Senate colleagues to resign, Mastriano has maintained he broke no laws the day of the Capitol breach and has not been charged.

Before Mastriano entered the political limelight, he attracted attention for his claim to have pinpointed the precise location of York's famed battle. He organized construction of the 2-mile (3-kilometer) "Circuit du Sergeant York" trail, lined with interpretive markers and dedicated amid fanfare in 2008.

But a multidisciplinary team that conducted its own surveys of the general battle area concluded the correct spot is very likely about a half-mile (0.8 kilometers) south of Mastriano's purported location.

"The issue is not about a few meters' difference between the two sites," said Dutch journalist Stephan van Meulebrouck, who has written about the York site controversy. "It is about good research versus bad research and the inability, or even the unwillingness of certain parties in this debate to admit to that fact."

In his 2014 book "Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne," and elsewhere, Mastriano has repeatedly dismissed any notion that there is a legitimate dispute about the validity of his preferred site, writing that "we know with certainty the location of the York action," that it was "discovered with 100% certainty" and that it "has been located and verified."

Gregory became interested in Mastriano's book as part of his own research into other members of York's squad, but had difficulty verifying some of Mastriano's references.

After an Associated Press review found additional questionable footnotes, Gregory sent the Kentucky publisher 35 citations he considers fraudulent. In early March, he made a nearly identical complaint to the University of New Brunswick, where the York research figured prominently in Mastriano's doctoral studies.

The university's research integrity officer, vice president David MaGee, told Gregory he was conducting a preliminary inquiry to determine if a full investigation is warranted. He and other university officials declined comment to the AP, citing privacy laws.

The University Press of Kentucky is looking into Gregory's claims, said director Ashley Runyon, as it would with any such allegation.

"Scholars are specifically asked if there are any errors of fact or interpretation," Runyon told the AP, noting the book underwent standard peer review, received positive reviews and won a \$5,000 prize for a writer's debut book on military history, foreign affairs or intelligence matters.

Gregory and other researchers are also highly skeptical of Mastriano's assertion that the photo on his book's dust jacket shows York leading German officers and other prisoners. The official U.S. Army Signal Corps caption from 1918 indicates it was taken almost two weeks before York's heroics.

Mastriano's own description of the photo has changed over time.

In a 2007 article by Mastriano for *Armchair General* magazine, a caption says the image "significantly aided" his research and "is now believed to show" York's prisoners. That caption makes no claim about which Germans are shown or if York is in the photo, saying an Army photographer "took the photo but at the time they were not identified as York's prisoners."

Four years later, in a 2011 lecture at the Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, he was more definitive, saying the photo had been mislabeled.

"We are fairly sure this is of York. I know that's hard to see, but you can see the mustache that represents York, it looks like York," he said.

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In his book, Mastriano wrote the photo "is confirmed to be" of "York and his German captives, being clearly identified by the presence" of three German officers at the head of the group — Paul Vollmer, Max Thoma and Paul Lipp.

In a 2017 email, Mastriano told a reference historian at the Army War College Library that he had "no idea" why the government photo indicated it was from Sept. 26, 12 days before York's heroics, but "it is simply wrong."

He assured the historian the photo had been "thoroughly scrutinized and analyzed and correctly annotated in my book." Mastriano said he knew of no American action on Sept. 26 that would have produced more than 100 prisoners and three German officers.

But Gregory has found other photos of Vollmer that do not seem to match the image and says there are records showing Americans captured hundreds of Germans in that area on Sept. 26.

The 59 pages of footnotes in Mastriano's book cite — more than 150 times — York's 1928 pseudo-autobiography. Among those references are minor errors such as incorrect page notations — but other mistakes are more substantial.

A section about U.S. soldiers in York's unit training in Europe includes two footnotes referring to the 1928 book. But those references lead to York's recollections of training in Georgia.

In another place, a footnote in a section about York being offered \$20,000 a week to join a theatrical revue leads instead to a description of York hunting in Tennessee.

Mastriano, who was stationed in Germany with NATO, has said he spent at least 100 days in the woods around Chatel-Chehery, scouring the area for metal artifacts and other relics of the battle.

He found bullets and bullet casings he believes were fired by York and says those artifacts — along with a period map, battle accounts and other evidence — led him to the spot on private land.

He donated a trove of the collected material to the U.S. Army's Center of Military History in Washington in 2009.

He has also given public lectures about York and heads up what he calls the "Sgt. York Discovery Expedition," which has a website that highlights his research and the trail.

But the other team zeroed in on a different area during surveys in 2006 and 2009. They recovered metal pieces engraved with York's unit name and material they believe was dropped when a large group of Germans surrendered, and found the temporary grave locations of Americans buried near York's heroic stand.

"For the scientific community and most of the serious historians, I provided enough evidence to pretty much prove it was in the right place," said Tom Nolan, who researched the site for a doctorate in geographic information science from Texas State University.

Mastriano dismissed doubters in a September 2018 speech at the National WWI Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri.

"They went back after our findings and hit the German archives to try to fill in their gaps," but they were unsuccessful in debunking him, Mastriano asserted.

Among his detractors is independent researcher and expert metal detector operator Brad Posey, who first met Mastriano when both men lived in Germany.

Posey had spent about three days helping Mastriano survey the French site, but the artifacts he found and the practices he observed convinced him that Nolan's site was far more likely to be correct.

"When I went into this, I honestly thought that he's really found the spot," Posey said. "After one day with him up there I knew, this is not the right spot."

He subsequently signed on with Nolan's team and did his own research in the German military archives, finding no conclusive evidence to back up Mastriano's narrative.

In the Cooper biopic that became the highest-grossing movie of 1941, York seemed to have his own geographic doubts. As his squad and prisoners reached a fork in the path, York asked a German officer, "Which way would you be a-goin'?"

When the officer suggested one route, York marched them off the other way.

Fallout from riot, virus leaves toxic mood on Capitol Hill

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The mood is so bad at the U.S. Capitol that a Democratic congressman recently let an elevator pass him by rather than ride with Republican colleagues who voted against certifying Joe Biden's election.

Republicans say it's Democrats who just need to get over it — move on from the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, end the COVID-19 restrictions and make an effort toward bipartisanship.

Not yet 100 days into the new Congress, the legislative branch has become an increasingly toxic and unsettled place, with lawmakers frustrated by the work-from-home limits imposed by the coronavirus and suspicious of each other after the Jan. 6 riot over Donald Trump's presidency.

Particularly in the House, which remains partly shuttered by the pandemic and where lawmakers heard gunshots ring out during the siege, trust is low, settled facts about the riot are apparently up for debate and wary, exhausted members are unsure how or when the "People's House" will return to normal.

One newer congresswoman said it's "heartbreaking" to see what has become of the institution she cherished, in the country she has taken an oath to defend from enemies foreign and domestic.

"You know, I do sometimes just close my eyes and, like, picture this place in the way that it used to be, and how welcoming it was," said Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., first elected in 2018.

An immigrant from Somalia, she said she draws on the coping skills she learned as a child in wartime to enter the razor-wire fenced Capitol, now with armed members of the National Guard, to "try to pretend that that's not what it is."

The first months of the year have laid bare the scars from the historic, unprecedented events. The fallout extends far beyond the broken windows and gouged walls of the Capitol to the loss that comes from the absence of usual routines and visitors that were the daily hum of democracy. With virtual meetings and socially distanced votes, lawmakers have fewer opportunities to talk to each other, share ideas and ease fears in the aftermath of the riot.

"The mood is toxic," said Rep. Rodney Davis, R-Ill. "I mean, it really sucks to be in the minority, but it's really worse when there's just such a high partisan temperature."

It came to a pressure point this past week when a dozen Republicans voted against awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to law enforcers who defended the Capitol, in part because the resolution mentioned the "insurrectionists" who attacked the "temple" of American democracy. Democrats were stunned.

Despite the charged atmosphere, the House is forging ahead with Biden's agenda, the Democratic majority ushering the \$1.9 trillion virus relief bill into law without support from a single Republican. The tensions are delaying, but not stalling, fast action on voting rights, gun background checks and other legislative priorities, but leaving the potential for bipartisanship with Biden an open question.

One certainty is that the last president has left an indelible mark on the legislative branch.

Trump's brand of politics is reshaping the Republican Party as lawmakers mimic his style. GOP lawmakers mostly play down the insurrection as simply a "protest," even as 300 people have been charged in the attack. Republicans dismiss the House coronavirus restrictions, despite public health guidelines urging vaccinations, mask-wearing and social distance to prevent another surge.

Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, said that at events he attended back home few people wear masks anymore and "the attitude is it's time to get back to normal, get back to freedom."

Leadership sets a tone, and California Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., the top Republican in the House, tried to suggest at a recent news conference that the GOP challenges to Biden's victory were not intended to change the election outcome — despite Trump urging his supporters "fight like hell" on Jan. 6 as lawmakers were certifying the 2020 election results.

Five people died as a result of the attack at the Capitol, including a woman shot by police and a police officer who succumbed later from injuries.

Dozens of lawmakers have tested positive for the coronavirus, and two elected officials, both Republicans, have died from COVID-19, one just before his Jan. 3 swearing-in.

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The GOP leader has sent House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., a letter saying the House should resume normal operations now that 75% of lawmakers are vaccinated.

Pelosi responded Friday that the goal is "100%" compliance with vaccinations and social distancing guidelines.

One problem in resuming fully in-person operations at the Capitol is the lack of vaccinations for thousands of staff to the 435 House members. So far only two doses have been available for each House office, officials said. Six more doses are expected to be added as soon as next week.

The Senate, with 100 members, largely resumed its operations last spring.

For now, House proxy voting that was put in place to lessen lawmakers' health risks of traveling to Washington will persist. Visitors are still off-limits at the Capitol.

"There are moments when I'm very excited and very happy, some really great things are happening," said Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern, the House Rules Committee chairman who skipped the elevator when he saw it was carrying Republicans who challenged the presidential vote.

But he said he was bothered by lawmakers who "try to somehow claim that, you know, this was an act of patriotic people coming to disagree? Give me a break."

It's clear that Democrats are more emotionally spent than House Republicans, who bolstered their ranks in the last election despite Trump's loss. Their gains narrowed the path to regaining House control in 2022.

One Trump-aligned Republican lawmaker, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, has started gumming up Democrats' floor operations by demanding roll calls on routine legislation, testing lawmakers' patience as already lengthy House proceedings drag into late-night sessions. In February, the House voted to remove Greene from her committee assignments because of her lengthy history of outrageous social media posts and other actions.

While security fencing is set to be removed from the Capitol, metal detectors remain stationed outside the House chamber after some Republican lawmakers pledged to bring their firearms onto the House floor.

Trust is low.

"Do you think?" said Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., among those who voted against the police medals. "Look at the metal detectors here — we have to get squeegeed."

Rep. Steve Palazzo, R-Miss., acknowledged, "There might be some relationship building that needs to take place."

Rep. Norma Torres, D-Calif., said she has spent sleepless nights replaying the January attack scenes in her mind.

She said she is hoping for some assurances from her Republican colleagues that they're all committed to the same goal of "upholding our democracy."

"If we want to get back to normal," she said, "we have to be better than we are."

Striking Myanmar rail workers move out as protests continue

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — Residents of Myanmar's second-biggest city helped striking railway workers move out of their state-supplied housing Saturday after the authorities said they would have to leave if they kept supporting the protest movement against last month's military coup.

Mandalay residents carried the workers' furniture and other household items to trucks, van and pickup trucks.

The state railway workers last month went on strike as key and early supporters of the civil disobedience movement against the Feb. 1 coup that toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The military regime has sought to force them back to work through intimidation, which included a nighttime, gun-firing patrol last month through their housing area in Mandalay and a raid in the railway workers' housing area in Yangon.

Protests against the coup continued Saturday in cities and town across the country, including in Mandalay and Yangon.

The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar after five decades of military rule. In the face of persistent strikes and protests against the takeover, the junta has responded with an

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increasingly violent crackdown and efforts to severely limit the information reaching the outside world.

Internet access has been severely restricted, private newspapers have been barred from publishing, and protesters, journalists and politicians have been arrested in large numbers.

The independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has verified 235 deaths and has said the actual total — including ones where verification has been difficult — “is likely much higher.” It said it has confirmed that 2,330 people have been arrested or charged since the coup, with 1,980 still detained or remaining charged.

In addition to using lethal force to try to break up demonstrations, the security forces have been carrying out a campaign of harassment, stealing from homes they raid, said the group, which also charged that security forces have used people they arrested as human shields as they sought to break up demonstrations.

Numerous reports on social media, including videos, have shown security forces vandalizing cars parked on the street.

The U.N. agencies UNICEF and UNESCO, along with the private humanitarian group Save the Children, on Friday issued a statement criticizing the occupation of education facilities across Myanmar by security forces as a serious violation of children’s rights.

It said security forces have reportedly occupied more than 60 schools and university campuses in 13 states and regions.

“It will exacerbate the learning crisis for almost 12 million children and youth in Myanmar, which was already under tremendous pressure as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing widespread school closures,” said the statement. “Save the Children, UNESCO and UNICEF call on security forces to vacate occupied premises immediately and ensure that schools and educational facilities are not used by military or security personnel.

“Schools must be not used by security forces under any circumstances,” it declared.

Calls for international action to halt the violence continue to mount.

“The junta can’t defeat the people of Myanmar united in peaceful opposition,” Tom Andrews, the U.N.’s independent expert on human rights for Myanmar, wrote on Twitter on Friday. “Desperate, it launches ruthless attacks to provoke a violent response to try and justify even more violence. It’s not working. The world must respond by cutting their access to money & weapons. Now.”

Unexpectedly strong statements were issued Friday by two of Myanmar’s fellow countries in the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo urged a halt to violence and asked other regional leaders to hold a summit on the crisis.

Widodo’s move came after ASEAN foreign ministers held a March 2 meeting that reached no consensus on the crisis.

Malaysia’s Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin issued a statement supporting Widodo’s call for an ASEAN summit, saying he was “appalled by the persistent use of lethal violence against unarmed civilians which has resulted in a high number of deaths and injuries, as well as suffering across the nation.”

UN official: Myanmar people want UN sanctions, peacekeepers

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The people of Myanmar have huge expectations from the United Nations and the international community following the Feb. 1 coup, with many calling for sanctions and some urging the U.N. to send peacekeepers to stop the killings of peaceful protesters seeking a return to democracy, the top U.N. official in the country said Friday.

Acting resident and humanitarian coordinator Andrew Kirkwood said in a video briefing to U.N. reporters from Myanmar’s largest city Yangon that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and other U.N. officials have been very consistent about what’s really needed: “collective member state actions in the Security Council.”

Guterres echoed that message again on Friday, saying “a firm, unified international response is urgently needed” to stop the violence by security forces and return Myanmar to the path of democracy, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

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"Many people will have seen people carrying placards saying, 'how many more bodies?'" Kirkwood said. "People are really looking for concerted international action in terms of sanctions. Frankly, some people here want to see peacekeepers."

"There's a huge expectation on the United Nations, with the entire international community," he said. "We are doing everything we can in the current situation, and there is still frustration among the people that the international community hasn't done more to date."

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

The Security Council adopted a presidential statement -- one step below a resolution -- on March 10 calling for a reversal of the coup, strongly condemning the violence against peaceful protesters and calling for "utmost restraint" by the military. It stressed the need to uphold "democratic institutions and processes" and called for the immediate release of detained government leaders including Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.

The statement is weaker than the initial draft circulated by the United Kingdom, which would have condemned the coup and threatened "possible measures under the U.N. Charter" -- U.N. language for sanctions -- "should the situation deteriorate further."

Diplomats said council members China and India, both neighbors of Myanmar, as well as Russia and Vietnam, which along with Myanmar is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, objected to provisions in the stronger earlier drafts of the statement.

Getting Security Council approval for U.N. sanctions or peacekeepers will be an uphill struggle. That's because it will require support or an abstention from China, a veto-wielding council member that calls itself a friend of Myanmar and has a policy opposing sanctions.

The U.N. has also looked to ASEAN as the regional power to take the lead in trying to end the crisis.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the leader of Southeast Asia's largest economy, urged an immediate halt to the violence on Friday and called for a summit of ASEAN leaders on the coup.

ASEAN, currently chaired by Brunei, also faces internal divisions in agreeing on significant action against Myanmar.

Without it, the death toll keeps mounting as protesters refuse to accept the coup.

Kirkwood said at least 211 people have been killed in the seven weeks since the military takeover, including at least 15 children, some as young as 14. He emphasized that many were killed by sniper bullets to the head.

At least 2,400 people have been arrested because of their suspected participation in demonstrations, he said. "The vast majority of these people are held incommunicado still, and there are increasing reports of sexually based violence against them."

Before the coup, the U.N. was providing humanitarian aid to over a million people, Kirkwood said. As a result of the coup, "we're really very worried about an impending humanitarian crisis."

"Two million people live in areas under martial law in the industrial suburbs," Kirkwood said. "Just in the last few days, tens of thousands of people have fled those areas under martial law and there are desperate interviews of families carrying everything they can as they return to villages they left a decade ago to come to the city for a better life."

In addition, Kirkwood said, "the government health system has practically collapsed, the security forces have occupied 36 hospitals around the country, and in some cases patients have been evicted from those hospitals."

There's also a banking crisis that has caused major disruptions to supply chains and logistics, Kirkwood said, and in the last month food prices have increased about 20% in some places, the result mainly of growing fuel shortages and transportation difficulties.

"What we may be looking at is a slow burning food crisis," he said. "What we fear is that the situation

will really deteriorate as transportation links and people's access to agricultural inputs decreases, people are displaced from their normal homes and farms."

"We haven't seen a significant increase in the people in need of food yet, but this is a huge concern for us over time," Kirkwood said.

He said the U.N. has better access to Rakhine state, where some 600,000 Rohingya Muslims live in difficult conditions after more than 700,000 Rohingya fled a military crackdown in 2017 to neighboring Bangladesh.

"The protests and the violence haven't really spread in Rakhine as they have in the rest of the country," Kirkwood said. "And so in terms of humanitarian issues it's a small bright spot in an otherwise quite dark picture."

A New Year in Iran, but the country's crises remain the same

By AMIR VAHDAT and ISABEL DÉBRE Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — The Persian New Year, Nowruz, begins on the first day of spring and celebrates all things new. But as families across Iran hurried to greet the fresh start — eating copious crisp herbs, scrubbing their homes and buying new clothes — it was clear just how little the country had changed.

A year into the coronavirus pandemic that has devastated Iran, killing over 61,500 people — the highest death toll in the Middle East — the nation is far from out of the woods. And although Iranians had welcomed the election of President Joe Biden with a profound sigh of relief after the Trump administration's economic pressure campaign, the sanctions that have throttled the country for three years remain in place.

"I was counting down the seconds to see the end of this year," said Hashem Sanjar, a 33-year-old food delivery worker with a bachelor's degree in accounting. "But I worry about next year."

Once again, Nowruz, a joyous two-week celebration rooted in gatherings — at homes, in parks and squares — will be stifled by the pandemic. Gone from Tehran's streets are the performers dressed as "Hajji Firuz," the ancient folk figure who dances, sings and bangs tambourines to ring in the holiday. Gone too are the usual piles of old furniture, which families can no longer afford to throw out for the new year.

A nightly curfew in the capital forbids residents from venturing out after 9 p.m. Health officials are pleading with the public to stay home. And the government has banned travel to cities hardest-hit by the virus.

Still, authorities will allow families to travel to the Caspian Sea and other vacation spots with lower infection rates, a bid to boost Iran's slumping retail sales. Before the pandemic, domestic travel revenue accounted for an estimated \$1.2 billion over the holiday. Police warned of heavy traffic from Tehran to the northern coast as residents hit the road.

Last year as Nowruz approached, the country of 83 million had become a global epicenter of the coronavirus. The virus coursed across Iran as heads of shrines called on pilgrims to keep coming and authorities dismissed alarm over rising deaths. Desperate to salvage its ailing economy, the government resisted a nationwide lockdown, further spreading the disease.

Now, the pain of the pandemic runs too deep to deny. The virus has touched all aspects of daily life, infecting some 1.78 million people, overwhelming hospitals, filling vast cemeteries and pummeling an economy already reeling from U.S. sanctions.

Iran's economy shrank 5% last year, according to the International Monetary Fund. Over 1 million people lost their jobs in 2020, reported the Interior Ministry. Inflation has soared to nearly 50% compared to 10% in 2018, before then-President Donald Trump withdrew from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers and re-imposed sanctions. The prices of basic goods, including Nowruz staples like spiced nuts and clothes, have doubled or tripled.

Casual laborers bear the brunt of the fallout. The poverty rate has surged to 55%. The government's \$40 stipends for poor families have failed to plug the gap.

Payman Fadavi, a 48-year-old electronics shop owner in a Tehran mall, said he faces financial ruin.

"The virus led to economic problems for the whole world, but in Iran it is worse, we are experiencing sanctions along with coronavirus," he said, adding the pandemic forced him to fire most of his staff. "I think I have to close the store soon."

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Rasul Hamdi, a 38-year-old cleaner, struggles because clients “wouldn’t let me come and clean their homes out of fear of the virus.” The outbreak has altered his life in other ways, as people around him fell ill. Now, all his next-door neighbors are gone — a whole family dead from COVID-19.

Amid the misery, and despite the chilling rain, signs of life were returning to Tehran ahead of the holiday.

Through pandemics, wars and disasters, the ancient Zoroastrian festival of Nowruz, or “New Day” in Farsi, has been celebrated continuously for over 3,000 years, predating the region’s Muslim conquest. Some 300 million people in Iran and beyond gather around tables replete with ancient symbols of renewal, prosperity and luck: green wheat sprouts, apples, gold coins and oranges or goldfish in bowls of water.

This week, throngs of mask-clad shoppers packed the metro and jockeyed to buy last-minute gifts and sweets at Tehran’s storied Grand Bazaar. In the northern Tajrish Square, vendors hawked candles and flowers, calling out wishes for a joyous new year. Even as the infection rates have dropped from peaks reached last fall, the crowded scenes pointed to pandemic fatigue and public intransigence rather than national recovery, especially as Iran’s vaccine rollout lags.

Still waiting for big shipments from COVAX, the global initiative to provide doses to low- and middle-income countries, Iran so far has inoculated only several thousand health care and front-line workers. Around a hundred people continue to die of COVID-19 each day, according to government statistics. Daily infection counts have hovered at around 8,000 since the discovery of a fast-spreading variant earlier this year.

Many in Iran find the seasonal symbols on their Nowruz tables in increasingly short supply. Hopes for a rapid return to the nuclear deal are dimming as the Biden administration, grappling with congressional opposition, a litany of higher priorities and pressure to wring more concessions from Iran, refuses to lift sanctions. The U.S. insists that Iran come back into compliance with the nuclear accord first.

As Iran’s frustration deepens, the country is hurtling toward a different sort of renewal — a presidential election in mid-June. Disappointment with continued sanctions under relative moderate President Hassan Rouhani could play a critical role in the vote, said Behnam Maleki, a Tehran-based economist. Rouhani, who is term-limited from running again, faces strong opposition from hard-liners, narrowing the window for a diplomatic breakthrough with the U.S.

But on Saturday at 1:07 p.m., the exact moment of the spring equinox, Iranian families will pay little heed to their country’s mounting crises. Over hearty meals, they will embrace and kiss, hoping for better times.

DeBre reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Sister Jean gets the vaccine and seat at the NCAA Tournament

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Writer

The best COVID-19 vaccine shots in America just might be the two that went into Sister Jean’s arm.

The breakout star and model for the most coveted bobblehead of the 2018 NCAA Tournament is now eight months beyond her 101st birthday and still serving as chaplain for the Loyola of Chicago basketball team. It took two vaccinations and some serious wrangling, but Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt was back on the scene Friday in Indianapolis watching her beloved Ramblers in person, sporting brand-new, brick-red kicks but the same radiant smile — a fresh reminder for a pandemic-weary fan base that a little perseverance still goes a long way.

In this case, thankfully, she didn’t have to wait long. The eighth-seeded Ramblers were dead behind the arc and dominated the boards to pull away for a relatively easy 71-60 win over No. 9 Georgia Tech. Loyola’s next opponent, Midwest Regional No. 1 seed Illinois, is bound to provide a much stiffer test of Sister Jean’s faith.

Yet her celebratory fist bump at the buzzer was one of the signature moments of the first full day of an NCAA Tournament canceled a year ago due the pandemic. The time away hardly blunted the tourney’s reputation for producing upsets, though to be fair, ranking teams based on a string of chaotic conference tournaments and a shortened regular season — 20 percent of games wound up cancelled — was probably more hit-and-miss than usual.

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The biggest takedown was scored by No. 15 seed Oral Roberts, which needed overtime to escape second-seeded Ohio State 75-72. That marked just the ninth time in tournament history it happened.

"We put our shoes on just as the other team puts their shoes on," said Kevin Obanor, who led Oral Roberts with 30 points. "We just had the mindset of, 'Show us that you deserve to be No. 2,' and we came out with a lot of confidence."

Not long after, No. 13 North Texas registered its first tourney win by stunning a second entry from the mighty Big Ten Conference, fifth-seeded Purdue 78-69, and Oregon State claimed this year's first by-now familiar 12-seed-over-a-No. 5 slot by handily beating Tennessee 70-56. Syracuse, an 11 seed, made a staggering 56% percent (15 of 27) of its 3-point attempts en route to burying No. 6 San Diego State 78-62.

That game also produced one of those father-son moments sports are so good at: Buddy Boeheim, who made seven of his 10 3-point shots — including one from the edge of half-court logo — finished with 30 points, one better than the school record set by his father, Syracuse head coach Jim Boeheim, in the 1966 tournament.

Finally, No. 10 Rutgers pulled off a mild upset over seventh-seeded Clemson, 60-56, while No. 9 Wisconsin's 85-62 pasting of No. 8 North Carolina hardly qualified as that, unless you count Tar Heels coach Roy Williams' first-ever loss in a tournament opener.

Baylor and Houston, the other No. 1 and No. 2 seeds in action, clobbered Hartford and Cleveland State, respectively. All the other higher seeds — Villanova, Texas Tech, Arkansas, Florida, Oklahoma State and West Virginia — also won.

Loyola guard Lucas Williamson, who scored a game-high 21 points to send the ACC Tournament-champion Yellow Jackets packing, was a freshman during Loyola's magical run to the Final Four in 2018. So much about this year's tournament is different, but the feeling of accomplishment was the same.

"It feels so good, and I want to feel it again," Williamson began, smiling broadly.

But when the next question came about playing Illinois — which drowned No. 16 Drexel 78-49 in a dunkfest earlier in the day — he got serious.

"Going to take everything we got. They're one of the best teams in the country," Williamson said. "That's no secret."

ORU wasn't exactly a secret — it boasts the nation's leading scorer in Max Abmas — but only 4.25 percent of people who filled out brackets at the NCAA site picked them to oust the Buckeyes.

"When they rank them, it was only just a number at the end of the day," said Obanor, who scored seven of his 30 in overtime. Abmas added 29.

The Golden Eagles face another tall task when they meet No. 7 Florida. But Ohio State coach Chris Holtmann left little doubt how much better that was than the alternative.

"Obviously, a really bitter end to terrific season. We'll own that, accept it and ..." he paused, fighting back tears, "we'll move forward."

Spa shootings could be first test of Georgia hate crimes law

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The murder case against a white man charged with shooting and killing six women of Asian descent and two other people at Atlanta-area massage businesses this week could become the first big test for Georgia's new hate crimes law.

Robert Aaron Long, 21, told police that the attacks Tuesday at two spas in Atlanta and another massage business near suburban Woodstock were not racially motivated and claimed to have a sex addiction. Authorities said he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation but were still investigating his motive.

Because most of the victims were women of Asian descent, there's skepticism of that explanation and public clamoring for hate crime charges, especially among the Asian American community, which has faced rising numbers of attacks since the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

But, like many states, the Georgia law enacted last summer does not provide for a standalone hate

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crime, instead allowing an additional penalty when a person is convicted of another crime.

"It's not something you get arrested for. It's a sentence enhancer," said Pete Skandalakis, a former prosecutor and executive director of the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia.

The law says an additional penalty can be applied for certain crimes if they are motivated by a victim's race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender, or mental or physical disability. Even before the law passed amid the national reckoning over racial injustice, the pandemic had largely paused court cases, so Skandalakis said he doesn't believe the rule has been used yet.

A hate crime charge can be included in an indictment or added at some point before trial. If a jury convicts the defendant of the underlying crime, prosecutors can present evidence for a hate crime sentencing enhancement. Defense attorneys can present their own evidence, and the jury deliberates again. If jurors find it's a hate crime, there is a mandatory enhancement of at least two years in prison and a fine of up to \$5,000 for a felony.

The federal government and some other states go further with laws that criminalize bias-motivated violence without requiring a conviction on an underlying crime.

The U.S. Department of Justice could choose to bring federal hate crime charges independently of the state prosecutions. Federal investigators have not yet uncovered evidence to prove Long targeted the victims because of their race, two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press. The officials had direct knowledge of the investigation but were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In Georgia, the minimum sentence for murder is life in prison, with or without the possibility of parole after 30 years. Prosecutors also can seek the death penalty if the killing meets certain requirements.

Long has been charged with eight counts of murder, and it will be up to Cherokee County District Attorney Shannon Wallace and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis to decide whether to pursue the hate crime enhancement.

Wallace said in a statement that she can't answer specific questions about the case but that she is "acutely aware of the feelings of terror being experienced in the Asian-American community." A representative for Willis did not respond to requests for comment.

Given that someone convicted of multiple murders is unlikely to be released from prison, an argument could be made that it's not worth the effort, time and expense to pursue a hate crime designation that carries a relatively small additional penalty.

But Republican state Rep. Chuck Efration, who sponsored the legislation, said it's not just about the punishment.

"It is important that the law calls things what they are," he said. "It's important for victims, and it's important for society."

And the law needs to be used to give it teeth, said state Sen. Michelle Au, a Democrat who is Chinese American.

Au believes there has been some resistance nationwide to charge attacks against Asian Americans as hate crimes because they are seen as "model minorities," a stereotype that they are hard-working, educated and free of societal problems. She said she heard from many constituents in the last year that Asian Americans — and people of Chinese descent in particular — were suffering from bias because the coronavirus had emerged in China and then-President Donald Trump used racial terms to describe it.

"People feel like they're getting gaslighted because they see it happen every day," she said. "They feel very clearly that it is racially motivated, but it's not pegged or labeled that way. And people feel frustrated by that lack of visibility and that aspect being ignored."

In addition to sending a message to the community, it's important for the new law to be used for legal reasons, Georgia State University law professor Tanya Washington said. While police have said it's too soon to tell whether the spa shootings qualify as a hate crime, she said it seems obvious the violence was motivated by bias given the people and businesses targeted.

"Unless we test it with cases like this one, we won't have a body of law around how do you prove bias

motivated the behavior," she said.

The Georgia law also mandates collecting and reporting data on hate crimes investigated by law enforcement, which allows tracking and proper allocation of resources, Washington said.

Georgia was one of only four states without a hate crimes law when lawmakers quickly passed it last year in the wake of the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and national protests against racial injustice and police brutality. Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was pursued and fatally shot while running near coastal Brunswick in February 2020. Three white men were charged with murder after video of the killing emerged months later.

Georgia's Supreme Court had overturned an earlier hate crimes statute in 2004, saying it was too broad.

Associated Press writers Jeff Amy in Atlanta and Michael Balsamo in Washington contributed reporting.

'An all-hands moment': GOP rallies behind voting limits

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press

On an invitation-only call last week, Sen. Ted Cruz huddled with Republican state lawmakers to call them to battle on the issue of voting rights.

Democrats are trying to expand voting rights to "illegal aliens" and "child molesters," he claimed, and Republicans must do all they can to stop them. If they push through far-reaching election legislation now before the Senate, the GOP won't win elections again for generations, he said.

Asked if there was room to compromise, Cruz was blunt: "No."

"H.R. 1's only objective is to ensure that Democrats can never again lose another election, that they will win and maintain control of the House of Representatives and the Senate and of the state legislatures for the next century," Cruz said told the group organized by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-backed, conservative group that provides model legislation to state legislators.

Cruz's statements, recorded by a person on the call and obtained by The Associated Press, capture the building intensity behind Republicans' nationwide campaign to restrict access to the ballot. From statehouses to Washington, the fight over who can vote and how — often cast as "voting integrity" — has galvanized a Republican Party in search of unifying mission in the post-Trump era. For a powerful network of conservatives, voting restrictions are now viewed as a political life-or-death debate, and the fight has all-but eclipsed traditional Republican issues like abortion, gun rights and tax cuts as an organizing tool.

That potency is drawing influential figures and money from across the right, ensuring that the clash over the legislation in Washington will be partisan and expensive.

"It kind of feels like an all-hands-on-deck moment for the conservative movement, when the movement writ large realizes the sanctity of our elections is paramount and voter distrust is at an all-time high," said Jessica Anderson, executive director of Heritage Action, an influential conservative advocacy group in Washington. "We've had a bit of a battle cry from the grassroots, urging us to pick this fight."

Several prominent groups have recently entered the fray: Anti-abortion rights group, the Susan B. Anthony List, has partnered with another conservative Christian group to fund a new organization, the Election Transparency Initiative. FreedomWorks, a group formed to push for smaller government, has initiated a \$10 million calling for tighter voting laws in the states. It will be run by Cleta Mitchell, a prominent Republican attorney who advised former President Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, Heritage Action has announced a new effort also focused on changes in state voting laws. It included a \$700,000 ad campaign to back GOP-written bills in Georgia, the group's first foray into advocating for state policy.

So far, the states have been the center of the debate. More than 250 bills have been introduced in 43 states that would change how Americans vote, according to a tally by the Brennan Center for Justice, which backs expanded voting access. That includes measures that would limit mail voting, cut hours that polling places are open and impose restrictions that Democrats argue amount to the greatest assault on voting rights since Jim Crow.

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That push was triggered by Trump's lies that he lost the presidential election due to fraud — claims rejected by the courts and by prominent Republicans — and the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol that those groundless claims sparked.

But the fight over voting laws now extends far beyond Trump and is shifting to Washington, where the Democratic-led Senate will soon consider an array of voting changes. The package, known as H.R. 1, would require states to automatically register eligible voters, as well as offer same-day registration. It would limit states' ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons' voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require states to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no-excuse absentee balloting. Democrats, who are marshaling their own resources behind the bill, argue it is necessary to block what they describe as voter suppression efforts in the states.

Republicans contend it's a grab bag of long-sought Democratic goals aimed at tilting elections in their favor. Cruz claimed it would lead to voting by millions of "criminals and illegal aliens."

The bill "says America would be better off if more murderers were voting, America would be better off if more rapists and child molesters were voting," Cruz said.

He added that he had recently participated in an all-day strategy call with national conservative leaders to coordinate opposition. The leaders agreed that Republicans would seek to rebrand the Democratic-backed bill as the "Corrupt Politicians Act," he said.

The focus on voting is visible across the conservative movement, even among groups with no clear interest in the voting debate. At a televised town hall in February, leading Christian conservative Tony Perkins fielded several questions about voting before tackling topics on the social issues his Family Research Council typically focuses on.

Perkins answered the question by recalling how voting laws were made stricter in his native Louisiana after a close 1996 Senate race won by Democrats. He noted that the state now votes solidly Republican.

"When you have free, fair elections, you're going to have outcomes that are positive," Perkins said before urging viewers to push state lawmakers to "restore election integrity."

Stronger voting regulations have long been a conservative goal, driven by old — and some say outdated — conventional wisdom that Republicans thrive in elections with lower turnout, and Democrats in ones with more voters. That has translated to GOP efforts to tighten voter identification laws and require more frequent voter roll purges. Both efforts tend to disproportionately exclude Black and Latino voters, groups that lean Democratic.

In a sign of the increasing attention to the issue last year, Leonard Leo, a Trump advisor and one of the strategists behind the conservative focus on the federal judiciary, formed The Honest Elections Project to push for voting restrictions and coordinate GOP effort to monitor the 2020 vote.

But the issue expanded beyond what many conservatives expected. As Trump groundlessly blamed fraud for his loss, and he and his allies lost more than 50 court cases trying to overturn the election, his conservative base became convinced of vague "irregularities" and holes in the voting system.

While Leo's group, like other parts of the establishment GOP, kept a distance from such claims, state lawmakers stepped in quickly with bills aimed at fixing phantom problems and restoring confidence in the system.

"We're certain our vote will count, we're certain our vote is secure, we're certain our system is fair and not having any sort of nefarious activities," said Iowa Rep. Bobby Kaufmann, a Republican who authored a wide-ranging election bill that shortened the state's early voting period.

Leo's group has since released a list of its preferred voting law changes.

Similarly, other outside groups soon jumped into the debate that's roiling their activists who write the letters, make phone calls and send the small donations that keep the groups relevant.

"It's gone up the chain of priority," said Noah Wall, executive vice president of FreedomWorks, which trained 60 top activists in Orlando last weekend on voting issues. "If you were to poll our activists right now, election integrity is going to be near the top of the list. Twelve months ago, that wasn't the case."

Critics of Brazil's president being targeted by security law

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Police in Brazil are starting to employ a dictatorship-era national security law against critics of President Jair Bolsonaro, while lawyers and activists rally to provide them with legal help and accuse the government of trying to silence dissent.

On Friday, demonstrators challenged police in the capital by parading with anti-Bolsonaro signs a day after four protesters were detained. They had called the president "genocidal" for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and displayed a cartoon depicting him next to a Nazi swastika. Officers took no action Friday as about 40 people protested for an hour.

The national security law, which dates from 1983, near the end of the country's military dictatorship, makes it a crime to harm the heads of the three branches of government or expose them to danger. The vague measure has recently been used to detain or investigate Bolsonaro critics.

Geography teacher Katia Garcia said she showed up in front of the president's office Friday because the arrests had inspired her.

"They were jailed because the description 'genocidal' suits our president very well," Garcia said, wearing a face mask and face shield. "He has contributed to our health care system collapsing, for the lack of vaccines. Police can't silence us."

There have been previous news-making charges against prominent critics of the president, including a newspaper columnist, a political cartoonist and a popular YouTube star, but the law is increasingly being employed against ordinary citizens. Courts haven't upheld any of the arrests so far, but lawyers are expressing alarm that the tactic is becoming commonplace.

Both demonstrations in Brasilia called for Bolsonaro's impeachment due to his administration's alleged failings in the pandemic, which has caused almost 290,000 deaths in Brazil. The country has reported nearly 3,000 deaths each day this week.

On several instances, the president has complained that he is being unfairly vilified, most recently Thursday night during a live Facebook broadcast.

"They call me a dictator. I want you to point at one thing I did in two years and two months that was autocratic," he said while complaining about a newspaper column that used the word genocidal to describe him.

Brasilia police said Thursday that the four detained protesters violated the national security law "as they showed a Swastika in association to the symbol of the president of the Republic." But Brazil's federal police force, which decides whether cases brought by local police deserve to go ahead in national security crimes, dismissed the case and released three of the four demonstrators. One was held on an outstanding warrant from a previous case.

Federal police have conducted more than 80 investigations under the security law during Bolsonaro's first two years, and more than 10 in the first 45 days of 2021, according to the newspaper O Globo. The yearly average before the conservative leader took office was 11.

The cases appear to almost entirely target Bolsonaro's critics, human rights organizations and activists say.

One case last year involved a sociologist and a businessman who paid for two billboards that insulted Bolsonaro by saying he wasn't worth a gnawed piece of fruit. That investigation was requested by Justice Minister André Mendonça, who called it a crime against the president's reputation. It was dismissed in October.

On Friday night, unsuccessful presidential candidate Ciro Gomes said the federal police are investigating him for calling the president "a thief" in a radio interview in November. The request for the probe was signed by Bolsonaro himself, Gomes said on his social media channels.

"I don't particularly care about this act against me, but I think it is serious that Bolsonaro tries to intimidate opponents and adversaries," the left-leaning Gomes said.

On Monday, police invoked the national security law to force Felipe Neto, a popular YouTuber, to give testimony after he referred to Bolsonaro as "genocidal" in one of his broadcasts. Federal police dismissed

the case two days later amid a public outcry.

Neto, who was named by Time magazine last year as one of the world's 100 most influential people, was also targeted in November with allegations of corrupting minors. Those charges were also dropped.

"From the start, I knew that this attempt at intimidation was not aimed at scaring me. It was to scare the Brazilian people," Neto told The Associated Press by phone.

"I have means to defend myself, but most teachers, journalists and members of civil society do not," added Neto, who this week set up a legal defense fund to help anyone who faces similar charges for criticizing Bolsonaro and needs an attorney.

O Globo said in an editorial Friday that the spirit of the national security law runs counter to Brazil's constitution in the promotion of civil liberties.

"The national security law should be revoked and replaced by a more modern tool that is capable of reconciling the protection of the rule of law and the respect to individual rights," the newspaper said. "Among those are the full — and essential — freedom of speech."

___ Associated Press photojournalist Eraldo Peres in Brasilia contributed to this report.

Sources: Feds have no evidence yet for GA hate crime charge

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal investigators have so far not found evidence that clears the high bar for federal hate crime charges against a man who has been accused of killing eight people at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press.

Seven of the eight people killed were women; six were of Asian descent. The crime has stitched together stigmas about race, gender, migrant work and sex work.

Though investigators have not ruled out ultimately filing hate crime charges, they face legal constraints in doing so. Federal statutes require prosecutors to prove that the victims were targeted because of specific factors, like race, gender identity, religion, national origin or sexual orientation, or the suspect infringed on a federally or constitutionally protected activity. To successfully prosecute a hate crimes case, prosecutors typically seek tangible evidence, such as the suspect expressing racism in text messages, in internet posts or to witnesses.

No such evidence has yet surfaced in the Georgia probe, according to the officials, who have direct knowledge of the investigation into the suspect, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long. They were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity on Friday.

Advocates have said even if the shooter didn't specifically target the victims and because some were Asian, he still could have been acting with bias against them. Three of the women died at the Gold Spa in Atlanta, while the fourth woman died across the street at Aromatherapy Spa. Four other people were killed and one was wounded at Youngs Asian Massage near Woodstock, in Atlanta's northwestern suburbs. Their deaths come as crimes against Asian Americans are spiking.

Officials have identified those killed as: Soon Chung Park, 74; Hyun Jung Grant, 51, whom family members identified by her maiden name, Hyun Jung Kim; Suncha Kim, 69; Yong Ae Yue, 63; Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Daoyou Feng, 44; and Xiaojie Tan, 49, who owned Youngs.

Both federal and local investigators are still looking into the possible motive behind Tuesday's killings.

Most crimes are handled by local prosecutors. Federal officials may get involved when there is a violation of a U.S. statute, like civil rights crimes targeting someone in a federally-protected class — which include race, national origin and religion, among others — as well as crimes that affect interstate commerce or violent crimes involving, for example, a felon in possession of a firearm.

After his arrest, Long told police he had a "sex addiction" and carried out the shootings because he was trying to snuff out the sources of temptation, according to authorities.

Police said the gunman previously visited two of the spas where four of the women were killed and said the suspect equated the businesses to sex, and that drove him to kill. Authorities have said he may have been headed to Florida to carry out a similar attack on "some type of porn industry."

Georgia officials said they were still investigating and everything was still on the table, including possible state hate crime charges.

In a statement Thursday, Long's lawyer, J. Daran Burns, offered condolences to the victims' families. He said he was working on Long's behalf "to investigate the facts and circumstances" surrounding the killings.

Brazil security law being turned on president's critics

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Protesters against Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro defied police in the capital Friday, a day after the latest round of arrests of the leader's critics under a dictatorship-era national security law.

Four demonstrators were detained Thursday after calling Bolsonaro "genocidal" for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and displaying a cartoon depicting the president as a Nazi. But on Friday, police quietly watched an hour-long protest against Bolsonaro staged by about 40 people.

The national security law, which dates from 1983, near the end of the country's military dictatorship, states it is a crime to harm the heads of the three branches of government or expose them to danger. That vague definition has recently been used to detain or investigate Bolsonaro critics.

Geography teacher Katia Garcia said she showed up in front of the president's office Friday because the arrests had inspired her.

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There have been previous news-making charges against prominent critics of the president, including a newspaper columnist, a political cartoonist and a popular YouTube star, but the law is increasingly being employed against ordinary citizens. Courts haven't upheld any of the arrests so far, but lawyers are expressing alarm that the tactic is becoming commonplace.

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___ Associated Press photojournalist Eraldo Peres in Brasilia contributed to this report.

Long dormant volcano comes to life in southwestern Iceland

REYKJAVÍK, Iceland (AP) — A long dormant volcano on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern Iceland flared to life Friday night, spilling lava down two sides in that area's first volcanic eruption in nearly 800 years.

Initial aerial footage, posted on the Facebook page of the Icelandic Meteorological Office, showed a relatively small eruption so far, with two streams of lava running in opposite directions. The glow from the lava could be seen from the outskirts of Iceland's capital, Reykjavík, which is about 32 kilometers (20 miles) away.

The Department of Emergency Management said it was not anticipating evacuations because the volcano is in a remote valley, about 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) from the nearest road.

The Fagradals Mountain volcano had been dormant for 6,000 years, and the Reykjanes Peninsula hadn't seen an eruption of any volcano in 781 years.

There had been signs of a possible eruption recently, with earthquakes occurring daily for the past three weeks. But volcanologists were still taken by surprise because the seismic activity had calmed down before the eruption.

Biden, Harris offer solace, denounce racism in Atlanta visit

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, JEFF AMY and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris offered solace to Asian Americans and denounced the scourge of racism at times hidden "in plain sight" as they visited Atlanta on Friday, just days after a white gunman killed eight people, most of them Asian American women.

Addressing the nation after a roughly 80-minute meeting with Asian American state legislators and other leaders, Biden said it was "heart-wrenching" to listen to their stories of the fear among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders amid what he called a "skyrocketing spike" of harassment and violence against them.

"We have to change our hearts," he said. "Hate can have no safe harbor in America."

Biden called on all Americans to stand up to bigotry when they see it, adding: "Our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit."

"They've been attacked, blamed, scapegoated and harassed; they've been verbally assaulted, physically assaulted, killed," Biden said of Asian Americans during the coronavirus pandemic.

The president also called the shootings an example of a "public health crisis of gun violence in this country," as his administration has come under scrutiny from some in his own party for not moving as swiftly

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as promised on reforming the nation's gun laws.

Harris, the first person of South Asian descent to hold national office, said that while the motive of the shooter remains under investigation, these facts are clear: Six of the eight killed were of Asian descent and seven of them were women.

"Racism is real in America. And it has always been. Xenophobia is real in America, and always has been. Sexism, too," she said. "The president and I will not be silent. We will not stand by. We will always speak out against violence, hate crimes and discrimination, wherever and whenever it occurs."

She added that everyone has "the right to be recognized as an American. Not as the other, not as them. But as us."

Before leaving Washington, Biden declared his support for the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, a bill that would strengthen the government's reporting and response to hate crimes and provide resources to Asian American communities.

Georgia state Rep. Marvin Lim, who was among a group of Asian American leaders who met with Biden and Harris in Atlanta, said the group "didn't really talk about hate crime sentencing and all of these things there's been a lot of discussion around.

"We really talked about the grief people are feeling, the fear people are feeling, the possible responses to that," Lim said. "The discussion felt very affirming."

State Sen. Michelle Au, a Chinese American Democrat who represents parts of Atlanta's northern suburbs, was moved by the presence of Harris, saying: "Not only that she was there listening to us, but that she also understood these issues in a very intimate way, that in some ways you can't teach, that you can't teach that sort of lived experience. So we felt that she was going to be an incredible advocate on our behalf in the White House."

Their trip was planned before the shooting, as part of a victory lap aimed at selling the benefits of pandemic relief legislation. But Biden and Harris instead spent much of their visit consoling a community whose growing voting power helped secure their victory in Georgia and beyond.

Activists have seen a rise of racist attacks. 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.

Biden and Harris both implicitly criticized former President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus."

"For the last year we've had people in positions of incredible power scapegoating Asian Americans," said Harris, "people with the biggest pulpits, spreading this kind of hate."

"We've always known words have consequences," Biden said. "It is the 'coronavirus.' Full stop."

In his first primetime address to the nation as president last Thursday — five days before the Atlanta killings at three metro-area massage businesses — Biden called attacks on Asian Americans "un-American."

Biden also used the visit to tour the headquarters of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where he received a briefing on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic and delivered a pep talk to the agency's scientists.

"We owe you a gigantic debt of gratitude and we will for a long, long, long time," Biden said, adding that under his administration "science is back" driving policy to combat the virus.

Though the originally planned political event to tout the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill has been delayed, Biden still met with Georgia voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams, Democrats' likely 2022 candidate for governor, as Republicans in the state legislature push several proposals to make it harder to vote in the state.

"The battle for the right to vote is never, ever over," Biden said. "It's not over here in this state of Georgia. So we're gonna fight again."

He also met with newly minted Democratic Sens. Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock and Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms.

As the fastest-growing racial demographic in the U.S. electorate, Asian Americans are gaining political influence across the country. In California, two Korean American Republican women made history with their congressional victories. The Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, typically dominated by

Democrats, has its largest roster ever, including Asian American and Pacific Islander members and others who represent significant numbers of Asian Americans.

"We're becoming increasingly more visible and active in the political ecosystem," said Au, a Democrat who represents part of the growing, diversifying suburbs north of Atlanta. Yet, Au said, "What I've heard personally, and what I have felt, is that people sometimes don't tend to listen to us."

Au said a White House spotlight, especially amid tragedy, is welcomed by a community often overshadowed in national conversations about diversity. She noted Trump and other Republicans merely brushed off charges of racism when they dubbed the coronavirus the "China virus" because of its origins.

"To have them talk about it in this way, so publicly, and to say AAPI, or to note that our communities are going through difficult times, is huge," Au said.

As he boarded Air Force One on Friday morning, Biden, who was wearing a mask, stumbled several times up the stairs to the aircraft, before saluting the military officer who greeted him on the tarmac. Jean-Pierre said Biden was "doing 100% fine."

Miller reported from Washington. AP writers Ben Nadler and Bill Barrow in Atlanta contributed.

US, China wrap up testy 1st face-to-face talks under Biden

By MATTHEW LEE and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Top U.S. and Chinese officials wrapped up two days of contentious talks in Alaska on Friday after trading sharp and unusually public barbs over vastly different views of each other and the world in their first face-to-face meeting since President Joe Biden took office.

The two sides finished the meetings after an opening session in which they attacked each other in an unusually public way. The U.S. accused the Chinese delegation of "grandstanding" and Beijing fired back, saying there was a "strong smell of gunpowder and drama" that was entirely the fault of the Americans.

The meetings in Anchorage were a new test in increasingly troubled relations between the two countries, which are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and China's western Xinjiang region, as well as over Taiwan, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

"We got a defensive response," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after the meetings concluded.

"We wanted to share with them the significant concerns that we have about a number of the actions that China has taken, and behaviors exhibiting concerns, shared by our allies and partners," he said. "And we did that. We also wanted to lay out very clearly, our own policies, priorities, and worldview. And we did that too."

In separate comments, Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi said dialogue was the only way to resolve differences, But he also made clear that Beijing had no intention of backing down on any issue.

"China is going to safeguard our national sovereignty, security and our interests to develop China," he said. "It is an irreversible trend," he said.

"We hope the United States is not going to underestimate China's determination to defend its territory, safeguard its people and defend its righteous interests," he said.

As they opened the talks on Thursday, Blinken said the Biden administration is united with its allies in pushing back against Chinese authoritarianism. In response, Yang accused Washington of hypocrisy on human rights and other issues, many of which Blinken mentioned in his comments.

"Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability," Blinken said of China's actions. "That's why they're not merely internal matters, and why we feel an obligation to raise these issues here today."

National security adviser Jake Sullivan amplified the criticism, saying China has undertaken an "assault on basic values."

"We do not seek conflict but we welcome stiff competition," he said.

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Yang responded angrily by demanding the U.S. stop pushing its own version of democracy at a time when the United States itself has been roiled by domestic discontent. He also accused the U.S. of failing to deal with its own human rights problems and took issue with what he said was "condescension" from Blinken, Sullivan and other U.S. officials.

"We believe that it is important for the United States to change its own image and to stop advancing its own democracy in the rest of the world," Yang said. "Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States."

"China will not accept unwarranted accusations from the U.S. side," he said, adding that recent developments had plunged relations "into a period of unprecedented difficulty" that "has damaged the interests of our two peoples."

"There is no way to strangle China," he said.

Blinken appeared to be annoyed by the tenor and length of the comments, which went on for more than 15 minutes. He said his impressions from speaking with world leaders and on his just-concluded trip to Japan and South Korea were entirely different from the Chinese position.

"I'm hearing deep satisfaction that the United States is back, that we're reengaged," Blinken retorted. "I'm also hearing deep concern about some of the actions your government is taking."

Underscoring the animosity, the State Department blasted the Chinese delegation for violating an agreed upon two-minute time limit for opening statements and suggested it "seem(ed) to have arrived intent on grandstanding, focused on public theatrics and dramatics over substance."

"America's approach will be undergirded by confidence in our dealing with Beijing — which we are doing from a position of strength — even as we have the humility to know that we are a country eternally striving to become a more perfect union," it said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, speaking later in Beijing, said Blinken and Sullivan had provoked Chinese officials into making a "solemn response" after U.S. officials made "groundless attacks" against China.

"It was the U.S. side that ... provoked the dispute in the first place, so the two sides had a strong smell of gunpowder and drama from the beginning in the opening remarks. It was not the original intention of the Chinese side," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

U.S.-China ties have been torn for years, and the Biden administration has yet to signal whether it's ready or willing to back away from the hard-line stances taken under Donald Trump.

Just a day before the meeting, Blinken had announced new sanctions over Beijing's crackdown on pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong. In response, China stepped up its rhetoric opposing U.S. interference in domestic affairs and complained directly about it.

"Is this a decision made by the United States to try to gain some advantage in dealing with China?" State Councilor Wang Yi asked. "Certainly this is miscalculated and only reflects the vulnerability and weakness inside the United States and it will not shake China's position or resolve on those issues."

Trump had taken pride in forging what he saw as a strong relationship with Chinese leader 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.

Lee reported from Washington.

4 men linked to Proud Boys charged in plot to attack Capitol

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

Four men described as leaders of the far-right Proud Boys have been charged in the U.S. Capitol riots, as an indictment ordered unsealed on Friday presents fresh evidence of how federal officials believe group members planned and carried out a coordinated attack to stop Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's electoral victory.

So far, at least 19 leaders, members or associates of the neo-fascist Proud Boys have been charged

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in federal court with offenses related to the Jan. 6 riots. The latest indictment suggests the Proud Boys deployed a much larger contingent in Washington, with over 60 users "participating in" an encrypted messaging channel for group members that was created a day before the riots.

The Proud Boys abandoned an earlier channel and created the new "Boots on the Ground" channel after police arrested the group's top leader, Enrique Tarrío, in Washington. Tarrío was arrested on Jan. 4 and charged with vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church during a protest in December. He was ordered to stay out of the District of Columbia.

Tarrío hasn't been charged in connection with the riots, but the latest indictment refers to him by his title as Proud Boys' chairman.

Ethan Nordean and Joseph Biggs, two of the four defendants charged in the latest indictment, were arrested several weeks ago on separate but related charges. The new indictment also charges Zachary Rehl and Charles Donohoe.

All four defendants are charged with conspiring to impede Congress' certification of the Electoral College vote. Other charges in the indictment include obstruction of an official proceeding, obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder and disorderly conduct.

Nordean, 30, of Auburn, Washington, was a Proud Boys chapter president and member of the group's national "Elders Council." Biggs, 37, of Ormond Beach, Florida, is a self-described Proud Boys organizer. Rehl, 35, of Philadelphia, and Donohoe, 33, of North Carolina, serve as presidents of their local Proud Boys chapters, according to the indictment.

A lawyer for Biggs declined to comment. Attorneys for the other three men didn't immediately respond to messages seeking comment Friday.

Proud Boys members, who describe themselves as a politically incorrect men's club for "Western chauvinists," have frequently engaged in street fights with antifascist activists at rallies and protests. Vice Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, who founded the Proud Boys in 2016, sued the Southern Poverty Law Center for labeling it as a hate group.

The Proud Boys met at the Washington Monument around 10 a.m. on Jan. 6 and marched to the Capitol before then-President Donald Trump finished addressing thousands of supporters near the White House.

Around two hours later, just before Congress convened a joint session to certify the election results, a group of Proud Boys followed a crowd of people who breached barriers at a pedestrian entrance to the Capitol grounds, the indictment says. Several Proud Boys also entered the Capitol building itself after the mob smashed windows and forced open doors.

At 3:38 p.m., Donohoe announced on the "Boots on the Ground" channel that he and others were "re-grouping with a second force" as some rioters began to leave the Capitol, according to the indictment.

"This was not simply a march. This was an incredible attack on our institutions of government," Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason McCullough said during a recent hearing for Nordean's case.

Prosecutors have said the Proud Boys arranged for members to communicate using specific frequencies on Baofeng radios. The Chinese-made devices can be programmed for use on hundreds of frequencies, making them difficult for outsiders to eavesdrop.

After Tarrío's arrest, Donohoe expressed concern that their encrypted communications could be "compromised" when police searched the group chairman's phone, according to the new indictment. In a Jan. 4 post on a newly created channel, Donohoe warned members that they could be "looking at Gang charges" and wrote, "Stop everything immediately," the indictment says.

"This comes from the top," he added.

A day before the riots, Biggs posted on the "Boots on the Ground" channel that the group had a "plan" for the night before and the day of the riots, according to the indictment.

In Nordean's case, a federal judge accused prosecutors of backtracking on their claims that he instructed Proud Boys members to split up into smaller groups and directed a "strategic plan" to breach the Capitol.

"That's a far cry from what I heard at the hearing today," U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell said on March 3.

Howell concluded that Nordean was extensively involved in "pre-planning" for the events of Jan. 6 and that he and other Proud Boys "were clearly prepared for a violent confrontation" that day. However, she

said evidence that Nordean directed other Proud Boys members to break into the building is "weak to say the least" and ordered him freed from jail before trial.

On Friday, Howell ordered Proud Boys member Christopher Worrell detained in federal custody pending trial on riot-related charges. Prosecutors say Worrell traveled to Washington and coordinated with Proud Boys leading up to the siege.

"Wearing tactical gear and armed with a canister of pepper spray gel marketed as 67 times more powerful than hot sauce, Worrell advanced, shielded himself behind a wooden platform and other protestors, and discharged the gel at the line of officers," prosecutors wrote in a court filing.

Defense attorney John Pierce argued his client wasn't aiming at officers and was only there in the crowd to exercise his free speech rights.

"He's a veteran. He loves his country," Pierce said.

Kunzelman reported from College Park, Maryland. Associated Press writer Michael Balsamo contributed to this report.

Judge won't move trial in Floyd's death; 13th juror picked

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A judge said Friday he won't delay or move the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death over concerns that a \$27 million settlement for Floyd's family could taint the jury pool, but he'll allow limited evidence from a 2019 arrest.

Jury selection in the trial of Derek Chauvin will stretch into a third week after attorneys seated just one additional juror Friday. The 13th juror picked is a woman who said she'd seen only clips of the video of Floyd's arrest and needs to learn more about what happened beforehand.

Hennepin County Judge Pete Cahill said court would resume Monday to pick two more jurors -- for a total of 15, one more than expected. Asked about the apparent discrepancy, a court spokesman cited a November order from Cahill that had said up to 16 jurors -- 12 to deliberate and four alternates -- would be seated.

Seven jurors had been picked last week when the Minneapolis City Council announced it had unanimously approved the massive payout to settle a civil rights lawsuit over Floyd's death. Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, subsequently sought to halt or move the trial, saying the settlement timing was deeply disturbing and jeopardized Chauvin's chance for a fair trial. Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter.

But Cahill, who called the timing "unfortunate," said he believed a delay would do nothing to stem the problem of pretrial publicity, and that there's no place in Minnesota untouched by that publicity.

The judge handed the defense a victory by ruling that the jury can hear evidence from Floyd's 2019 arrest, but only information possibly pertaining to the cause of his death in 2020. He acknowledged several similarities between the two encounters, including that Floyd swallowed drugs after police confronted him.

The judge previously said the earlier arrest could not be admitted, but he reconsidered after drugs were found in January in a second search of the police SUV that the four officers attempted to put Floyd in last year. The defense argues that Floyd's drug use contributed to his death.

Cahill said he'd allow medical evidence of Floyd's physical reactions, such as his dangerously high blood pressure when he was examined by a paramedic in 2019, and a short clip of an officer's body camera video. He said Floyd's "emotional behavior," such as calling out to his mother, won't be admitted.

But Cahill said he doesn't plan to allow the testimony of a forensic psychiatrist for the prosecution. Floyd said he had claustrophobia and resisted getting into the squad car before the fatal encounter last year, and the state wanted Dr. Sarah Vinson to testify that his actions were consistent with a normal person experiencing severe stress, as opposed to faking or resisting arrest.

The judge said he would reconsider allowing her as a rebuttal witness if the defense somehow opens the door, but allowing her to testify could usher in all of the evidence from Floyd's 2019 arrest.

"Clearly there is a cause of death issue here, and it is highly contested," Cahill said, noting that both

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arrests involved Floyd's cardiac problems and ingesting drugs.

The county medical examiner classified Floyd's death as a homicide in an initial summary that said he "had a cardiopulmonary arrest while being restrained by police." Floyd was declared dead at a hospital 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) from where he was restrained.

The full report said he died of "cardiopulmonary arrest, complicating law enforcement subdual, restraint, and neck compression." A summary report listed fentanyl intoxication and recent methamphetamine use under "other significant conditions" but not under "cause of death."

The earlier arrest lends more weight to the defense plan to argue that Floyd put his life in danger by swallowing drugs again and that, combined with his health problems, caused his death, said Ted Sampsell-Jones, a professor at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law.

"Jurors are not supposed to be influenced by that sort of thing, but they are human," Sampsell-Jones said.

Floyd, who was Black, was declared dead May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee on his neck for about nine minutes while he was handcuffed and pleading that he couldn't breathe. Floyd's death, captured on a widely seen bystander video, set off weeks of sometimes violent protests across the country and led to a national reckoning on racial justice.

The 13 jurors seated through Friday are split by race: Seven are white, four are Black and two are multiracial, according to the court.

It's unclear which jurors would be alternates. Legal experts said it's almost always the last people chosen, but the court said that wouldn't necessarily be the case for Chauvin's jury. Spokesman Kyle Christopherson said alternates could be chosen "many different ways," but declined to give details.

"You can see in this case why (Cahill) might want to do something different, like draw numbers from a hat," said Sampsell-Jones. He said the judge needs all jurors to pay attention and wouldn't want anyone to learn they are alternates through the media.

The woman picked Friday — a white woman in her 50s — said she's never seen police officers use more force with Black people or minorities than with white people, and that there's nothing to fear from police if people cooperate and comply with commands. She stopped short of saying an uncooperative person deserves to be harmed.

"If you're not listening to what the commands are, obviously something else needs to happen to resolve the situation," she said of officers' actions. "I don't know how far the steps need to go."

Several potential jurors were dismissed Friday, including a college student who attended protests that called for Chauvin and the other officers to be fired and charged, and one man who said he'd have a hard time believing testimony of Minneapolis police officers, because he believes they might try to cover up something.

Opening statements are March 29 if the jury is complete.

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

This story has been corrected to show the court has not said if the final two jurors chosen will be the alternates.

Oral Roberts shocks Ohio State, first big upset of NCAAs

By CLIFF BRUNT AP Sports Writer

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. (AP) — Ohio State's players were dancing around in the moments before tipoff against Oral Roberts, relaxed and full of swagger.

The Buckeyes aren't dancing anymore. The 15th-seeded Golden Eagles pulled off the first major upset of the first NCAA Tournament in two years, holding off second-seeded Ohio State 75-72 in overtime on Friday.

"When they rank them, it was only just a number at the end of the day," said Kevin Obanor, who led Oral Roberts with 30 points and 11 rebounds. "We put our shoes on just as the other team puts their shoes on. We just had the mindset of, 'Show us that you deserve to be No. 2,' and we came out with a

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lot of confidence.”

Oral Roberts got poised, impeccable performances from its two stars, Obanor and guard Max Abmas, to become the ninth 15 seed to win a first-round game and the first since Middle Tennessee shocked Michigan State in 2016. Last year’s tournament was called off because of the pandemic.

Obanor scored seven of Oral Roberts’ 11 points in overtime, including two free throws with 13 seconds left. Abmas, the nation’s leading scorer, had 29 points.

“Their two players that obviously concerned us were terrific, so give them, their coaches, their players, their program, their university a lot of credit for this win,” Ohio State coach Chris Holtmann said. “We had no illusions that this was going to be by any stretch anything other than a really challenging game, and it obviously was that from the very jump.”

Ohio State could have tied it in the closing seconds of overtime, but Duane Washington Jr.’s open 3-pointer from straight away bounced off the side of the rim, and Oral Roberts celebrated its first tournament win since 1974.

The Golden Eagles’ roster is full of lightly recruited players who found their way to the small, private Christian school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Summit League champions bowed their heads in a prayer circle after their victory over the Big Ten power.

“I know growing up, all my life, I was always like the underdog,” Obanor said. “The school is not a big school. Just to prove people wrong, it’s a blessing just to have people that are really committed and believe that we’re the better team.”

The Golden Eagles (17-10) will play seventh-seeded Florida in the South Region on Sunday.

E.J. Liddell had 23 points and 14 rebounds to lead the Buckeyes (21-10). Washington had 18 points and 10 rebounds but made just 7 of 21 shots.

Oral Roberts scored the game’s first seven points, including a 3-pointer by Abmas from the logo that drew a collective “Ooooh!” from the socially distanced crowd.

The Buckeyes led by eight before the Golden Eagles rallied. Abmas hit a 3-pointer with about five minutes left in the first half to give Oral Roberts a 26-25 lead, prompting a chant of “O-R-U!” He hit another 3 moments later to force an Ohio State timeout. He made 5 of 7 3-pointers in the first half and had 18 points at the break as the Golden Eagles led 36-33.

The Summit League champions led by seven in the second half before Ohio State rallied to take a 60-58 lead on a pullup jumper by CJ Walker with just under five minutes to play.

Obanor was fouled with 14 seconds to play, and he made both free throws to tie the game at 64. Washington missed a step-back jumper in the closing seconds, and the Buckeyes had no answer for Obanor in the extra session.

“This is obviously a really, really bitter end to a terrific season,” Holtmann said. “We’ll own that and accept it and we’ll move forward.”

MAKING FREEBIES

Oral Roberts entered the game with a chance to set the Division I record for free-throw shooting percentage in a season. The Division I record is 82.18%, set by Harvard in 1984. Oral Roberts entered the game at 82.35%, but made 14 of 18 in the game to slide to 82.17%.

KNEELING

Five Ohio State players knelt during the playing of the national anthem, one of many such demonstrations during the tournament.

STAT LINES

Ohio State outrebounded Oral Roberts 49-32, but the Golden Eagles balanced that out by committing six turnovers to the Buckeyes’ 16.

QUOTABLE

Oral Roberts coach Paul Mills on getting ready for Florida: “I mean, the reality is you have to turn around and you’re about to play another one, so the celebration better be pretty quick. If you spend all your time looking back at your wedding day videos, you’re probably not going to have a very good marriage.”

Follow Cliff Brunt on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CliffBruntAP>

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and updated bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket>

Trump's Mar-a-Lago partially closed due to COVID outbreak

By JILL COLVIN and TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, has been partially closed after staff members tested positive for the coronavirus.

That's according to several people, including one familiar with club operations, who said Mar-a-Lago had "partially closed" a section of the club and quarantined some of its workers "out of an abundance of caution." The person spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the situation by name.

An email sent to members said that service had been temporarily suspended in the club's dining room and at its beach club because some staff members had recently tested positive. It said the club had undertaken "all appropriate response measures," including sanitizing affected areas," and that banquet and event services remain open.

"The health and safety of our members and staff is our highest priority," it read.

The Florida Department of Health did not immediately respond to a phone call and email.

Trump moved to Mar-a-Lago after leaving Washington in January, and has spent the weeks since then laying low, golfing, dining with friends, meeting with Republican party leaders and plotting his political future as he considers running again in 2024.

Trump was hospitalized with COVID-19 last fall and has since been vaccinated against the virus.

Mar-a-Lago was the site of his first known exposure more than a year ago. A senior Brazilian official tested positive last year after spending time at Mar-a-Lago, where he posed for a photo next to Trump and attended a family birthday party.

The Trump White House was hit with several subsequent outbreaks after it flouted virus precautions by resisting mask-wearing and continuing to hold large events.

The club in Palm Beach has been a flurry of activity in recent weeks, hosting events and fundraisers, including one to benefit rescue dogs. Trump unexpectedly dropped by the event last week.

In January, Palm Beach County issued a warning to Mar-a-Lago's management after a New Year's Eve party that violated an ordinance requiring employees and guests to wear masks. Video of the party posted online by Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., showed that few of the 500 guests wore masks as they crowded the dance floor while rapper Vanilla Ice, Beach Boys co-founder Mike Love and singer Taylor Dayne performed. The club was told future violations would result in fines of \$15,000.

The former president was not present at the party. _____

Spencer reported from Fort Lauderdale. Associated Press writer Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

Slain spa worker toiled tirelessly to support her family

By CANDICE CHOI and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Hyun Jung Grant loved disco and club music, often strutting or moonwalking while doing household chores and jamming with her sons to tunes blasting in the car.

The single mother found ways to enjoy herself despite working "almost every day" to support two sons, said the older son, 22-year-old Randy Park.

"I learned how to moonwalk because, like, I saw her moonwalking while vacuuming when I was a kid," Park said.

On Tuesday night, Park was at home playing video games when he heard a gunman had opened fire at the Atlanta massage business where his mother worked. He rushed to the scene and then to a police sta-

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tion to find out more information. But it was through word of mouth that he learned his mother was dead.

Grant, 51, was among eight people killed by gunfire at three Atlanta-area massage businesses. The Fulton County medical examiner released her identity Friday along with those of three other victims: Soon Chung Park 74; Suncha Kim, 69; and Yong Ae Yue, 63.

Authorities in nearby Cherokee County had previously identified the others as Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Daoyou Feng, 44; and Xiaojie Tan, 49, who owned one of the massage businesses.

Seven of the slain were women, and six of them were of Asian descent. Police charged a 21-year-old white man with the killings, saying he was solely responsible for the deadliest U.S. mass shooting since 2019.

The situation has been harrowing for Park, who said he has not been able to claim his mother's body from the medical examiner's office because of a complication with her last name, which is legally Grant. Park said that name is from a marriage he does not recall, and he can't find papers showing a separation to prove that he is the next of kin.

Authorities have said Robert Aaron Long, who is charged with eight counts of murder, told them he wasn't motivated by race. Park dismissed the idea that the shootings weren't fueled by anti-Asian sentiment. Still, he said that his mother raised him to believe that people are fundamentally good, though "sometimes, things go horribly wrong."

It wasn't immediately clear which of the Atlanta businesses employed Grant.

Her job was a sensitive subject, Park said, noting the stigma often associated with massage businesses. She told her sons that they should tell others she worked doing makeup with her friends.

Ultimately, Park said, he didn't care what she did for work.

"She loved me and my brother enough to work for us, to dedicate her whole life," he said. "That's enough."

Michels owned a business installing security systems, a trade he learned after moving to the Atlanta area more than 25 years ago.

He'd been talking about switching to a new line of work, but never got the chance. He was fatally shot at Youngs Asian Massage on Tuesday along with three others.

"From what I understand, he was at the spa that day doing some work for them," said Michels' younger brother, John Michels of Commerce, Michigan.

Paul Michels also might have been talking with the spa's owner about how the business operates, his brother said, because he had been thinking about opening a spa himself.

"His age caught up to him. You get to a point where you get tired of climbing up and down ladders," John Michels said. "He was actually looking to start his own massage spa. That's what he was talking about last year."

Paul Michels grew up in Detroit in a large family where he was the seventh of nine children. His brother John was No. 8.

Though they were born 2 1/2 years apart, "he was basically my twin," John Michels said. Both enlisted in the Army after high school, with Paul joining the infantry.

A few years after leaving the military, Paul followed his brother to the Atlanta area in 1995 for a job doing low-voltage electrical work, installing phones and security systems. He also met his wife, Bonnie, and they were married more than 20 years.

"He was a good, hard-working man who would do what he could do to help people," John Michels said. "He'd loan you money if you needed it sometimes. You never went away from his place hungry."

They day before she was killed, Yaun dropped by Rita Barron's boutique to say hello and show photos of her 8-month-old daughter.

"She told me, 'I'm happy. I want another baby,'" said Barron, who had gotten to know Yaun from eating at the Waffle House where the new mother worked.

Yuan and her new husband returned Tuesday to the shopping center where Gabby's Boutique is located, only this time they headed next door to Youngs Asian Massage. They had planned it as a day for Yaun to relax while a relative watched their baby girl.

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Barron and her husband, Alejandro Acosta, heard gunshots from inside the boutique and later noticed that a bullet had gone through the wall. She called 911, and after police arrived Acosta watched them bring people out of the business, some bleeding and wounded. Among those who walked out was Yaun's husband, unhurt but distraught. His wife had been killed.

"As you can imagine, he's totally destroyed, without strength, doesn't want to talk with anybody," said Acosta, who added that he had spoken twice with Yaun's husband since the shootings.

Family members said Yaun and her husband were first-time customers at Youngs, eager for a chance to unwind.

"They're innocent. They did nothing wrong," Yaun's weeping mother, Margaret Rushing, told WAGA-TV. "I just don't understand why he took my daughter."

This story has been edited to correct the name of Youngs Asian Massage.

Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia. Associated Press writer Michael Warren in Atlanta contributed to this report.

New York Times: Current aide accuses Cuomo of sex harassment

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — A woman who currently works in the office of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo says he looked down her shirt and made suggestive remarks to her and another aide, according to a newspaper report published Friday.

Alyssa McGrath told The New York Times that Cuomo called her beautiful in Italian, referred to her and her female colleague as "mingle mamas," asked why she wasn't wearing a wedding ring and inquired about her divorce.

"He has a way of making you feel very comfortable around him, almost like you're his friend," Ms. McGrath told the newspaper. "But then you walk away from the encounter or conversation, in your head going, 'I can't believe I just had that interaction with the governor of New York.'"

McGrath is the first current aide to come forward publicly to join mounting allegations of sexual misconduct against Cuomo. His behavior with women is the subject of an investigation overseen by the state's attorney general and a separate impeachment investigation by the New York Assembly, the state's lower legislative chamber.

McGrath told The New York Times that her female colleague was the same woman the governor is accused of groping in the Executive Mansion, an allegation that was revealed in a report last week in the Times Union of Albany.

That aide hasn't been identified publicly. McGrath said the woman spoke with her in detail about what happened to her after the Times Union report was published.

Cuomo, a Democrat, has repeatedly denied allegations of sexual misconduct. A lawyer for him told The New York Times that Cuomo has indeed used Italian phrases like "ciao bella," which means "hello beautiful" in Italian, and greeted both men and women alike with hugs and a kiss.

"None of this is remarkable, although it may be old-fashioned," lawyer Rita Glavin said. "He has made clear that he has never made inappropriate advances or inappropriately touched anyone."

McGrath did not accuse the governor of inappropriate touching, but described a time when she was sitting alone with Cuomo for a dictation session when she caught him gazing at her.

"I put my head down waiting for him to start speaking, and he didn't start speaking," she told The Times. "So I looked up to see what was going on. And he was blatantly looking down my shirt."

She said Cuomo then asked "What's on your necklace?"

Assembly Democratic Speaker Carl Heastie on Friday said the body's impeachment investigation will examine "all credible allegations" against the governor, including whether he used his office to sexually harass or assault employees.

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Other subjects under investigation, Heastie said, will include whether Cuomo withheld information on COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes from the public, and his administration's handling of safety concerns at a newly constructed bridge over the Hudson River.

"Your charge is to determine whether evidence exists to support a finding that the governor has engaged in conduct, as governor, that violates the laws of the State of New York and whether such violations constitute serious and corrupt conduct in office that may justify articles of impeachment," Heastie wrote in a Friday letter to Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Lavine.

Other aspects of the probe, including how long it will take and how public its proceedings or findings will be, are still being determined.

The Assembly earlier this week hired the Manhattan law firm Davis Polk & Wardwell to assist with the investigation.

The pace of the inquiry has frustrated some lawmakers who want Cuomo out now.

"It's pretty strange to me and I think that we are needing to ask a lot of questions here," Assemblywoman Yuh-Line Niou, a Democrat. "With any kind of lack of transparency or lack of access to any process, one has to ask about the motivations and one has to ask: Why?"

Meanwhile, polling suggests that while Cuomo's support slipped following the allegation of groping at the Executive Mansion, his political base hasn't abandoned him.

A Quinnipiac University poll of 905 registered voters found that while 43% believe he should resign, 36% of women polled said he should quit, and 23% of Democrats wanted him to resign.

Among respondents of all political affiliations, 36% said Cuomo should be impeached and removed from office. The poll was conducted before McGrath's allegations were made public.

Cuomo says he never touched anyone inappropriately. He has apologized, though, for what he said were attempts to engage in office banter that he now realizes offended women who worked for him.

An attorney for one of Cuomo's accusers, Charlotte Bennett, has said she won't cooperate with the Assembly's inquiry because of questions about potential political interference.

Bennett and several other women who have accused Cuomo of harassment have already been interviewed by attorneys working for Attorney General Letitia James.

Federal prosecutors are also scrutinizing whether Cuomo's administration misled the public or the U.S. Justice Department about COVID-19 fatalities at nursing homes.

Amid border surge, confusion reigns over Biden policies

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

TIJUANA, Mexico (AP) — It took less than a month for 200 tents to fill every spot in a Mexican plaza at the busiest border crossing with the United States.

At the camp in Tijuana, across the border from San Diego, some 1,500 migrants line up for hot meals under a canopy-covered kitchen, children play soccer and volunteers in orange jackets rotate on security patrol. People pay to use the bathroom at a pharmacy or travel agency across the street and to shower at a hotel on the corner.

Badly misinformed, the migrants harbor false hope that President Joe Biden will open entry to the United States briefly and without notice. Or they think he may announce a plan that will put them first in line to claim asylum, though he hasn't said anything to support that theory.

Biden ended some hardline border policies of his predecessor, Donald Trump, proposed a pathway to citizenship for people in the U.S. illegally and promised in an executive order to "create a humane asylum system." But neither he nor his aides have outlined the new approach to asylum or said when it will be unveiled, creating an information void and giving rise to rumors that migrants would be allowed in. Amid sharply higher migration flows, confusion and skepticism surround Biden's insistence that it's not the time to come to the border.

"The camp is a center for disinformation," said Edgar Benjamin Paz, a Honduran man whose family's tent is one of the first in an unsanctioned line to seek asylum. "No one knows what's going on."

The camp was established after the Biden administration announced on Feb. 12 that asylum-seekers

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waiting in Mexico for court dates could be released in the United States while their cases wind through the system. It extends only to an estimated 26,000 asylum-seekers with active cases under Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy, which Biden halted. As of Monday, 2,114 people in the program had been admitted to the U.S. at crossings in San Diego and in the Texas cities of El Paso and Brownsville.

Paz, who fled Honduras with his wife and two children after a gang demanded their accounting business follow its orders, said migrants wrongly interpreted the February announcement to mean that the border was "open."

U.S. authorities encountered migrants at the border more than 100,000 times in February, the first six-figure total since a four-month streak in 2019. There's been a surge of families and children traveling alone, who enjoy more legal protections.

Almost everyone at the Tijuana camp has been in Mexico for months or years. They include Haitians who started arriving in Tijuana in 2016 as well as Mexican and Central American families fleeing violence, poverty and natural disasters.

Cristina, a Mexican woman who declined to provide her last name because of fears for her safety, passes days at her tent with her 13- and 4-year-old daughters while her husband sells shaved ice. The family sleeps in a rented room at night.

"We want to see if they open up, see if they give us some news, see if they respond to our pleas," said Cristina, 39, whose family fled violence in Mexico's Guerrero state and arrived in Tijuana in June. "Nothing is clear."

Biden, in interview this week with ABC News, said his message to migrants was: "Don't leave your town or city or community." Aides repeatedly note that most people encountered by the Border Patrol are quickly expelled from the U.S. under pandemic-related powers that deny an opportunity to seek asylum.

"We are working to repair what has been an unprepared and dismantled system," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday when asked about new migrant camps. "It's going to take some time. Our policy is that we're obviously going to continue to make sure we're working through our laws and the border is not open."

Biden is contending with smugglers whose business relies on convincing people that now is a good time to cross, Republican adversaries promoting a narrative of a border in crisis, and exemptions from pandemic-related expulsions for unaccompanied children and people deemed vulnerable by U.S. authorities.

The rise in children arriving alone has sent authorities scrambling for temporary housing and processing space, including at the Dallas Convention Center.

In Tijuana, Erika Pinheiro, litigation and policy director of Al Otro Lado, a group that provides legal services to migrants, has spoken to crowds at the camp and struggled to dispel disinformation because the Biden administration doesn't yet have an asylum plan.

"All I can say is they're coming up with a plan, and they're working on it, and it's going to take time," Pinheiro said.

She wants to say that waiting at the camp won't help but, expecting pushback, has held off.

"If you're telling people what they don't want to hear and others are telling people what they do want to hear, telling them the truth is of limited utility," Pinheiro said.

People driving by offer clothes and diapers from their car windows. A tiny number of migrants wear donated T-shirts that say, "Biden. Please let us in!" It's not clear who distributed them. There is a large "Biden for President" flag outside one tent.

Casa de Luz, a support group for LGBTQ migrants in Tijuana, serves two free hot meals a day, down from three when crowds were smaller.

So far, Mexican authorities have given no indication they plan to close the camp. It's at the entrance to a pedestrian bridge leading to San Diego that has been closed since the pandemic struck.

Ramon Diaz, a 49-year-old Cuban who paid a smuggler \$20,000 to guide him from French Guiana to Tijuana, says the camp is the closest he can get to the United States for now. He's staying put.

"We don't know what's going to happen," he said. "(Biden) said he was going to help migrants. We have lots of faith in God and in him."

Georgia church disowns suspect, says he betrayed faith

By LUIS ANDRÉS HENAO, GARY FIELDS and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

The church attended by the white man charged with killing eight people at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, most of them women of Asian descent, condemned the shootings Friday and said they run contrary to the gospel and the church's teachings.

Crabapple First Baptist Church in Milton, Georgia, also announced in a statement that it plans to remove 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long from its membership because it "can no longer affirm that he is truly a regenerate believer in Jesus Christ."

Previously the church had only issued a brief statement expressing condolences, without mentioning Long. It also shut down its social media accounts and made its website private.

On Friday it said those measures were taken to protect the safety of its congregants.

Congregants were "distracted" when they learned the alleged shooter was a member of the community, the statement said. His family has belonged to the church for many years.

"We watched Aaron grow up and accepted him into church membership when he made his own profession of faith in Jesus Christ," it said.

"These unthinkable and egregious murders directly contradict his own confession of faith in Jesus and the gospel."

Investigators are still trying to discover what compelled Long to commit the worst mass killing in the United States in almost two years.

Police say he told them he was not racially motivated and claimed to have a "sex addiction," and he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation.

Those statements caused widespread uproar and skepticism given the locations and that six of the eight victims were women of Asian descent.

Crabapple First Baptist said it would continue to grieve, mourn and pray for the families of the victims and that it deeply regrets, "the fear and pain Asian-Americans are experiencing as a result of Aaron's inexcusable actions."

"No blame can be placed upon the victims," Crabapple First Baptist said. "He alone is responsible for his evil actions and desires."

The church also said it does not teach that acts of violence are acceptable against "certain ethnicities or against women" or that women are responsible for men's sexual sin against them.

"Murder, especially, is a heinous evil and grievous sin. We also explicitly denounce any and all forms of hatred or violence against Asians or Asian-Americans."

Assaults against Asian Americans have risen across the country during the coronavirus pandemic. The virus was first identified in China, and former President Donald Trump and others have used racially charged terms to describe it.

The church said it is cooperating with law enforcement and praying for "both earthly justice and divine justice."

Tyler Bayless, who lived along with Long at an addiction recovery facility in Roswell, Georgia, for at least six months through early 2020, described him as "a little bit socially awkward but not standoffish or quiet." Long asked that he pray for him at least a couple of times, Bayless said, but never imposed his beliefs on others.

"He had some interesting religious beliefs, I'm sure, but he was never very overtly pushy about that sort of thing. Like he was never like, 'I've got to save your soul,'" Bayless said.

Bayless recalled several occasions when Long said he lapsed and went to a massage business, prompting extreme self-loathing, guilt and public confession that he feared he might harm himself. Long once asked him to hold on to a hunting knife, Bayless added.

"He said, 'You know, I went to one of these places. I feel like I'm falling out of God's grace,'" Bayless said.

"I mean, this was the kind of pain that he was in because of what his religious beliefs led him to think

about the acts that he was engaging in.”

Bayless also said Long tried to limit his social media use to avoid what he saw as sources of temptation to sin.

Joshua Grubbs, a professor of clinical psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio who has researched the intersection of sexual behaviors, religion and morality, said that especially in the United States, men from conservative religious backgrounds may be prone to interpreting “just a little bit of sexual behavior that violates their morals as an addiction.”

But there’s no evidence that those sexual behaviors would predispose someone to violence against others, he said.

“The notion that ‘I have a sex addiction, I feel so bad about it, I am going to go out and kill eight people,’ I just don’t buy it,” said Grubbs, who has also treated people with the problem. “It’s not true to my experience as a researcher or a clinical psychologist.”

Grubbs counsels religious leaders on how to discuss sex, pornography and “out-of-control sexual behaviors” and advises against using language that can cause or worsen feelings of depression and shame.

“I have never once encountered a religious leader that suggested” that a cure for the behavior is to “go murder the people” who make it possible. “I have never heard that. It’s an absurd premise.”

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Myanmar garment workers urge global brands to denounce coup

By ANNE D’INNOCENZIO and ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Tin Tin Wei used to toil 11 hours a day, six days week sewing jackets at a factory in Myanmar. But she hasn’t stitched a single garment since a coup in February.

Instead, the 26-year-old union organizer has been protesting in the streets — and trying to bring international pressure to bear on the newly installed junta.

Her union, the Federation of Garment Workers in Myanmar, and others have been staging general strikes to protest the coup and are urging major international brands like H&M and Mango, which source some of their products in Myanmar, to denounce the takeover and put more pressure on factories to protect workers from being fired or harassed — or worse arrested and killed for participating in the protests.

“If we go back to work and if we work for the system, our future is in the darkness, and we will lose our labor rights and even our human rights,” said Tin Tin Wei, who has been a clothing factory worker since age 13.

The response from companies so far has been mixed. Only a few have said they would curtail their business in Myanmar. Most others have put out statements that stop short of taking action, saying that while they denounce the coup, they want to support the workers by providing them with jobs.

Tin Tin Wei’s union and the Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar have also been demanding comprehensive international sanctions — not the targeted sanctions some have imposed — to bring down the junta that ousted the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

As international sanctions were dropped in the mid-2010s when Myanmar began shifting toward democracy after decades of military rule and started to set some labor standards, Western brands looking to diversify their sourcing were attracted to the country’s cheap labor. Broad sanctions now would cripple that burgeoning clothing industry, which has been growing rapidly in recent years before the coronavirus pandemic cut orders and eliminated jobs.

Comprehensive sanctions could wreck the livelihoods of more than 600,000 garment workers, but some union leaders say they would rather see massive layoffs than endure military oppression.

“I need to do some sort of sacrifice in the short term for the long term for our next generation,” said Tin Tin Wei, who is the sole breadwinner in her family and has been receiving food donations.

The civil disobedience movement, or CDM as it is known, has included railway workers, truck drivers,

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hospital, bank employees and many others determined to stifle the economy.

The aim is "no participation with the junta at all," Sein Htay, a migrant labor organizer who returned to Myanmar from Thailand said in an emailed comment. "We believe that CDM is really working. So we are motivated to continue."

But violent crackdowns by Myanmar security forces against protesters including garment workers are escalating. Troops shot and killed at least 38 people Sunday in an industrial suburb of Yangon — an area dominated by clothing factories — after Chinese-owned factories were set on fire. Tens of thousands of workers and their families were seen fleeing the area in the days that followed.

The garment industry plays a key role in Myanmar's economy, particularly the export sector. Roughly a third of Myanmar's total merchandising exports come from textiles and apparel, worth \$4.59 billion in 2018. That's up from 9%, or \$900 million, in 2012 as international sanctions were dropped, according to the latest data from the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar.

Myanmar's apparel exports mostly go to the European Union, Japan and South Korea because of favorable trade agreements. The U.S. accounts for 5.5% of Myanmar's exports, with clothing, footwear and luggage representing the bulk of that, according to garment trade expert Sheng Lu.

But Myanmar still accounts for a tiny share — less than 0.1% — in U.S. and European Union fashion companies' total sourcing networks. And there are plenty of other alternatives for brands.

Despite this, many are taking a wait-and-see stance when it comes to any long-term decisions. Experts note it's not easy to shift products to a different country, nor is it easy to return to Myanmar once companies leave. Furthermore, some argue Western companies play a role in reducing poverty by giving workers in Myanmar opportunities to earn an income while also helping to improve labor standards there.

Factory working conditions were already poor before the February coup, but the labor unions had made some inroads and gave workers hope. And while the National League for Democracy, the party that was ousted in the takeover, wasn't proactively protecting unions, it didn't persecute or crack down on them, says Andrew Tillet-Saks, a labor organizer in Southeast Asia who previously was based in Myanmar.

Asian brands have so far remained quiet about the turmoil. The American Apparel & Footwear Association joined other groups like the Fair Labor Association in condemning the coup while urging members to honor existing financial contracts with factories there.

L.L. Bean CEO Steve Smith said he was saddened by the situation in Myanmar, which he visited in 2019. Bean uses several factories and suppliers for three product lines.

Smith said there's backup production elsewhere, but it's important not to abandon the country.

Other companies have been more forceful in their response. For instance, Hennes & Mauritz and The Benetton Group have suspended all new orders from factories in Myanmar.

"Although we refrain from taking any immediate action regarding our long-term presence in the country, we have at this point paused placing new orders with our suppliers," H&M said in a statement. "This is due to our concern for the safety of people and an unpredictable situation limiting our ability to operate in the country."

Spanish brand Mango said it would work with its trade and union partners, globally and locally in Myanmar, to ensure there's no retaliation against any factory worker or union leader exercising their civil or union rights.

Moe Sandar Myint, chairwoman of the Federation of Garment Workers in Myanmar who organized small strikes on factory floors that later moved to the streets, said brands aren't doing enough to help workers. She wants to see "concrete action."

Nearly 70% of the garment factories in Myanmar are owned by foreigners, according to the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar, and a good chunk of them are Chinese-owned. International brands using the factories don't directly hire the workers, often depending on a web of contractors and sub-contractors to produce goods for them.

But companies have "an enormous amount of influence in the industry," Tillet-Saks said. "They hold all the power over the supplier."

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Tin Tin Wei says escalating intimidation by the military is scaring some employees at her factory. Located in the Hlaing Thayar industrial zone, it unionized five years ago. Out of 900 workers employed at the factory, 700 initially joined the protests but that number dropped to 500 by early March, she said.

Moe Sandar Myint, who's in hiding and moving from one safe house to another after the police raided her home in early February, said she will keep fighting.

"I cannot allow my generation and my next generation to live through another military leadership," she said. "This is unacceptable."

Kurtenbach reported from Bangkok. Associated Press writers Grant Peck in Bangkok and Dave Sharp in Freeport, Maine, contributed to the report.

'An all-hands moment': GOP rallies behind voting limits

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press

On an invitation-only call last week, Sen. Ted Cruz huddled with Republican state lawmakers to call them to battle on the issue of voting rights.

Democrats are trying to expand voting rights to "illegal aliens" and "child molesters," he claimed, and Republicans must do all they can to stop them. If they push through far-reaching election legislation now before the Senate, the GOP won't win elections again for generations, he said.

Asked if there was room to compromise, Cruz was blunt: "No."

"H.R. 1's only objective is to ensure that Democrats can never again lose another election, that they will win and maintain control of the House of Representatives and the Senate and of the state legislatures for the next century," Cruz said told the group organized by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-backed, conservative group that provides model legislation to state legislators.

Cruz's statements, recorded by a person on the call and obtained by The Associated Press, capture the building intensity behind Republicans' nationwide campaign to restrict access to the ballot. From statehouses to Washington, the fight over who can vote and how — often cast as "voting integrity" — has galvanized a Republican Party in search of unifying mission in the post-Trump era. For a powerful network of conservatives, voting restrictions are now viewed as a political life-or-death debate, and the fight has all-but eclipsed traditional Republican issues like abortion, gun rights and tax cuts as an organizing tool.

That potency is drawing influential figures and money from across the right, ensuring that the clash over the legislation in Washington will be partisan and expensive.

"It kind of feels like an all-hands-on-deck moment for the conservative movement, when the movement writ large realizes the sanctity of our elections is paramount and voter distrust is at an all-time high," said Jessica Anderson, executive director of Heritage Action, an influential conservative advocacy group in Washington. "We've had a bit of a battle cry from the grassroots, urging us to pick this fight."

Several prominent groups have recently entered the fray: Anti-abortion rights group, the Susan B. Anthony List, has partnered with another conservative Christian group to fund a new organization, the Election Transparency Initiative. FreedomWorks, a group formed to push for smaller government, has initiated a \$10 million calling for tighter voting laws in the states. It will be run by Cleta Mitchell, a prominent Republican attorney who advised former President Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, Heritage Action has announced a new effort also focused on changes in state voting laws. It included a \$700,000 ad campaign to back GOP-written bills in Georgia, the group's first foray into advocating for state policy.

So far, the states have been the center of the debate. More than 250 bills have been introduced in 43 states that would change how Americans vote, according to a tally by the Brennan Center for Justice, which backs expanded voting access. That includes measures that would limit mail voting, cut hours that polling places are open and impose restrictions that Democrats argue amount to the greatest assault on voting rights since Jim Crow.

That push was triggered by Trump's lies that he lost the presidential election due to fraud — claims

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rejected by the courts and by prominent Republicans — and the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol that those groundless claims sparked.

But the fight over voting laws now extends far beyond Trump and is shifting to Washington, where the Democratic-led Senate will soon consider an array of voting changes. The package, known as H.R. 1, would require states to automatically register eligible voters, as well as offer same-day registration. It would limit states' ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons' voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require states to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no-excuse absentee balloting. Democrats, who are marshaling their own resources behind the bill, argue it is necessary to block what they describe as voter suppression efforts in the states.

Republicans contend it's a grab bag of long-sought Democratic goals aimed at tilting elections in their favor. Cruz claimed it would lead to voting by millions of "criminals and illegal aliens."

The bill "says America would be better off if more murderers were voting, America would be better off if more rapists and child molesters were voting," Cruz said.

He added that he had recently participated in an all-day strategy call with national conservative leaders to coordinate opposition. The leaders agreed that Republicans would seek to rebrand the Democratic-backed bill as the "Corrupt Politicians Act," he said.

The focus on voting is visible across the conservative movement, even among groups with no clear interest in the voting debate. At a televised town hall in February, leading Christian conservative Tony Perkins fielded several questions about voting before tackling topics on the social issues his Family Research Council typically focuses on.

Perkins answered the question by recalling how voting laws were made stricter in his native Louisiana after a close 1996 Senate race won by Democrats. He noted that the state now votes solidly Republican.

"When you have free, fair elections, you're going to have outcomes that are positive," Perkins said before urging viewers to push state lawmakers to "restore election integrity."

Stronger voting regulations have long been a conservative goal, driven by old — and some say outdated — conventional wisdom that Republicans thrive in elections with lower turnout, and Democrats in ones with more voters. That has translated to GOP efforts to tighten voter identification laws and require more frequent voter roll purges. Both efforts tend to disproportionately exclude Black and Latino voters, groups that lean Democratic.

In a sign of the increasing attention to the issue last year, Leonard Leo, a Trump advisor and one of the strategists behind the conservative focus on the federal judiciary, formed The Honest Elections Project to push for voting restrictions and coordinate GOP effort to monitor the 2020 vote.

But the issue expanded beyond what many conservatives expected. As Trump groundlessly blamed fraud for his loss, and he and his allies lost more than 50 court cases trying to overturn the election, his conservative base became convinced of vague "irregularities" and holes in the voting system.

While Leo's group, like other parts of the establishment GOP, kept a distance from such claims, state lawmakers stepped in quickly with bills aimed at fixing phantom problems and restoring confidence in the system.

"We're certain our vote will count, we're certain our vote is secure, we're certain our system is fair and not having any sort of nefarious activities," said Iowa Rep. Bobby Kaufmann, a Republican who authored a wide-ranging election bill that shortened the state's early voting period.

Leo's group has since released a list of its preferred voting law changes.

Similarly, other outside groups soon jumped into the debate that's roiling their activists who write the letters, make phone calls and send the small donations that keep the groups relevant.

"It's gone up the chain of priority," said Noah Wall, executive vice president of FreedomWorks, which trained 60 top activists in Orlando last weekend on voting issues. "If you were to poll our activists right now, election integrity is going to be near the top of the list. Twelve months ago, that wasn't the case."

Famed Tiffany jewelry designer Elsa Peretti dead at age 80

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Elsa Peretti, who went from Halston model and Studio 54 regular in the 1960s and '70s to one of the world's most famous jewelry designers with timeless, fluid Tiffany & Co. collections often inspired by nature, has died. She was 80.

She died Thursday night in her sleep at home in a small village outside Barcelona, Spain, according to a statement from her family office in Zurich and the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation.

Peretti's sculptural cuff bracelets, bean designs and open-heart pendants are among her most recognizable work. She lent her classical aesthetic to functional goods, too, including bowls, magnifying glasses, razors and even a pizza cutter done in sterling silver, a metal she favored and helped popularize as a luxury choice.

"Elsa was not only a designer but a way of life," Tiffany said in a statement Friday. "Elsa explored nature with the acumen of a scientist and the vision of a sculptor."

Born in Florence, Italy, to wealthy, conservative parents and educated in Rome and Switzerland, Peretti moved to Barcelona in her 20s and began working as a model, where she tapped into a community of artists that included Salvador Dali, according to an August profile in The Wall Street Journal's magazine. A short time later, she decamped for New York and started modeling for Halston and other top designers, jumping into the art and fashion jet set. It's then she began to make jewelry, tapping the designers she worked for to incorporate her pieces.

It was Halston, a close friend, who introduced her to the highest echelons at Tiffany, an exclusive collaboration that lasted throughout her career.

The outspoken Peretti began designing for Tiffany in 1974. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of her signature wrist-hugging Bone Cuff, Tiffany launched fresh versions, including some with stones of turquoise and jade.

Describing herself as "retired" to the Wall Street Journal, she kept her hand in, communicating with artisans around the world and checking on the work of her ateliers.

"Her inspiration was often drawn from everyday items — a bean, a bone, an apple could be transformed into cufflinks, bracelets, vases or lighters," the family statement said. "Scorpions and snakes were turned into appealing necklaces and rings, often in silver, which was one of her preferred materials. She herself stated that 'There is no new design, because good lines and shapes are timeless.'"

Of Peretti's designs, Liza Minnelli told Vanity Fair in 2014: "Everything was so sensual, so sexy. I just loved it. It was different from anything I'd ever seen."

Peretti's more than three dozen collections for Tiffany established her in luxury, but she also understood the need for budget flexibility among consumers. She was behind Tiffany's Diamonds by the Yard line that began in 1974, based on the idea of spreading out the stones on a simple chain and offering them at a range of price points. Today, the line goes for \$325 to \$75,000.

"You need to be able to go out on the street with your jewelry," she told the Journal. "Women can't go around wearing \$1 million."

Peretti's designs are in the permanent collections of the British Museum in London and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, among others. In recognition of her work, Tiffany established the Elsa Peretti professorship in jewelry design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, the first endowed professorship in the history of FIT.

She was also a philanthropist, establishing her foundation in her father's honor in 2000. It supports a range of projects, from human and civil rights to medical research and wildlife conservation.

The small village of Sant Martí Vell, where she died in Catalonia, was always close to her heart, the family statement said. In 1968, she bought a mustard-yellow house there and lovingly restored it over the next 10 years. She went on to have entire swaths of the village restored, acquiring and preserving buildings, including a church. She also supported excavation of Roman ruins and the archiving of the village's history and established a working vineyard that has put out wines under the Eccocivi label since 2008.

AstraZeneca vaccinations resume in Europe after clot scare

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Countries across Europe resumed vaccinations with the AstraZeneca shot on Friday, as leaders sought to reassure their populations it is safe following brief suspensions that cast doubt on a vaccine that is critical to ending the coronavirus pandemic.

The British and French prime ministers rolled up their sleeves, as did a handful of other senior politicians across the continent where inoculation drives have repeatedly stumbled and several countries are now re-imposing lockdowns as infections rise in many places.

Britain is a notable exception: The outbreak there has receded, and the country has been widely praised for its vaccination campaign, though this week it announced that it, too, would be hit by supply shortages. The U.K. also never stopped using AstraZeneca. European Union countries, by contrast, have struggled to quickly roll out vaccines, and the pause of the vaccine by many this week only added to those troubles.

The suspensions came after reports of blood clots in some recipients of the vaccine, even though international health agencies urged governments to press ahead with the shot, saying the benefits outweighed the risks. On Thursday, the European Medicines Agency said that the vaccine doesn't increase the overall incidence of blood clots, though it could not rule out a link to a small number of rare clots.

The move paved the way for a slew of European countries including Italy, France and Germany to begin using the vaccine again.

"It's clear that the revocation of the suspension is for us a great relief because we have to strongly accelerate the vaccination campaign," said Dr. Giovanni Rezza, the head of prevention at the Italian Health Ministry.

Rezza told reporters in Rome that Italy only reluctantly halted the campaign out of an abundance of caution, but needed to ramp it back up quickly to make up for lost time now.

He said Italy needed to more than double the 200,000 vaccinations per day the country had reached before the suspension to reach its goal of inoculating 80% of the population by September.

Health experts have expressed concern that even though the suspensions were brief, they could still damage confidence in the vaccine at a time when many people are already hesitant to take a shot that was developed so quickly. While many EU countries have struggled with such reluctance, it's even more of a worry in developing nations that may not have any other choice of vaccine. AstraZeneca, which is cheaper and easier to store than many rival products, is the linchpin in vaccination drives in many poorer countries.

Amid these concerns, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson got an AstraZeneca jab at St. Thomas' Hospital in south London, where he was treated in intensive care last April for COVID-19.

"I literally did not feel a thing and so it was very good, very quick and I cannot recommend it too highly," Johnson, 56, said on leaving the hospital after his jab. "Everybody, when you get your notification for a jab please go and get it. It is the best thing for you, the best thing for your family and for everybody else."

Others who got the shot Friday included French Prime Minister Jean Castex, Slovenia's President Borut Pahor and Prime Minister Janez Jansa, and a German state governor. Italian Premier Mario Draghi said he would get the AstraZeneca shot when it's time for his age group, and said his grown son had received it in London.

"Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt" about its safety, Draghi, 73, told a news conference.

Castex, 55, said he stepped up because he wanted to show full confidence in the shot, even though he is not yet eligible under France's rules. The former director of the Pasteur Institute, Patrick Berche, told BFMTV the move was "a very beautiful gesture."

France restarted the vaccine with some restrictions that seemed aimed at reducing the risk of potential side effects even further.

Other countries that are resuming their use of AstraZeneca shots include Bulgaria, a nation of 7 million where only 355,000 people have been vaccinated with a first dose so far — the lowest number in the European Union.

But not everyone was as quick to return to the vaccine. Sweden, Norway and Denmark, which was the

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first country to pause using AstraZeneca, said they would wait another week before deciding whether to resume. And Finland decided to pause the vaccine for the first time Friday, saying it would suspend use for a week while it investigated two suspected cases of blood clots.

Though there are concerns that the pause may have sown long-lasting doubts, some were relieved that the vaccine was available again Friday.

Marvin Brandl, 28, an emergency paramedic, was among a group of health care workers who got a shot in the German city of Cologne. He voiced trust in all the vaccines that have been approved by the EU.

"Last night when I found out that vaccination was possible again, I made the appointment right away and then I was satisfied and grateful that I was able to get vaccinated," Brandl said.

Authorities in Berlin said two large vaccination centers were reopening Friday and that people whose appointments were canceled this week will be able to get the vaccine over the weekend without making a new one.

After several stumbles in the vaccine rollout, EU governments are keen to get shots rolling again, especially since infections and hospitalizations are rising dramatically in many countries, with many officials saying they are either entering or already are in a "third wave."

Infections rates in Germany are "now clearly exponential," Lars Schaade, the deputy head of the Robert Koch Institute, said. Officials have warned that country could face a return to stricter lockdown measures by Easter.

In France, the government backed off ordering a tough lockdown for Paris and several other regions, instead announcing a patchwork of new restrictions despite an increasingly alarming situation at hospitals with a rise in the number of COVID-19 patients.

In Poland, more people are on respirators than at any time since the start of the pandemic and children make up a greater percentage of those hospitalized. Officials blame the surge on a more transmissible mutation first identified in Britain that is spreading like wildfire in the country, and they say the worst is yet to come. The central European nation is preparing to enter a new nationwide lockdown on Saturday — albeit one that is less restrictive than the one imposed a year ago.

Hungary, meanwhile, extended lockdown restrictions for another week as a powerful surge breaks records each day — despite the fact that the country has the second-highest vaccination rate in the EU after Malta.

In Bosnia, which is not in the EU, soaring infections prompted a lockdown taking effect in the capital on Friday. The Balkan nation of 3.3 million has yet to start mass vaccination of its citizens and has kept relaxed measures and ski resorts open throughout the winter season.

Associated Press writers from around Europe contributed to this report.

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

CDC changes school guidance, allowing desks to be closer

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Students can safely sit just 3 feet apart in the classroom as long as they wear masks but should be kept the usual 6 feet away from one another at sporting events, assemblies, lunch or chorus practice, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday in relaxing its COVID-19 guidelines.

The revised recommendations represent a turn away from the 6-foot standard that has sharply limited how many students some schools can accommodate. Some places have had to remove desks, stagger schedules and take other steps to keep children apart.

Three feet "gives school districts greater flexibility to have more students in for a prolonged period of time," said Kevin Quinn, director of maintenance and facilities at Mundelein High School in suburban Chicago.

In recent months, schools in some states have been disregarding the CDC guidelines, using 3 feet as their standard. Studies of what happened in some of them helped sway the agency, said Greta Massetti,

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who leads the CDC's community interventions task force.

"We don't really have the evidence that 6 feet is required in order to maintain low spread," she said. Also, younger children are less likely to get seriously ill from the coronavirus and don't seem to spread it as much as adults do, and "that allows us that confidence that that 3 feet of physical distance is safe."

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the revised recommendations are a "roadmap to help schools reopen safely, and remain open, for in-person instruction." She said in-person schooling gives students not only "the education they need to succeed" but access to crucial social and mental health services.

The new guidance:

— Removes recommendations for plastic shields or other barriers between desks. "We don't have a lot of evidence of their effectiveness" in preventing transmission, Massetti said.

— Advises at least 3 feet of space between desks in elementary schools, even in towns and cities where community spread is high, so long as students and teachers wear masks and take other precautions.

— Says spacing can also be 3 feet in middle and high schools, so long as there is not a high level of spread in the community. If there is, the distance should be at least 6 feet.

The CDC said 6 feet should still be maintained in common areas, such as school lobbies, and when masks can't be worn, such as when eating.

Also, students should be kept 6 feet apart in situations where there are a lot of people talking, cheering or singing, all of which can expel droplets containing the coronavirus. That includes chorus practice, assemblies and sports events.

Teachers and other adults should continue to stay 6 feet from one another and from students, the CDC said.

The CDC's 6-foot advice for schools, issued last year, was the same standard applied to workplaces and other settings. In contrast, the World Health Organization suggested 1 meter — a little over 3 feet — was sufficient in schools. The American Academy of Pediatrics says desks should be 3 feet apart and "ideally" 6 feet.

The CDC guidance was problematic for many schools that traditionally had 25, 30 or more children per classroom in closely grouped desks. Some schools adopted complicated schedules. For example, half a class might come to school on some days, and the other half on other days.

Some schools stopped using lockers and staggered when different grades could move between classes to avoid crowding in the halls, where maintaining any distance at all can be difficult.

The Ridley school system in suburban Philadelphia took steps like that to abide by the 6-foot guideline. But neighboring communities went with 3 feet, "and we're not seeing the data really reflect a different spread rate," said Lee Ann Wentzel, district superintendent.

Even before the CDC acted, the district had decided to shift to 3-foot distancing next month. Wentzel said the change in CDC guidance will make it easier to explain and defend the decision.

A recent study in Massachusetts looked at students and staff members in schools that used the 3-foot standard and those that had the 6-foot one. It found no significant difference in infection rates.

Massetti said other research has also been influential, including two studies the CDC released Friday. One out of Utah found low coronavirus transmission rates among students who did a good job wearing masks and whose desks were only 3 feet apart. The other study, done in Missouri, pointed to a similar conclusion.

Still, the change at the CDC met with skepticism in some quarters.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said the 1.6-million-member union is reviewing the latest research, "but we are concerned this change has been driven by a lack of physical space rather than the hard science on aerosol exposure and transmission."

Dr. Lawrence Kleinman, a professor of pediatrics and global urban public health at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said 3 feet is "probably safe" if schools are doing everything right — if everyone is wearing masks correctly at all times and washing their hands, and if ventilation is good. But he said that's unlikely.

"I will not send my child to a school that's distancing at 3 feet," said Kleinman, who has a 4-year-old daughter.

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Idaho Legislature shuts down due to COVID-19 outbreak

By KEITH RIDLER Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The Idaho Legislature voted Friday to shut down for several weeks due to an outbreak of COVID-19.

Lawmakers in the House and Senate made the move to recess until April 6 with significant unfinished business, including setting budgets and pushing through a huge income tax cut.

At least six of the 70 House members tested positive for the illness in the last week, and there are fears a highly contagious variant of COVID-19 is in the Statehouse.

"The House has had several positive tests, so it is probably prudent that the House take a step back for a couple weeks until things calm down and it's not hot around here for COVID," House Majority Leader Mike Moyle said before the votes.

Five of those who tested positive are Republicans and one is Democrat. Another Republican lawmaker is self-isolating. The chamber has a super-majority of 58 Republicans, most of whom rarely or never wear masks. All the Democratic lawmakers typically wear masks.

The three lawmakers who tested positive this week, two Republicans and one Democrat, had all been participating in debates on the House floor.

The House, with the illness spreading, requested the Senate recess as well. Two senators contracted COVID-19 but have recovered and returned to the 35-member Senate.

The Senate honored the House request and voted to recess about an hour after the House, with Republican Senate President Pro-Tem Chuck Winder calling it "an unusual and kind of historic request that has been made of us."

Republican Sen. Majority Leader Kelly Anthon said senators could use the time to prepare for when the Senate convenes again. "We will use this time productively for the Idaho people so that when we come back together on April 6, we will be ready to work quickly," he said.

Republican House Speaker Scott Bedke said after the votes that the delay could be good because it could give the Legislature time to figure out how to spend the \$2.2 billion the state is receiving in the latest round of federal coronavirus relief money.

Republican leaders in the House and Senate, who control both chambers, didn't impose a mask mandate this session.

"I think maybe when they come back, maybe it will be different," Bedke said. "But I have no regrets on the safety protocols here to this point."

Lawmakers will be paid the per diem rates to cover their normal session-related living expenses during the recess, and secretaries and attachés will also be paid during the break. Bedke characterized it as essentially a long weekend that many will use to catch up on paperwork and other business.

A major goal of GOP lawmakers in the Legislature this session has been curbing the emergency powers of the Republican governor to respond to things like pandemics. Legislators have floated several proposals that would restrict Gov. Brad Little's ability to make sweeping directives in the future.

The House has also been advancing a bill that would ban local governments from requiring that people wear masks. Little, who wears a mask in public and encourages others to do so, has never issued a state-wide mask mandate, but a handful of counties and about a dozen cities currently have such orders in place.

In a joint statement, Democratic House Minority Leader Ilana Rubel and Democratic Senate Minority Leader Michelle Stennett said they hoped that their colleagues ill with COVID-19 recovered.

"But we can't help but be disappointed in how bad things have become at the Capitol, when we could've prevented this from becoming a hot spot all along," they said. "We are just so sorry it took so many people getting sick for us to act. We must do better when we return, or else we'll keep finding ourselves in this

position.”

Besides the eight lawmakers known to have contracted COVID-19, a handful of House and Senate staffers also are known to have contracted the virus this session.

During the recess, the lawmakers are expected to travel home to all parts of the state, potentially spreading the variant of the virus.

Dr. David Peterman, a pediatrician and CEO of Primary Health Medical Group, said Thursday that 30% to 40% of positive tests at the health group’s facilities in southwestern Idaho were the variant.

About 175,000 Idaho residents have been infected with the coronavirus, and more than 1,900 have died. But about 200,000 residents have received both shots of the two-shot vaccine, and another 125,000 have received the first shot. About 1.8 million people live in the state.

Associated Press reporter Rebecca Boone contributed to this report.

This story has been updated to correct that six representatives have tested positive, not five.

Plans solidify for 93rd Oscars: No Zoom, no sweatshirts

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

With nominations set and just over a month until showtime, details are trickling out about the 93rd Oscars and neither sweatshirts nor Zoom made the cut.

“Our plan is that this year’s Oscars will look like a movie, not a television show,” said show producers Jesse Collins, Stacy Sher and Steven Soderbergh in a statement Friday. They’ve enlisted Emmy and Tony Award winning director Glenn Weiss to direct the live broadcast on April 25.

Although considerably scaled down from a normal year, the producers have said they are committed to holding an in-person event at Los Angeles’ Union Station for nominees, presenters and limited guests. There will also be a live component at the Dolby Theatre, which has been home to the Academy Awards since 2001.

But unlike the Golden Globes, which combined in-person and Zoom elements in its bi-coastal broadcast, the Oscars are not making a virtual element possible for nominees who either can’t or don’t feel comfortable attending. The producers said they plan to treat the event like an active movie set with on-site COVID safety teams and testing protocols.

And, yes, they expect attendees to dress up.

“We’re aiming for a fusion of Inspirational and Aspirational, which in actual words means formal is totally cool if you want to go there, but casual is really not,” producers said.

The 93rd Oscars will be broadcast live on ABC on April 25 starting at 8 p.m. ET.

‘Very angry’: Democrats face tough choices on immigration

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats who long blistered the Trump administration’s hard-line immigration policies are suddenly in a tough political bind.

The Biden administration is responding to a wave of children crossing the southern border into the U.S. with some of the very tactics that evoked moral outrage from Democrats when former President Donald Trump embraced them. That includes accommodating children in hastily improvised lockups, spurring Republicans to argue that Democrats are now the ones throwing “kids in cages.”

The moment leaves many Democrats with few good options. There’s little appetite to condemn President Joe Biden in the same terms as Trump. Biden, after all, is pushing for a massive immigration overhaul that includes prized goals such as a pathway to citizenship for millions and has spoken of the need to treat those entering the U.S. with compassion.

But in taking a softer stance, Democrats and immigration advocates also risk being branded by the GOP as hypocrites.

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"I have chosen to not allow myself to get into my feelings about how there are still these detention centers being popped up by this administration because it makes me very, very angry," said Amanda Elise Salas, a Democratic political operative in Texas' Rio Grande Valley who worked for Biden's presidential campaign.

Salas said that she understands "that change comes in increments" and that Democrats don't have enough congressional seats to make Biden's immigration agenda an immediate reality. But she added, "It doesn't make any sense how we aren't looking at this in a radical way."

Trump expanded and fortified border walls while championing "zero tolerance" policies that made it more difficult to seek U.S. asylum and briefly even separated immigrant parents and children.

Biden has used executive actions to begin rolling back much of that, but a sweeping plan he announced his first day in office to remake the immigration system has stalled in Congress. Instead, the Democratic-controlled House passed two smaller-scale bills Thursday that offer a process to obtain U.S. citizenship for immigrants brought to the country illegally as children and extend legal status to farm workers and their families.

Both initiatives won some GOP support, helping their chances in a Senate split 50-50. But Republicans have also signaled that they see continuing to hammer Biden on border issues as a winner heading into 2022's midterm elections.

The number of immigrants being stopped at the U.S. southern border surged to nearly 100,000 in February alone. Enough of those were children without their parents that the Biden administration has reopened a Trump administration facility in remote Carrizo Springs, Texas, to house them.

Officials are also planning to send more hundreds of miles north to converted space inside Dallas' convention center.

Biden defenders note that what's happening on the border now is not the same as during the Trump years. Their criticisms of the Trump administration focused on children separated from their parents and held in Border Patrol facilities featuring cells partitioned with chain-link fencing.

Further, the Biden administration continues to rapidly send back most single adults and families whom federal agents stop at the border under a public health order issued by Trump at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It only is allowing teens and children on their own to stay — at least temporarily — which has helped cause their ranks to spike.

Still, such nuance is easily lost in the larger political fight. And Republicans, looking to hit back after Biden successfully delivered on his promised \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, have been quick to pounce.

"This is a human heartbreak," California Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the top Republican in the House, said after touring a border facility in El Paso, Texas, this week. "This crisis is created by the presidential policies of this new administration."

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who is organizing his own border trip, said the Biden administration, "in effect, issued an invitation for unaccompanied children to come to this country."

Democrats counter by alleging the actual hypocrisy is among Republicans, who are now feigning concern over immigrant children after years of cheering tougher Trump policies. They say part of the surge has been caused by immigrants who were stuck at the border waiting to advance legitimate asylum claims the Trump administration failed to process.

"They're having to pick up the pieces of a system in tatters because of Donald Trump," former Democratic presidential candidate Julián Castro said of the Biden administration.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has bristled at suggestions that the southern border is in crisis, and White House press secretary Jen Psaki has tried to avoid using the term.

Their efforts to counter Republicans' message has been complicated by Biden himself, however. He's discouraged men, women and children ready to head to the U.S. border from Mexico, Central America and elsewhere, with hopes of being allowed to more easily cross onto American soil.

"Don't leave your town or city or community," Biden said during a recent interview with ABC, pleading for more time as his administration works toward longer-term solutions at the border.

But that request runs counter to traditional patterns, which usually see the number of immigrants in-

crease when temperatures rise.

"The reality is that people — including women and children — are forced to migrate and have been coming seasonally," said Marielena Hincapie, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center. "It isn't like they started coming now because Biden got elected. They come every year around this time, when the weather pattern changes."

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi noted Friday that "in the spring more people do come, so there will be more, as there are now." But she said the Biden administration has plans to ensure immigrants are handled "in a much more humane way than before."

Hincapie applauded the Biden administration's use of Federal Emergency Management Agency officials to manage the influx of immigrants in more humane and healthy ways. For Salas, though, Biden's comments reflected a misunderstanding of life on the U.S.-Mexico border that encompasses most members of both parties.

"We're not focused on the right things," she said.

Indeed, the Biden administration has admitted struggling with sending mixed messages to immigrants.

"It is difficult at times to convey both hope in the future and the danger that is now," Roberta Jacobson, the Biden administration's coordinator for the southern border, said during a White House press briefing last week.

"We are trying to convey to everybody in the region that we will have legal processes for people in the future, and we're standing those up as soon as we can," Jacobson added. "But at the same time, you cannot come through irregular means. ... The majority of people will be sent out of the United States."

Amid intensifying Republican criticism, meanwhile, Biden has mostly avoided attacks from his party's progressive wing. One of its top public faces, New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, tweeted of reopening the Trump-era facility in Carrizo Springs, "This is not okay, never has been okay, never will be okay — no matter the administration or party."

But she also added that "our fraught, unjust immigration system will not transform" overnight.

Advocates who have championed Biden's larger immigration reform proposal also have largely refrained from criticizing the president for failing to get it passed. Instead, many are heartened with the smaller reforms advancing.

"There's not just one lever that you should push on, or an all-or-nothing legislative approach," said Peter Boogaard, a spokesperson for FWD.us, which advocates for immigrant rights. "And that doesn't mean that you don't need to continue to advocate for the broader approach."

Kremlin: Putin's offer of a call with Biden was to save ties

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Kremlin said Friday that President Vladimir Putin's offer to speak by phone with U.S. President Joe Biden was intended to prevent bilateral ties from completely falling apart over the American's remark that the Russian leader was a killer.

Putin made it clear that "it makes sense to have a talk to maintain Russia-U.S. relations instead of trading barbs," and he wanted to make it public to help defuse tensions over Biden's "very bad remarks," said his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.

Asked by reporters Friday if he'll take Putin up on his offer to have a call, Biden said, "I'm sure we'll talk at some point."

In an interview broadcast Wednesday, Biden replied "I do" when asked if he thought Putin was a "killer." Russia responded by recalling its ambassador in Washington for consultations and Putin on Thursday pointed at the U.S. history of slavery, slaughtering Native Americans and the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II in an "it-takes-one-to-know-one" response.

At the same time, Putin noted that Russia would still cooperate with the United States where and when it supports Moscow's interests, adding that "a lot of honest and decent people in the U.S. want to have peace and friendship with Russia."

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He proposed the phone call with Biden in the next few days to discuss the coronavirus pandemic, regional conflicts and other issues, and he suggested that the conversation be open to the public.

Peskov said Putin's offer to make the call public was intended to prevent Biden's statement from inflicting irreparable damage to the already-frayed ties.

"Since Biden's words were quite unprecedented, unprecedented formats can't be excluded," Peskov said. "President Putin proposed to discuss the situation openly because it would be interesting for the people of both countries."

Peskov said the Kremlin hasn't heard back from the White House on the offer of a call, adding that it wasn't going to repeat the proposal.

"The request has been made," he said in a conference call with reporters. "The lack of response would mean a refusal to have a conversation."

Calls between heads of states are normally conducted out of the public eye, but in one exception last June, the opening part of Putin's video call with French President Emmanuel Macron was televised.

In taking a tough stance on Russia, Biden has said the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Putin are done. And he has taken pains to contrast his style with the approach of former President Donald Trump, who avoided direct confrontation with Putin and frequently spoke about him with approval.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden would continue to look to cooperate on efforts to stem Iran's nuclear program and, more broadly, nuclear nonproliferation. But she said Biden did not regret referring to Putin as a killer and pushed back against suggestions the rhetoric was unhelpful.

Russia's relations with the United States and the European Union already had plunged to post-Cold War lows after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, meddling in elections, hacking attacks and, most recently, the jailing of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny after his poisoning, which he blamed on the Kremlin. Russian authorities rejected the accusations.

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, forecast that the Russia-U.S. ties will remain bitterly strained in the coming years and spoke about the need to focus on preventing any military incidents between them.

"The most important thing in relations with the U.S. for a foreseeable perspective is to avoid an inadvertent military conflict," Trenin said in a commentary, adding that Moscow and Washington have the necessary communications channels. "It's necessary to prevent possible incidents between the armed forces of Russia, the U.S. and its allies, their aircraft and ships, or if they still happen, settle them immediately."

On Wednesday, the U.S. national intelligence director's office released a report finding that Putin authorized influence operations to help Trump's reelection bid. The Biden administration warned that Russia would face sanctions soon over its attempt to influence the election and the massive SolarWinds hacks.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan weighed in the controversy, saying Biden's statement about Putin was "unbecoming of a head of state."

"It really is not acceptable or palatable for a head of state to use such an expression against the head of a state such as Russia," Erdogan told reporters in Istanbul. He praised Putin's response as "very astute and elegant."

Erdogan's comments came as Turkey's efforts toward a reset of its troubled relations with the U.S. remain unanswered. Since Biden's inauguration in January, he has not held a telephone call with Erdogan.

Associated Press writers Zeke Miller in Washington, Daria Litvinova in Moscow and Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey, contributed.

Happiness Report: World shows resilience in face of COVID19

By DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — The coronavirus brought a year of fear and anxiety, loneliness and lockdown, and illness and death, but an annual report on happiness around the world released Friday suggests the pandemic has not crushed people's spirits.

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The editors of the 2021 World Happiness Report found that while emotions changed as the pandemic set in, longer-term satisfaction with life was less affected.

"What we have found is that when people take the long view, they've shown a lot of resilience in this past year," Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, one of the report's co-author, said from New York.

The annual report, produced by the U.N Sustainable Development Solutions Network, ranks 149 countries based on gross domestic product per person, healthy life expectancy and the opinions of residents. Surveys ask respondents to indicate on a 1-10 scale how much social support they feel they have if something goes wrong, their freedom to make their own life choices, their sense of how corrupt their society is and how generous they are.

Due to the pandemic, the surveys were done in slightly fewer than 100 countries for this year's World Happiness Report, the ninth one compiled since the project started. Index rankings for the other nations were based on estimates from past data.

The results from both methods had European countries occupying nine of the top 10 spots on the list of the world's happiest places, with New Zealand rounding out the group. The top 10 countries are Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, New Zealand and Austria.

It was the fourth consecutive year that Finland came out on top. The United States, which was at No. 13 five years ago, slipped from 18th to 19th place. On a shortened list ranking only those countries surveyed, the U.S. placed 14th.

"We find year after year that life satisfaction is reported to be happiest in the social democracies of northern Europe," Sachs said. "People feel secure in those countries, so trust is high. The government is seen to be credible and honest, and trust in each other is high."

Finland's comparative success in curbing COVID-19 may have contributed to the enduring trust the country's people have in their government. The country took rapid and extensive measures to stop the spread of the virus and has one of Europe's lowest COVID-19 mortality rates.

"In Finland as well, of course, people have been suffering," Anu Partanen, author of "The Nordic Theory of Everything" said on Friday in Helsinki. "But again in Finland and the Nordic countries, people are really lucky because society still supports a system buffering these sorts of shocks."

Overall, the index showed little change in happiness levels compared to last year's report, which was based on information from before the pandemic.

"We asked two kinds of questions. One is about the life in general, life evaluation, we call it. How is your life going? The other is about mood, emotions, stress, anxiety," Sachs said. "Of course, we're still in the middle of a deep crisis. But the responses about long-term life evaluation did not change decisively, though the disruption in our lives was so profound."

Issues that affect the well-being of people living in the United States include racial tensions and growing income inequality between the richest and poorest residents, happiness experts say.

"As for why the U.S. ranks much lower than other similarly or even less wealthy countries, the answer is straightforward," said Carol Graham, an expert at The Brookings Institution who was not involved in the report. "The U.S. has larger gaps in happiness rankings between the rich and the poor than do most other wealthy countries."

Report co-author Sonja Lyubormirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, noted that American culture prizes signs of wealth such as big houses and multiple cars more so than other countries, "and material things don't make us as happy."

Conversely, people's perception that their country was handling the pandemic well contributed to an overall rise in well-being, Columbia's Sachs said. Several Asian countries fared better than they had in last year's rankings; China moved to 84th place from 94th last year.

"This has been a difficult period. People are looking past it when they look for the long term. But there are also many people that are suffering in the short run," he said.

Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen, who was not involved in the report, thinks the Finnish character itself might help explain why the country keeps leading the index.

"I think Finns are pretty kind of content on some level at being just what we are," he said. "We don't really have to be more."

Seth Borenstein in Washington D.C. contributed to this report.

Manhattan courthouses adapt to COVID so trials can return

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The two big, busy federal courthouses in Manhattan took the adage that justice delayed is justice denied to heart when the coronavirus hit, creating a pandemic-safe environment for jurors that could be a blueprint for courts elsewhere.

After months of inactivity, they are holding trials again with a safety system that includes an air-filtered plexiglass booth for witnesses, an audio system that lets socially distant lawyers exchange whispers without putting their heads together and protocols to ensure that no document changes hands without being sprayed with disinfectant.

More than 100 trials are already scheduled this year, and a month after jury trials resumed following a post-Thanksgiving halt, there has been no traceable spread of COVID-19 at the courthouse, according to its chief administrator, District Executive Edward Friedland.

That's important because some of the nation's oldest judges are among the 70 or so who sit in the two courthouses. One, 93-year-old Louis L. Stanton, has come into work almost every day since the pandemic arrived.

"We wanted to protect them. But also, you know, the justice system has to move forward," Friedland said.

When trials initially halted a year ago as the pandemic hit the city, Chief Judge Colleen McMahon formed a committee to explore how to resume safely. Friedland tapped the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for expertise. Soon, an epidemiologist was on board, along with an air flow expert.

A CDC expert who had designed airtight hospital bed units with HEPA filters helped develop plexiglass booths where witnesses safely sit maskless, preserving a defendant's right to confront an accuser.

McMahon credited the extensive anti-COVID efforts for allowing incarcerated defendants to go to trial first.

Only nine jury trials were conducted in the fall, but there have been seven since mid-February, including four underway this week. Normally, there'd be dozens annually.

The simultaneous trials are in contrast with Brooklyn federal court, where Federal Defenders Attorney-in-Charge Deirdre von Dornum said judges were cautiously scheduling three trials in April — none overlapping — to prevent multiple juries in the courthouse at once.

"It would be better for the clients to have more trials sooner, since the postponements obviously harm people's trial rights, but on the other hand, a jury scared of contracting COVID is unlikely to be engaging fully with the concept of reasonable doubt!" she wrote in an email.

At the Manhattan courthouses, some jurors are rescheduled if they don't want to attend a trial in person.

"It was a gamble as to whether we were going to have people answer the call or not," McMahon said, but she said there have been enough people to ensure diverse juries.

Six of 40 courtrooms in a courthouse that opened in the mid-1990s have been reconfigured, as have two others across the street in an 85-year-old courthouse listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The complex has a storied history of cases over the last century: the espionage trials of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the prosecution of Ponzi schemer Bernard Madoff and claims arising from the Titanic's sinking and the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Jurors fill nearly half of each courtroom, spaced apart in an elevated section. Each receives a packet with hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, disinfectant wipes and a forehead thermometer. Double masks are mandatory. Some courtrooms were recast into giant spaces for jurors to congregate 6 feet (2 meters) apart for discussions, 12 feet (4 meters) for meals.

When a juror recently tested positive for the coronavirus, no other jurors got sick.

In court, lawyers at long tables whisper into special phones, their voices amplified for their team by a

technology borrowed from roadies communicating backstage at long-ago rock concerts. Microphone covers are replaced with each speaker.

"We think we've done a lot of things here that are groundbreaking in terms of how to conduct a trial during COVID, but certainly we've spoken to our colleagues in other courts and learned from them as well," Friedland said.

About \$1 million was spent on the changes. To explain safety measures, Friedland made a rare exception to rules banning photos.

"You can't go anywhere in this courthouse now without seeing a sign. The one thing we're worried about is complacency — that people have COVID fatigue," Friedland said. "Especially jurors if they're here for weeks. Your mask is not worn the right way. You forget to sanitize your hands."

U.S. District Judge P. Kevin Castel, who presided over the first two pandemic-era jury trials in the fall, said protocols do become routine, eventually.

"Once everybody gets into the rhythm and the flow, after the first day or day and a half it feels very much ... like any other trial," Castel said.

There are glitches.

Last week, a trial was delayed when a juror needed a COVID test because someone in the school where her husband works tested positive. Then, a prosecutor said somebody had illegally recorded proceedings from a telephone feed and posted it on the internet.

Castel eventually cut off the public feed, as several spectators could fit in the courtroom while others could observe video in a nearby overflow courtroom.

He said some changes may outlive the pandemic, particularly for civil proceedings.

"You might see more call-in lines where the public can listen to a trial. There may be more conferences that are done either by video or by audio," he said.

It's a future everyone longs for, he said.

"I don't know of any rational person who would find this better," Castel said. "You want the human interaction. It's a dynamic that is important to us as humans."

Follow our latest coverage that examines the myriad ways life has been impacted since the World Health organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic: <https://apnews.com/hub/pandemic-year>

Samia Suluhu Hassan becomes Tanzania's first woman president

By KHALED ABUBAKAR and TOM ODULA Associated Press

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania (AP) — Samia Suluhu Hassan made history Friday when she was sworn in as Tanzania's first female president after the death of her controversial predecessor, John Magufuli, who denied that COVID-19 is a problem in the East African country.

Wearing a hijab and holding up a Quran with her right hand, the 61-year-old Hassan took the oath of office at State House, the government offices in Dar es Salaam, the country's largest city.

The inauguration was witnessed by Cabinet members, former presidents Ali Hassan Mwinyi and Jakaya Kikwete. The former heads of state were among the few people in the room wearing face masks to protect against COVID-19.

Hassan succeeds Magufuli, who had not been seen in public for more than two weeks before his passing was announced on state TV late Wednesday. Magufuli had denied that COVID-19 was a problem in Tanzania, saying that national prayer had eradicated the disease from the country. But Magufuli acknowledged weeks before his death that the virus was a danger.

A major test of Hassan's new presidency will be how she deals with the pandemic. Under Magufuli, Tanzania, one of Africa's most populous countries with 60 million people, made no efforts to obtain vaccines or promote the use of masks and social distancing to combat the virus. This policy of ignoring the disease endangers neighboring countries, African health officials warn.

Although Hassan announced that Magufuli died of heart failure, exiled opposition leader Tundu Lissu

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says the president died of COVID-19, citing informed medical sources in Dar es Salaam.

"The immediate job, the immediate decision she has to make, and she doesn't have much time for it, is what is she going to do about COVID-19?" Lissu told The Associated Press at his place of exile in Belgium.

"President Magufuli defied the world, defied science, defied common sense in his approach to COVID-19 and it finally brought him down," said Lissu.

"President Samia Saluhu Hassan has to decide very soon whether she is changing course or continuing with the same disastrous approach to COVID-19 that her predecessor took," the opposition leader said.

Hassan must also decide how she will address Magufuli's legacy, including whether to continue with his policies that took Tanzania from a relatively tolerant democracy to a repressive state, Lissu said, questioning if she will be able to restore the country's political freedoms and democracy.

Lissu went into exile in 2017 after he was shot 16 times. The attack came shortly after Magufuli said those who were opposed to his economic reforms deserved to die. Lissu returned to Tanzania to challenge Magufuli in the 2020 elections. He lost to Magufuli in polls marred by violence and widespread allegations of vote-rigging. Lissu returned to exile, saying his life was in danger.

Speaking at her inauguration, Hassan gave little indication that she intended to change course from Magufuli.

"It's not a good day for me to talk to you because I have a wound in my heart," said Hassan, speaking Kiswahili. "Today I have taken an oath different from the rest that I have taken in my career. Those were taken in happiness. Today I took the highest oath of office in mourning," she said.

She said that Magufuli, "who always liked teaching," had prepared her for the task ahead. "Nothing shall go wrong," she assured, urging unity.

"This is the time to stand together and get connected. It's time to bury our differences, show love to one another and look forward with confidence," she said. "It is not the time to point fingers at each other but to hold hands and move forward to build the new Tanzania that President Magufuli aspired to."

Hassan will complete Magufuli's second term that began in October. She has had a meteoric rise in politics in a male-dominated field. Both Tanzania and the surrounding East African region are slowly emerging from patriarchy.

After Magufuli selected her as his running mate in 2015, Hassan became Tanzania's first female vice president. She was the second woman to become vice president in the region, after Uganda's Specioza Naigaga Wandira who was in office from 1994 to 2003.

Born in Zanzibar, Tanzania's semi-autonomous archipelago, in 1960, Hassan went to primary school and secondary school at a time when very few girls in Tanzania were getting educations as parents thought a woman's place was that of wife and homemaker.

After graduating from secondary school in 1977, Hassan studied statistics and started working for the government, in the Ministry of Planning and Development. She worked for a World Food Program project in Tanzania in 1992 and then attended the University of Manchester in London to earn a postgraduate diploma in economics. In 2005, she earned a master's degree in community economic development through a joint program between the Open University of Tanzania and Southern New Hampshire University in the U.S.

Hassan went into politics in 2000 when she became a member of the Zanzibar House of Representatives. In 2010, she won the Makunduchi parliamentary seat with more than 80% percent of the vote. She was appointed a Cabinet minister in 2014 and became vice-chairperson of the Constituent Assembly that drafted a new constitution for Tanzania, a role in which she won respect for deftly handling several challenges.

As president, Hassan's first task will be to unite the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party behind her, said Ed Hobe-Hamsher, senior Africa analyst with the Verisk Maplecroft research firm. The party has been in power since Tanzania's independence.

As a Muslim woman from Zanzibar, Hassan may find it difficult to win the support of the party's mainland Christians, he said, warning that some entrenched leaders may develop "obstructionist strategies" against her. He said it's likely that Hassan will start her rule by maintaining the status quo and not embarking on a significant Cabinet reshuffle.

Hassan is the second woman in East Africa to serve as head of state. Burundi's Sylvia Kiningi served as

interim president of that tiny landlocked country for nearly four months until Feb. 1994.

Odula contributed from Nakuru, Kenya. AP journalist Bishr Eltouni in Tienen, Belgium, contributed.

Brazil vaccine drive faces challenges in remote communities

By ERALDO PERES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

CAVALCANTE, Brazil (AP) — Brazil's vast size and deficient infrastructure make getting coronavirus vaccines to far-flung communities of Indigenous peoples and descendants of slaves a particularly daunting endeavor.

Nurse Rosemeire Bezerra has years of experience inoculating descendants of slaves — known as "quilombolas" — in the municipality of Cavalcante, about 180 miles from Brazil's capital, Brasilia. Her biggest challenge in the current vaccination drive is keeping vaccine doses below 8 degrees Celsius (46 degrees Fahrenheit) in an isolated, tropical region. It's especially sweltering in the Valley of Souls (Vão de Almas, in Portuguese) where she was headed.

On Monday, Bezerra protected plastic foam coolers with cardboard shells and filled them with ice. She intended to vaccinate 190 families within four days, before that ice melted. She set off with her team and three others, including an experienced driver familiar with the remote region.

Houses in the Valley of Souls are far apart, and chewed-up dirt roads make for a jolting journey that complicates keeping a cooler balanced on laps. The many river crossings test the four-wheel-drive vehicles, too.

Access is so poor that Bezerra and her staffers often vaccinate people they encounter on the roadside or tending to crops in their fields, as they might not have another chance. Some areas are reached only by foot, and they have to carry in their own food and water.

The vaccination team set up shop inside a school and pitched tents inside a classroom. Bezerra slept with a lantern and the coolers by her side.

"I woke up three times every night to see if the temperature was adequate," she said. "It's a very big responsibility if they're lost. I treated those vaccines like my daughter."

Brazil is in the midst of an alarming spike of COVID-19 cases, with nearly 3,000 deaths a day for the first time since the pandemic began. Public health experts say that restrictions on activity and social distancing can help ease pressure on hospitals' overloaded intensive care units, but that the only long-term solution is mass vaccination in a country of 210 million people that is bigger than the contiguous U.S.

Almost 6% of Brazilians have received at least one shot, according to Our World in Data, a collaboration between researchers at the University of Oxford and the nonprofit group Global Change Data Lab. Just 1.5% have gotten two doses.

There are formidable logistics to reaching Indigenous communities, many of which are only accessible by boat, and also difficulties overcoming doubts about the vaccines.

Members of the remote Baré group in Amazonas state received their vaccine jabs Wednesday after health workers travelled more than two hours from the state capital of Manaus up the Cuieiras River to the village of New Hope (Nova Esperança). Some of the villagers initially had rejected the shots.

It was hardly the only time Januário Carneiro, coordinator of the Manaus region's Indigenous health care unit, was met with skepticism and mistrust.

Carneiro has spent hours convincing Indigenous people the vaccines are safe, and says he has been successful. So far, 71% of about 15,000 Indigenous people in the Manaus region have received their first shots, and 52% had their second jabs this week, he said.

While New Hope is home to 195 villagers, Carneiro's journey on Wednesday was to immunize just 19 people missed on prior outings. That helps explain why priority vaccination for Indigenous people and quilombolas is a matter of efficiency.

"Imagine if you go to these isolated areas just for people over 70 years old, then have to come back later, paying for all the fuel for a boat just for a small group. That's why, when you go, you have to vaccinate everyone at once," Jacqueline Sachett, a nursing professor at the Amazonas state university, said

in a video posted by the state-run Fiocruz Institute. "It isn't just a matter of human rights."

New Hope's chief, José Prancácio, said the whole village was infected with the coronavirus after people traveling to Manaus for food brought the virus home.

Manaus suffered a devastating second wave of COVID-19 cases in January, driven by a more contagious strain of the virus. Hospitals lacked oxygen for weeks and doctors had to choose which intensive care patients to put on ventilators.

The state has seen the number of cases and deaths ebb since, but immunization still has a way to go. New Hope, for its part, is nearing immunity. After Reinaldo de Souza Santos, 37, received his shot, he held up his vaccine card to display stickers proving he had gotten both his shots.

"My people are now calm and very happy about this vaccine," Prancácio said. "Until there's a vaccine, a lot of people die. But today, thank God, we're 100% satisfied."

In Cavalcante, quilombola Manoel Pereira and his wife, Leona, received their first shots standing beside the fence of their cassava farm. Wearing a disposable gown, Bezerra calmly delivered the dose to Pereira, who looked eager to return to his labors.

"It is a very poor community, with some places that can only be reached by special pick-up trucks," Bezerra said. "Our team didn't spare any effort. We needed to give them some hope."

Associated Press journalist Fernando Crispim in Manaus contributed to this report.

Scientist behind coronavirus shot says next target is cancer

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The scientist who won the race to deliver the first widely used coronavirus vaccine says people can rest assured the shots are safe, and the technology behind it will soon be used to fight another global scourge — cancer.

Ozlem Tureci, who co-founded the German company BioNTech with her husband, was working on a way to harness the body's immune system to tackle tumors when they learned last year of an unknown virus infecting people in China.

Over breakfast, the couple decided to apply the technology they'd been researching for two decades to the new threat, dubbing the effort "Project Lightspeed."

Within 11 months, Britain had authorized the use of the mRNA vaccine BioNTech developed with U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, followed a week later by the United States. Tens of millions of people worldwide have received the shot since December.

"It pays off to make bold decisions and to trust that if you have an extraordinary team, you will be able to solve any problem and obstacle which comes your way in real time," Tureci told The Associated Press in an interview.

Among the biggest challenges for the small, Mainz-based company that had yet to get a product to market was how to conduct large-scale clinical trials across different regions and how to scale up the manufacturing process to meet global demand.

Along with Pfizer, the company enlisted the help of Fosun Pharma in China "to get assets, capabilities and geographical footprint on board, which we did not have," Tureci said.

Among the lessons she and her husband, BioNTech chief executive Ugur Sahin, learned along with their colleagues was "how important cooperation and collaboration is internationally."

Tureci, who was born in Germany to Turkish immigrants, said the company, which has staff members from 60 countries, reached out to medical oversight bodies from the start, to ensure that the new type of vaccine would pass the rigorous scrutiny of regulators.

"The process of getting a medicine or a vaccine approved is one where many questions are asked, many experts are involved and there is external peer review of all the data and scientific discourse," she said.

Amid a scare in Europe this week over the coronavirus shot made by British-Swedish rival AstraZeneca,

Tureci dismissed the idea that any corners were cut by those racing to develop a vaccine.

"There is a very rigid process in place and the process does not stop after a vaccine has been approved," she said. "It is, in fact, continuing now all around the world, where regulators have used reporting systems to screen and to assess any observations made with our or other vaccines."

Tureci and her colleagues have all received the BioNTech vaccine themselves, she told the AP. "Yes, we have been vaccinated," she said.

As BioNTech's profile has grown during the pandemic, so has its value, providing funds the company can use to pursue its original goal of developing a new tool against cancer.

The vaccines made by BioNTech-Pfizer and U.S. rival Moderna uses messenger RNA, or mRNA, to carry instructions into the human body for making proteins that prime it to attack a specific virus. The same principle can be applied to get the immune system to take on tumors.

"We have several different cancer vaccines based on mRNA," said Tureci, who is BioNTech's chief medical officer.

Asked when such a therapy might be available, Tureci said "that's very difficult to predict in innovative development. But we expect that within only a couple of years, we will also have our vaccines (against) cancer at a place where we can offer them to people."

For now, Tureci and Sahin are trying to ensure the vaccines governments have ordered are delivered and that the shots respond effectively to any new mutation in the virus.

On Friday, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier awarded the wife and husband one of the country's highest decorations, the Order of Merit, during a ceremony attended by Chancellor Angela Merkel, a trained scientist herself.

"You began with a drug to treat cancer in a single individual," Steinmeier told the couple. "And today we have a vaccine for all of humanity."

Tureci said ahead of the ceremony that getting the award was "indeed an honor."

But she insisted developing the vaccine was the work of many.

"It's about the effort of many: our team at BioNTech, all the partners who were involved, also governments, regulatory authorities, which worked together with a sense of urgency," Tureci said. "The way we see it, this is an acknowledgement of this effort and also a celebration of science."

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

Asian American churches plan acts beyond prayer for healing

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO, MARIAM FAM and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

Asian American Christian leaders said Thursday their congregations are saddened and outraged after a white gunman killed eight people — most of them women of Asian descent — at three Atlanta-area massage businesses. And they're calling for action beyond prayers.

Asian Americans were already rattled by a wave of racist attacks amid the spread of the coronavirus pandemic across the United States. While the motive behind Tuesday's rampage remains under investigation, some see it as a wake-up call to stand up against a rise in violence against the community.

The lead pastor at Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, located a few miles from two of the spas that were targeted, said he will ask congregants during his Sunday sermon to "not just pray, not just worry," because "it's time for us to act."

"I'm going to urge people with love and peace that we need to step up and address this issue, so that ... our next generation should not be involved in tragic ... violence," the Rev. Byeong Han said. "That's what Christians need to do."

South Korea's Foreign Ministry says diplomats in Atlanta have confirmed with police that four of the dead were women of Korean descent, and are working to determine their nationality.

Jane Yoon, a congregant at Korean Central Presbyterian and a 17-year-old high school junior in nearby

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Marietta, said she increasingly worries for her family, which is of Korean descent, and was shocked by the killings.

"I was definitely very outraged," she said. "I was in shock at first of the news and just also how close it is to my community."

It also hit home on a very personal level: Last week, she said, she was in a car accident and another driver punched her in the face and body before she was able to call 911. Yoon said the woman, who was arrested, did not make any racist comments during the assault, but she couldn't help but think about rising attacks against Asian Americans.

Following that incident, she has been getting spiritual guidance and counseling from the congregation.

In the Atlanta suburb of Roswell, the Rev. Jong Kim of Grace Korean Presbyterian Church said he found a glimmer of hope in the wake of the killings after a woman reached out to donate \$100 to his church "to express her feelings of sorrow to the Asian community."

Kim spoke to several other Korean pastors in the area Thursday, and they now plan to join the group Asian Americans Advancing Justice, through which they hope to have discussions about issues of race and ethnicity and provide funeral service assistance for the victims' families.

The Atlanta chapter of Asian Americans Advancing Justice has said that while details of the shooting are still emerging, "the broader context cannot be ignored." The attacks, it said, "happened under the trauma of increasing violence against Asian Americans nationwide, fueled by white supremacy and systemic racism."

Ripples from the killings have been felt well beyond Atlanta.

In Chicago, Garden City Covenant Church invited Asian Americans "in need of a community who understands your pain" to join an online meeting in which they could "share, listen, lament and pray" together.

"There were a lot of tears, and there were a lot of questions, and for many I think there is a sense also of helplessness," said Gabriel J. Catanus, the lead pastor, who is Filipino American. The church's diverse congregation includes about 60 percent Filipino Americans, he said, along with worshippers from Latino and other communities.

"It's an important Biblical practice, and Christian practice, to come before God honestly and to pour one's own heart out before God," he said. "God can handle even the rage and the devastation that comes out of us at times."

Catanus said he was glad to see that people are now "more awakened" to the experiences of Asian Americans. But he said much work remains to be done in faith communities and called on religious leaders to denounce anti-Asian racism from their pulpits.

"In the Christian community and in our Christian institutions, specifically, we need to confess that we have in many ways failed to lead and to teach our people," he said. "Our discipleship has failed in many ways to address these very powerful forces that have led to violence and death."

Kevin Park, an associate pastor at Korean Central Presbyterian Church, said not only Asian Americans but the whole country needs to speak out against the violence, racism and "more subtle marginalization" that have been suffered for generations.

"There's opportunities among faith communities that we need to stand up together and reach out to communities that are hurting, not only Asian American communities but other communities of color," he said.

"And I think there needs to be kind of this movement toward solidarity. ... We're all in this together."

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, March 20, the 79th day of 2021. There are 286 days left in the year. Spring arrives at 5:37 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 20, 1995, in Tokyo, 12 people were killed, more than 5,500 others sickened when packages containing the deadly chemical sarin were leaked on five separate subway trains by Aum Shinrikyo (ohm shin-ree-kyoh) cult members.

On this date:

In 1413, England's King Henry IV died; he was succeeded by Henry V.

In 1727, physicist, mathematician and astronomer Sir Isaac Newton died in London.

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte returned to Paris after escaping his exile on Elba, beginning his "Hundred Days" rule.

In 1854, the Republican Party of the United States was founded by slavery opponents at a schoolhouse in Ripon (RIH'-puhn), Wisconsin.

In 1922, the decommissioned USS Jupiter, converted into the first U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, was re-commissioned as the USS Langley.

In 1933, the state of Florida electrocuted Giuseppe Zangara for shooting to death Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak at a Miami event attended by President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, the presumed target, the previous February.

In 1952, the U.S. Senate ratified, 66-10, a Security Treaty with Japan.

In 1976, kidnapped newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst was convicted of armed robbery for her part in a San Francisco bank holdup carried out by the Symbionese Liberation Army. (Hearst was sentenced to seven years in prison; she was released after serving 22 months, and was pardoned in 2001 by President Bill Clinton.)

In 1977, voters in Paris chose former French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac to be the French capital's first mayor in more than a century.

In 1985, Libby Riddles of Teller, Alaska, became the first woman to win the Iditarod Trail Dog Sled Race.

In 1996, a jury in Los Angeles convicted Erik and Lyle Menendez of first-degree murder in the shotgun slayings of their wealthy parents. (They were sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2004, hundreds of thousands of people worldwide rallied against the U.S.-led war in Iraq on the first anniversary of the start of the conflict. The U.S. military charged six soldiers with abusing inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Ten years ago: As Japanese officials reported progress in their battle to gain control over a leaking, tsunami-stricken nuclear complex, the discovery of more radiation-tainted vegetables and tap water added to public fears about contaminated food and drink. AT&T Inc. said it would buy T-Mobile USA from Deutsche Telekom AG in a cash-and-stock deal valued at \$39 billion (however, AT&T later dropped its bid following fierce government antitrust objections).

Five years ago: President Barack Obama opened a historic visit to Cuba, eager to push decades of acrimony deeper into the past. A bus carrying university exchange students back from Spain's largest fireworks festival crashed on a highway south of Barcelona, killing 13 passengers. The United States won 13 golds out of a possible 26 events and 23 medals in all, making it the biggest haul in the history of the world indoor track and field championships which were held in Portland, Oregon.

One year ago: The governor of Illinois ordered residents to remain in their homes except for essential needs, joining similar efforts in California and New York to limit the spread of the coronavirus. Stocks tumbled again on Wall Street, ending their worst week since the 2008 financial crisis; the Dow fell more than 900 points to end the week with a 17% loss. At a White House briefing, President Donald Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, were openly divided on the possible effec-

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tiveness of drugs being explored to treat the virus. Trump announced the closing of the Mexican border to most travel but not trade. Starbucks said it was temporarily closing access to its stores in the U.S. and reducing services to drive thru and delivery only. Singer Kenny Rogers, whose career spanned jazz, folk, country and pop, died at his home in Georgia; he was 81. Six-time Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady signed a two-year contract with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hal Linden is 90. Former Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) is 82. Country singer Don Edwards is 82. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Pat Riley is 76. Country singer-musician Ranger Doug (Riders in the Sky) is 75. Hockey Hall of Famer Bobby Orr is 73. Blues singer-musician Marcia Ball is 72. Actor William Hurt is 71. Rock musician Carl Palmer (Emerson, Lake and Palmer) is 71. Rock musician Jimmie Vaughan is 70. Country musician Jim Seales (formerly w/Shenandoah) is 67. Actor Amy Aquino (ah-KEE'-noh) is 64. Movie director Spike Lee is 64. Actor Theresa Russell is 64. Actor Vanessa Bell Calloway is 64. Actor Holly Hunter is 63. Rock musician Slim Jim Phantom (The Stray Cats) is 60. Actor-model-designer Kathy Ireland is 58. Actor David Thewlis is 58. Rock musician Adrian Oxaal (James) is 56. Actor Jessica Lundy is 55. Actor Liza Snyder is 53. Actor Michael Rapaport is 51. Actor Alexander Chaplin is 50. Actor Cedric Yarbrough is 48. Actor Paula Garcés is 47. Actor Michael Genadry is 43. Actor Bianca Lawson is 42. Comedian-actor Mikey Day is 41. Actor Nick Blood (TV: "Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.") is 39. Rock musician Nick Wheeler (The All-American Rejects) is 39. Actor Michael Cassidy is 38. Actor-singer Christy Carlson Romano is 37. Actor Ruby Rose is 35. Actor Barrett Doss is 32.